

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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January, 2010

Happy New Year. We start the annum with our annual election of the willfully clueless, our very own Dumbths, and we make plans for our very own Anniversary and Darwin Day celebration. We wonder how religion will evolve, compare it to a jigsaw puzzle and Mr. Potato Head, and gay-marriage phobia to “miscegnation” mania. We consider the Culture of Life, visit three states of Church-State relations, and re-visit East Ramapo. But first we risk our liberal-toleration chops. – JR

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## THE SWISS QUESTION ... AND ANSWERS, I HOPE

**John Rafferty**

**S**o the tolerant, democratic, secular and liberal-leaning Swiss have voted to ban the construction of new minarets in Switzerland. Hmm. So why can't this tolerant, democratic, secular and liberal-leaning American get upset?

Influentials and intellectuals across Europe have condemned the right-wing measure; Swiss government spokespeople have been quick to “explain” that the vote was not a rejection of the Muslim community, religion or culture (even though the 57.5% - 42.5% vote would be called a “landslide” in an American election), and *The New York Times* has called the results “disgraceful.”

So, why can't I care? Why doesn't my somewhat-leftist gorge rise up against this populist prejudice and jingo-inspired intolerance? Why can't I – a freedom-of and freedom-from religion fundamentalist – summon up outrage over similar measures now proposed in The Netherlands and Denmark? Or over the movement in France to ban the jibab and burka in schools?

Herb Silverman, President of Secular Coalition for America, while condemning the Swiss vote in his December 1 “On Faith” column in *The Washington Post*, inadvertently helped me answer my own question:

*A tiny minority of Muslims with a few minarets should be no more threatening to the beliefs and culture of a dominant Christian populace than a minority of Christians with a few steeples should be*

*to the people of Saudi Arabia. There is unlikely to be a steeple erected in Saudi Arabia anytime soon, but I would have expected better of the Swiss people.*

That's it, that last sentence. We do expect more of the Swiss, and the French, Danes, Dutch and Americans. We *do* expect *us* to be tolerant and progressive, while we too often give “Get Out of Political Correctness Jail Free” passes to the millions of Muslims who *don't* condemn suicide murderers and who *won't* – will *never* – allow a steeple to be erected, a crucifix to be worn, a mezuzah to

be affixed, a Bahai or Hindu ritual to be performed, or a secularist book, poem or play to be published in Saudi Arabia or any other Muslim theocracy. And who now agitate for the imposition of their exclusionary, intolerant sharia law within their own communities in the U.K. and across Scandinavia.

I know that by my own humanist standards I'm all wrong on this issue, but I simply cannot get worked up about this “disgraceful” wronging of the Muslims in Switzerland. And the important question is ...

*What do you think?*

Is there a standard of tolerance that should trump and negate a valid democratic election, or is “the will of the people” supreme? Do the (non-Muslim majority) Swiss have a right to discriminate against a religion or a group they perceive as threatening their own (Western-liberal) traditions and culture? Who/what is right here?

PIQUE readers are requested, entreated to forward their short-essay opinions and outraged fulminations to editor@shsny.org - by January 15, please.

*SHSNY 22nd Anniversary & Darwin Day Chinese Banquet February 3*

*Don't Miss It! Reserve Now! See Page 7 for details.*

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**BOARD OF DIRECTORS:** John Rafferty, *President/Editor*; Elaine Lynn, *Vice President/Secretary*; Donna Marxer, *Treasurer*; Remo Cosentino; Arthur Harris; Lee Loshak; Irv Millman; Robert A. Murtha, Jr.

**SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, F.D.R. Station, New York, NY 10150-7661 / 212-308-2165 / [www.shsny.org](http://www.shsny.org)**

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SHSNY is a member of the Alliance of Secular Humanist Societies.

## RETURN OF THE NATIVIST

Art Harris

I'm sure my views will cause many secular humanists to attack me as nativist, but I am not one. I believe in immigration and not a day goes by that I don't thank my ancestors for having the courage to leave Europe, and America for having accepted them.

It's the sort of immigrants that we are now encouraging, and the potential dangers of that policy, that concern me. The last changes in immigration quotas set new lows (12 percent) for Western Europe, increases for Asia and Africa, and the largest increase - 46 percent - for the Middle East.

Western Europe has also welcomed large numbers of Muslims from the Near East, and that's worked well for those countries, hasn't it?

Holland, Denmark and Great Britain are examples of that policy. Some Muslims in Britain claim that by 2100 the Green Crescent will replace the Union Jack. France barely controls their demanding-and-rioting immigrants, and the Eastern European nations have little ability to guide them into democratic society. Most people, fearful of Muslim anger, refuse to remonstrate against them, but when was the last time a Danish newspaper had a round-the-clock police guard?

Our American problem is that some of the people we are admitting into a modern society are living in the 14th century in regard to culture, tribal loyalties and religious concepts and, unlike Europeans, Africans and Orientals, substantial numbers of them resist inclusion.

Previous immigrant groups usually took one or two generations to enter into the American mainstream. We witnessed some Middle Eastern immigrants celebrating the bombing of the Twin Towers by dancing in the streets of Paterson and Detroit.

We have always had the occasional traitor among us; we do not need to open our gates to them. Petition our legislatures to reduce the Middle East quotas.

### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

I'm sure Art Harris is right - he's going to be pilloried for his views by our (mostly) liberal readership. (And I may be for mine on page 1.) So, bring it on. If we printed Art's views, we'll certainly print yours, too. E-mail your sober assessments or outraged rants to [editor@shsny.org](mailto:editor@shsny.org) - by January 15, please. - JR

### A JOYLESS DECISION ON "GAY" MARRIAGE

Rowena Johnston

It's true that I probably spend a whole lot more time than most straights thinking about the gays. It's unavoidable, really. I work in the HIV/AIDS field, and yes, large numbers of my colleagues are gay men, with a liberal sprinkling of lesbians. What I find really

odd, though, is how much time our New York state legislators have spent recently thinking about gays. Of course I'm referring to the recent debate on whether to legalize gay marriage, after which our "leaders" made the appalling decision to uphold an unfair and antiquated law banning it.

The arguments supporting gay marriage seem so clear to me that I find myself genuinely confused at any opposition. Obviously religion, especially Christianity, is invoked. Although there is no specific prohibition against gay marriage in the Bible, we can be pretty sure that God would not be a fan. The "good book" admonishes us that a man lying with a man is "detestable" (Leviticus 18:22), and that homosexual acts are "vile affections" (Romans 1:26). Still, I find myself wondering why Christians, if they find themselves in such a mean-spirited frame of mind, cannot simply go forth and detest. How, or why, does one make the leap to infringing on the legal rights of others? I Corinthians tells us a whole bunch of sexual transgressors will not inherit the kingdom of God. Presumably they get to look forward to a toasty eternity in the hellfire and brimstone. Since God clearly has the vengeful base covered, why do Christians here on planet earth think they need to add to the misery? Way to "love thy neighbor," guys!

Despite all the holier than thou-ing, one thing is patently clear - Christians are freakishly obsessed with sex. They are endlessly concerned with who is having sex with whom, how, and under which circumstances. But their interest doesn't stop there. Never mind the doing of it, they also meddle in how we talk about sex, how - or even whether - we educate about it, and much to our collective shame we have allowed their morbid monomania to leak into our policies on foreign aid.

All this hysterical rhetoric against gay marriage had me wondering whether there's any precedent that might help me understand the insanity. Surprise! - there is a strong parallel history in America's "anti-miscegenation" laws. Consider the curse of Ham. Ham saw his Dad Noah naked, upon which Noah placed a curse not on Ham but on his son Canaan. And not just Canaan, but all his descendants. (There's so much wrong with this story I hardly know where to start. Quite apart from the obvious lack-logic or -justice in the punishment, I'm also kind of curious to know what was so wrong with how Noah looked naked that he felt compelled to place a curse on a whole segment of humanity.) Canaan, conveniently, has been considered the ancestor of Africans and hey, presto, you have a perfect excuse, wrapped in a fun little story, to mistreat and enslave a whole continent of people. Until the civil rights movement, this parable served as a basis to ban not only marriage but any sexual relations between blacks and whites, putting us up there in the exalted company of apartheid and Nazism.

There is an eerie echo of today's arguments of "preserving the integrity of marriage" in the Virginia Racial Integrity Act of 1924. In the 1950s evangelical extraordinaire Jerry Falwell railed against integration and supported anti-miscegenation laws. Much like today's popular opinions concerning gay marriage, a 1965 Gallup Poll indicated that 42 percent of Northern whites supported bans on inter-racial marriage, as did 72 percent of Southern whites. And yet despite fears to the contrary, the legalization of interracial marriage has not led to the end of civilization as we know it. There is no reason to believe the same would not be true of gay marriage.

Christianity clearly has a piss-poor record of supporting human rights. Happily our legal system does a (mostly) better job in guiding and supporting moral behavior than the Bible. In the Supreme Court *Loving v Virginia* decision overturning the ban on interracial marriage, the court wrote that "Marriage is one of the basic civil rights of man, fundamental to our very existence and survival ... ." We pride ourselves on advances made in civil rights (achieved *despite* what the Bible tells us). We self-righteously condemn the trampling of human rights in other countries. We are constantly reminded we should learn from the mistakes of history. And so I return to my confusion about why gay marriage even needs to be debated. There is neither a logical, legal nor moral reason to prevent gay marriage. Its presence would not harm our society. The same cannot be said of its absence.

## RELIGION AS A JIGSAW PUZZLE

Matthew Parris

(Excerpted from *The Spectator*, 11/18/09)

**D**ame Margaret Drabble's lecture subject was her latest book, *The Pattern in the Carpet: a Personal History with Jigsaws*. We were all curious to know what the book might be. A memoir? A textbook on jigsaw puzzles? A history of the author, or of the puzzle?

Something of all these, it turned out. Drabble is a pleasant, thoughtful speaker, and had all our attention as she explained that this was a true story, partly about a difficult woman, her aunt, and partly about how she came, at her aunt's knee, to love jigsaw puzzles - a bridge between a solitary and unsociable lady, and children. From this starting point the book becomes an idiosyncratic history of the jigsaw puzzle, which turns out (to my surprise) to be an English invention.

But as its author spoke and answered questions, my mind was tending in a different direction: the nature of all those many puzzles where the challenge is to fit things together. Whodunits, join-the-dots, crosswords, Rubik's Cube - all invite the player to make order out of chaos or fill in the blanks. It's a deep human instinct, I think, to try to make sense of nonsense.

Someone had asked Dame Margaret if she had any tips for jigsaw puzzlers. Yes, she replied, like most people she started at the edges. The component pieces are easy to narrow down, having at least one straight edge; and in this way you can make a frame for your picture, and work inwards.

But by now my thoughts were racing. The beauty of a jigsaw puzzle as a challenge is that it is a kind of contained chaos: a jumble, yes, but a jumble we approach secured by three fixed anchors in our task. Though the puzzle-solver may appear to be confronted with a sprawling heap of apparently unrelated little colored shapes, he knows: (1) that they are finite in number and do add up to a single block with defined edges and no blanks; (2) that the block makes a recognizable picture; and (3) that this picture will be identical to the one on the front of the box containing the pieces. His options, in short, are helpfully confined within a template for the reconstruction of which he knows he has all he needs.

Imagine if it were otherwise: that, for each succeeding piece, we dipped into a barrel whose depth was unfathomed, with no idea how many more pieces there might be still to come; that there were no way of identifying the frame-making pieces; that (consequently) we had no idea of its extent. Imagine we were not provided with any copy of the picture we were supposed to put together - that it could be anything.

Or nothing. For imagine that there was no assurance that the pieces ever would add up to any sort of design: that they might be infinite, random, perfectly meaningless, and never fit; that for each piece there did not necessarily exist a piece which slotted into it.

Is this not the condition in which we all find ourselves?

As consciousness first dawns, the infant begins to grasp - in the form of individual items of experience - jigsaw pieces in what might be an immense jigsawed picture of the meaning of his existence, and of life itself. It is in the nature of the human mind to try to fit data together, and we immediately begin the attempt to make a picture. Some pieces do fit, others do not; we assemble little clumps, unrelated to other clumps. But, unlike Margaret Drabble and her aunt sitting around their latest puzzle, we have no idea how many pieces we are going to need before we have much chance of any grand design beginning to swim into shape. Indeed we have no idea how many pieces comprise the total picture, if it exists. It could be infinite. Nor do we know the boundaries. This world? Other worlds? Parallel universes? Things not dreamed of in our philosophy?

But we pore over our experiences, trying this fit and that. As the shapes stubbornly refuse to click together, as no uniting picture emerges, we think, "I'm only young; with age and experience I may find the missing pieces;



things may start to fit.”

But they don't - or for this columnist, anyway, they don't. By the time I was 30 I was well on the way to accumulating a huge and shapeless heap of experiences and thoughts, but still with no hint as to how they added up. I feel this now. At 60 the heap is simply bigger. The thought dawned early that there might be no uniting design. Now I'm sure of it.

But I have no religion. The great appeal of religion is not that (for any thoughtful person) it supplies the whole picture - who would be so arrogant as to think that?) - but that it places the seeker in a similar position to that which Dame Margaret and her aunt found themselves as the pair sat down excitedly to begin a new jigsaw. They didn't know which pieces fitted where, or where to start, or whether they'd finish; but they did know that there was a picture, they did know it had a frame, and they did know they had been provided with the means to put it together; and that, if they persisted, the fit might be found.

Seekers after religious truth are not supplied (as the jigsaw-puzler is) with the finished product for which to aim; but with the various (and sometimes rival) accounts of divine truth which books, sermons, metaphors, revelations and holy scriptures claim as authoritative, giving the seeker glimpses, at least, of what the picture might be: different templates to try.

It must be reassuring to feel confident there's a design, however mysterious and confusing; and that when the pieces fail to fit, that's evidence only of the need for more pieces, or more thought, or more prayer, to find the fit. A confidence not, I fear, for me. But I never did care for jigsaw puzzles.

## MR. POTATO-HEAD RELIGIOUS MASH-UPS

Charles M. Blow

*(Excerpted from his Op-Ed column, "Paranormal Flexibility," in The New York Times, 12/12/09)*

**T**he Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life has released a report ... about the increasingly complicated cacophony of spirituality in America - a mash-up of traditional faiths, fantasy and mythology.

Entitled "Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths," the report points out that many Americans are now choosing to "blend Christianity with Eastern or New Age beliefs" and that "sizable minorities of all major U.S. religious groups" said that they have had supernatural experiences, like encountering ghosts.

For the first time in 47 years of polling, the number of Americans who said that they have had a religious or mystical experience, which the question defined as a "moment of sudden religious insight or awakening," was greater than those who said that they had not. ...

Twenty percent of Protestants and 28 percent of

Catholics said they believe in reincarnation, which flies in the face of Christianity's rapture scenario. About the same percentages said they believe in astrology, yoga as a spiritual practice and the idea that there is "spiritual energy" pulsing from things like "mountains, trees or crystals." Uh-oh. Someone's God is going to be jealous.

Surprisingly, in some cases, those who identified themselves as Christian were more likely to believe these things than those who were unaffiliated. (It should be noted that unaffiliated is not the same as nonbeliever. Many are spiritual people who simply haven't found the right church, synagogue, mosque, coven, Ouija board club, or whatever.)

Furthermore, 16 percent of Protestants and 17 percent of Catholics said that they believe that some people can use the "evil eye" to "cast curses or spells that cause bad things to happen." ... Since 1996, the percentage of Americans who said that they have been in the presence of a ghost has doubled from 9 percent to 18 percent, and the percentage who said that they were in touch with someone who was dead has increased by nearly two thirds, rising from 18 percent to 29 percent.

For those keeping political score, Democrats were almost twice as likely to believe in ghosts and to consult fortune-tellers than were Republicans, and the Democrats were 71 percent more likely to believe that they were in touch with the dead. Please hold the Barack-Obama-as-the-ghost-of-Jimmy-Carter jokes. Heard them all.

The report is further evidence that Americans continue to cobble together Mr. Potato Head-like spiritual identities from a hodgepodge of beliefs - bending dogmas to suit them instead of bending themselves to fit a dogma. And this appears to be leading to more spirituality, not less. Cue the harps, and the sitars, and the tablas, and the whale music.

## CHURCH & STATE IN JAPAN

**A**fter Ichiro Ozawa of the ruling Democratic Party said in a speech that Christianity was "a self-righteous religion that excluded other religions," while Buddhism was "magnanimous," Christians in Japan accused Mr. Ozawa of breaching article 20 of the Japanese constitution, which reads:

*"No religious organization shall receive any privileges from the state or exercise any political authority. No person shall be compelled to take part in any religious acts. The state and its organs shall refrain from religious education or any other religious activity."*

*Hold on. That's the Japanese constitution MacArthur wrote after WWII, right? That changed Japan from a feudal society to a liberal democracy in a single generation. With even tougher wall-of-separation words than our own First Amendment. Why can't we have that in the U.S. constitution? - JR*

**CAST YOUR VOTE FOR  
THE SHSNY DUMBTH-OF-THE-YEAR, 2009**

To qualify for SHSNY's annual Dumbth Award, a nationally-recognizable personality must be not just wrong, but wrong-headed - denying of or clueless about reality. Like our first winner, TV personality *Star Jones*, saying in 2005 that God "blessed her" by postponing the previous December's Indian Ocean tsunami until after her honeymoon. Or like 2006's *Pat Robertson*, who claimed God gave Israel's Ariel Sharon a stroke for negotiating with the Palestinians ... 2007 winner right-wing harridan *Ann Coulter*, who suggested that Jews in America "be perfected" by becoming Christians ... and last year's Darwin-denier *Ben Stein*, who claimed that "Dachau is where science leads you ... to killing people."

*Pope Benedict XVI*. On his way to AIDS-ravaged Africa in March, he told reporters on his Alitalia plane that: "You can't resolve it [AIDS] with the distribution of condoms. On the contrary, it increases the problem."



*Pope Benedict XVI*



*Michele Bachman*

*Rep. Michele Bachman*. Criticizing the Obama stimulus plan in March as a Democratic conspiracy to "suck up" all federal funds, she opined that the conspiracy wouldn't work anyway, because: "We're running out of rich people in this country."

*Glenn Beck*, lunatic commentator and serial weeper on Fox, said on his March 11 broadcast: "It's time to stop playing games in this country. It is time to actually believe in something. I do. I know you do as well. Believe in something. Even if it's wrong."



*Glenn Beck*



*Joe The Plumber*

*Samuel Joe (the Plumber) Wurzelbacher* offered us this bit of time-traveling wisdom in June: "The founding fathers knew socialism doesn't work; they knew communism doesn't work."



*Sen. John Thune*

*Senator John Thune* of South Dakota, defending his proposed bill to allow people with concealed carry permits in any state to carry their guns in any other state, answered the objections of New York's Chuck Schumer: "If someone who has a concealed carry permit in the state of South Dakota that [sic] goes to New York and is in Central Park - Central Park is a much safer place."

*Dana Perino*, Press Secretary in the George W. Bush administration, appeared on Sean Hannity's show, called the Fort Hood massacre a "terrorist attack," implied that it was a failure of the Obama administration, and upended history by announcing: "We did not have a terrorist attack on our country during President Bush's term."



*Dana Perino*

Okay, nominations are closed, and balloting - online and by phone - begins right now, and lasts through January 31. Cast your vote via editor@shsny.org, or leave a message at 212-308-2165. Celebrators will get a second chance to vote at our February 3 Anniversary/Darwin Day Dinner (see page 7), at which the winner of the not-so-coveted horse's ass trophy will be announced - JR

**A PAST DUMBTH WINNER AND A CERTAIN FUTURE NOMINEE REWRITE HISTORY**

On "The O'Reilly Factor" November 24, while bloviating about Christian ethics in politics and the moral leadership of the Christian churches, Bill O'Reilly told 2007 Dumbth winner Ann Coulter that the Catholic Church courageously opposed Hitler "from the first," ignoring the infamous 1933 Vatican Concordat with Hitler's Reich that "legitimized" Nazism - and which the Church has still not repudiated.

The Blonde Bombshell of the Right nodded agreement with Bigmouth Bill, and noted that Christians were also behind the pre-Civil War abolitionist movement, neglecting to mention: 1) the two most important leaders of the movement, William Lloyd Garrison, a Unitarian whose printing press for *The Liberator* was burned down by Christians in Boston, and non-believing ex-slave Frederick Douglass; 2) that almost all of the four million slaves in the U.S. were "owned" by believing Christians, mostly Baptists and Presbyterians in the South, and 3) that many of the staunchest supporters of slavery were the (selectively) Bible-quoting Christian ministers of the antebellum South.

The next night O'Reilly asked Lou Dobbs, without a hint of humor: "Barack Obama, is he the Devil?"

# SHSNY BOOK CLUB: JANUARY - MARCH 2010

THURSDAY, JANUARY 14, 6:30 - 8:00 p.m.

The SHSNY Book Club meets at  
The Muhlenberg Branch Library  
209 West 23 Street (at 7th Ave.)

to discuss

**THE NEW ATHEISM:**

***Taking a Stand for Science and Reason***

**By Victor J. Stenger**

Professor of philosophy (University of Colorado) and emeritus professor of physics and astronomy at the University of Hawaii, best-selling author Stenger (*God: The Failed Hypothesis*) reviews and expands upon the principles of New Atheism and answers its critics. He demonstrates in detail that naturalism – the view that all of reality is reducible to matter and nothing else – is sufficient to explain everything we observe in the universe, from the most distant galaxies to the inner workings of the brain that result in the phenomenon of mind.

Dan Barker says of *The New Atheism*: “Stenger’s combined expertise in physics and philosophy prove fatal to any pretense that theism is defensible or rational. *The New Atheism* is a clear and potent explanation of why the old theism is no match for the New Atheism.”

And Sam Harris adds: “Victor J. Stenger dispels the blizzard of lies and half-truths [about “new atheism”] with great skill in this timely and accessible book. We are all in his debt.”

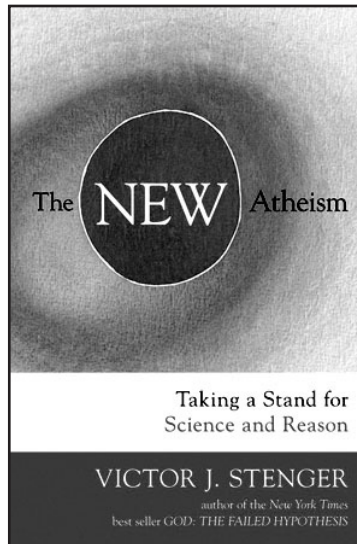
John Rafferty will lead the discussion. — Paperback

*Join us even if you haven't finished reading.  
The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!*

*Every SHSNY Book Club is a Book Swap, too.  
Bring the books gathering dust on your shelves and  
take your pick of other readers' castaways.  
The leftovers? Donated to the Library.*

## What book(s) would you like to read and discuss?

Anyone can suggest any book that would be of interest to our secular humanist readers, and everyone's opinion is valued. Final choices are made by our Book Club Editor, Elaine Lynn, but please email your suggestions to [editor@shsny.org](mailto:editor@shsny.org)



Thursday, February 18,  
6:30-8:00 p.m.

at the Muhlenberg Library  
**DENIALISM: How Irrational  
Thinking Hinders Scientific  
Progress, Harms the Planet, and  
Threatens Our Lives**  
by Michael Specter

*New Yorker* staff writer Specter reveals that Americans have come to mistrust institutions and especially the institution of science more today than ever before. Denialists come from both ends of the political spectrum, but have one important trait in common: their willingness to replace the rigorous and open-minded skepticism of science with the inflexible certainty of ideological commitment. Specter calls this a war against progress, and makes an argument for a new Enlightenment, the revival of an approach to the physical world that was stunningly effective for hundreds of years.

Thursday, March 18,  
6:30-8:00 p.m.

at the Muhlenberg Library  
**THIS WILL CHANGE  
EVERYTHING:**

***Ideas That Will Shape the Future***  
Edited by John Brockman

136 answers to: “What game-changing scientific ideas and developments do you expect to live to see?” Leo M. Chalupa and Alison Gopnik both consider the possibility resetting the adult brain’s plasticity – its capacity for learning – to childhood levels. Richard Dawkins suggests that reverse-engineering evolution could create a highly illuminating “continuum between every species and every other.” Full of ideas, *This* offers dozens of ingenious ways to think about progress.



# SHSNY CALENDAR: JANUARY - MARCH 2010

**MONDAY, JAN 4, 7:00 p.m.**  
**SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**

**JULIA SWEENEY:**

**LETTING GO OF GOD:**

**Breaking Up is Hard to Do**

Comedian Sweeney reflects on religion, her search for God and her eventual non-belief. After two Mormon missionaries who knock at her door pose a simple question, the debate begins.

From her roots as a Catholic to her flirtations with Buddhism and New Age "philosophies," Sweeney takes viewers on a smart and humorous spiritual journey as she seeks out truth and deals with the family fallout from her skepticism. As she says to an imaginary God she's at parting with: "It's because I take you so seriously that I can't bring myself to believe in you."

*Apologies to December moviegoers: Stone Creek double-booked, and we were shut out.*



### *Coming Attractions*

**February 8:** "1984," Orwell's terrifying vision of the future.

**March 1:** "Religulous," Bill Maher's funny take on the three big religions.

**April/May:** What do you want to see? Come and tell us.

SHSNY Movie Night is free, but Stone Creek's management expects a "one drink minimum" per person for the use of their back room.

Check out the Stone Creek menu and prices online at [www.stonecreeknyc.com](http://www.stonecreeknyc.com).

*Reserve the date:*

**WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 6:30 p.m.**

for a

**CHINESE BANQUET  
DARWIN DAY DINNER**

and

**SHSNY 21ST ANNIVERSARY  
CELEBRATION**

with

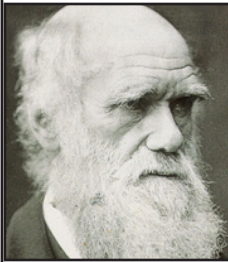
**Guest Speaker/  
Entertainer and  
Darwin Scholar**

**RICHARD MILNER.**  
Plus the presentation

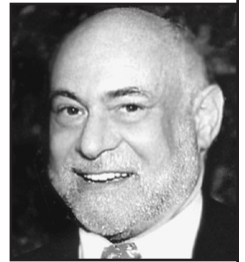
of the

**5TH ANNUAL**

**SHSNY DUMBTH AWARD**



*Charles Darwin*



*Richard Milner*

Halfway (sort-of) between SHSNY's anniversary (Jan 28) and Darwin Day (Feb 12) we'll gather at Red Egg restaurant downtown to celebrate both history-making events. We'll feast at a sumptuous Chinese banquet – from Dim Sum and Dumplings to Grand Marnier Prawns and Sautéed Steak Cubes (lots of veggie choices, too) – cast the final votes for the recipient of the not-so-coveted SHSNY 2009 Dumbth Award, and enjoy the wit and insights of Darwin scholar, author and first-class entertainer (his "Musical Evening with Charles Darwin" was one of our best evenings ever) – Richard Milner.

**Red Egg Restaurant**  
**202 Centre Street**

*(Map, directions - [www.redegg.nyc.com](http://www.redegg.nyc.com))*

Cost for the evening, all inclusive: \$50  
Cash bar.

To reserve: E-mail [editor@shsnyc.org](mailto:editor@shsnyc.org), or  
call 212-308-2165 (leave a call-back number).

**SUNDAY, JAN 17, 12:30 p.m.**

**OUR MONTHLY SHSNY  
BRUNCH GET-TOGETHER**

We'll gather again at Wild Ginger restaurant ("Asian fusion at its best"), 226 East 51 Street, between 2nd and 3rd Avenues.

Everyone interested in getting together with like-minded humanists and rationalists for good pan-Asian food and lively talk in a charming East-side setting, is welcome. Bring friends!

Order off the menu; individual checks.

**February brunch: 2/21**

## HOW WILL RELIGION EVOLVE?

John Tierney

(Reprinted from The New York Times, 11/29/09)

Does religion have a future? Who looks more like an evolutionary dead end: the religious American or the agnostic European? Or will both give way to some sort of compromise — people bound by new institutions that provide the social benefits of religion without belief in a traditional deity?

I raise these questions after reading my colleague Nicholas Wade's fascinating new book, *The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved and Why It Endures*, in which he argues that people have a genetically based urge to worship, engraved by natural selection in the mind's neural circuits because of the tremendous advantage religion conferred on early societies.

If there is a religious instinct, how do we make sense of the declining church attendance in western Europe? As an agnostic myself, I've tended to see the European trend as a harbinger of a general move toward secularism as societies become richer and more educated. But you don't see that trend in the United States, where church attendance is still robust, and Nicholas told me that he sees a long future for religion: "The extent to which people practice religion in modern states may wax and wane, depending on social circumstances like war or privation, but religion is unlikely to disappear entirely."

You might conclude, from the low birth rates (below replacement levels) in European countries, that agnostics and atheists are eventually going to lose out, from an evolutionary standpoint, and be replaced by the growing populations of believers from other societies. But it's also possible that the nonbelievers could develop new godless institutions that confer the evolutionary benefits of religion.

In *The Faith Instinct*, after discussing some of the challenges to traditional beliefs (like the arguments of scholars that Jesus had little to do with the invention of Christianity, and that Muhammad might not even have existed), Nicholas notes that music appreciation, like religion, is a universal human faculty that draws people together, stirs the emotions, and exalts the mind to a different plane. He then observes:

*Is there not some way of transforming religion into versions better suited for a modern age? The three monotheisms were created to meet conditions in societies that existed many centuries ago. The fact that they have endured for so long does not mean they were meant to last forever, only that they have become like some favorite Mozart opera that people are happy to hear over and over again. But the world of music did not achieve final perfection in Mozart.*

Some Mozart devotees might argue with that last

assertion, but I like the parallel between opera and religion. Going to the opera has always reminded me of going to church — the solemn congregants dressed in their best clothes, listening to their own sacred hymns and texts — but it doesn't have the same overall impact. As Nicholas notes, religion has traditionally involved people in a multisensual communal experience (music, poetry, dancing) that touches "the deepest emotions of which the mind is capable, inspiring people to look beyond their own self-interest to something they may value more, the health and survival of their society, culture or civilization."

But nowadays many religions have toned down those experiences (Nicholas notes that pews were put in churches to stop people from dancing), and many people seem untouched by religion. Nicholas suggests this is because "the three monotheisms seem long ago to have reached the limits of their development, lagging behind the increasing complexity of human societies and the vast growth of organized knowledge." He writes:

*Religious behavior evolved for a single reason: to further the survival of human societies. Those who administer religions should not assume they cannot be altered. To the contrary, religions are Durkheimian structures, eminently adjustable to a society's needs. They are shaped in implicit negotiation with supernatural powers who then give instructions to promote society's interests. Much of course depends on the craft and inspiration of the negotiators. But first it is necessary to understand that negotiation is possible.*

*Maybe religion needs to undergo a second transformation, similar in scope to the transition from hunter gatherer religion to that of settled societies. In this new configuration, religion would retain all its old powers of binding people together for a common purpose, whether for morality or defense. It would touch all the senses and lift the mind. It would transcend self. And it would find a way to be equally true to emotion and to reason, to our need to belong to one another and to what has been learned of the human condition through rational inquiry.*

What would the product of such a transformation look like? One possibility that occurs to me is a version of environmentalism, but with better music and with rituals that are more elegant than sorting garbage. A Church of Green could provide some of the same moral lessons and communal values as traditional religions, and I suspect it's no coincidence that green fervor is especially prevalent in European countries where traditional religion is on the decline.

Do you see any possibilities for new religions, or for ways in which current religions could evolve?



## NY Times Readers Respond

To the Editor:

Nicholas Wade claims that atheists would be reluctant to accept that religion might have conferred some adaptive advantages upon our ancestors. As one of the atheists whom Mr. Wade may have had in mind, I disagree.

If religious belief helped our ancestors survive and reproduce, perhaps because it increased group altruism in the face of territorial violence, this would not even slightly suggest that it is currently useful, much less true.

There are, needless to say, many traits that may have helped our ancestors propagate their genes that we would be wise to outgrow. Rape is also a universal feature of human life, and may have been selected for, but who would conclude on this basis that rape is morally defensible?

The tension between atheism and biology suggested in the article does not exist. In fact, there is no logical space in which it could exist. The reasons to doubt the evolutionary origins of religion have nothing to do with atheism; they relate entirely to the controversies over group selection to which Mr. Wade alluded.

– Sam Harris, Los Angeles

To the Editor:

How does [a god gene] work? What is the relationship between the organic gene and the human experience? Do we need one gene for a theist and another for an atheist, an agnostic or a polytheist?

It is possible to accept evolution without resorting to an organic narrative to account for every specific human experience. Must there be a specific gene for playing poker or dancing the rumba? And if we believe in elves and witches, are corresponding genes required?

– (Rev). David L. Smith, Pittsburgh

To the Editor:

While religions may have been useful to evolving societies, their social advantages are secondary to a much greater human impulse – the need to understand and explain the world around us. This impulse has clear survival advantages and distinguishes humans from other species.

But today as the reach of our understanding has advanced so far, we can and should dispense with the relics of our prescientific past. We can still sing the beautiful songs without buying into the outdated myths.

– James Heron, San Francisco

## THE STATE OF CHURCH-STATE ISSUES

Reported by Brian Lemaire

**O**n October 28, about 50 people attended an informative discussion of current Church and State issues at All Souls Unitarian Church, with panelists Susan Jacoby, author of *The Age of American Unreason*

and *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*; Rob Boston, spokesman for Americans United for the Separation of Church and State; and Edwin Sanders, pastor of the Memphis/ Nashville All-Faith Alliance.

Sanders, a man of faith and a Republican, had a seat at the table during the Bush years and so was able to advocate a liberal course in important forums not open to secular Democrats. He shared his views and experience on a variety of subjects.

He sees several reasons for government to keep a relationship with churches. For instance, churches can most effectively do surveillance (monitor hot-spots) and outreach in target communities such as those affected by the AIDS epidemic. He noted that some non-governmental non-profit AIDS-related organizations have simply become “businesses,” soaking up government funding on a permanent basis.

Sanders has supported the concept of “capacity building.” This refers to government contributing to building the capacity of small faith- and community-based organizations delivering HIV/AIDS services in local communities. This includes the mission of educating people about safe behaviors, and building leadership within communities to address the challenges.

But Sanders also spoke of the negative effects of church influence in state business. Bush’s \$15 billion, five-year plan known as the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) for Africa saw its funding channeled into abstinence-only groups. Sanders mentioned Edward Green of Harvard as an advisor for the program who de-emphasized the use of condoms. Drug policy during the Bush years, influenced heavily by the right-wing, sided against implementing needle-exchange as an effective tool against the spread of disease.

Sanders stressed that even though the Democrats are now in political ascendancy, secularists must continue to fight these battles in many forums.

In that vein, Rob Boston brought up another issue: we are losing in the Supreme Court. On the case deciding whether a religious cross can remain on public land in Arizona, the court gratuitously added to their decision a conclusion limiting standing of secular groups to bring similar cases in the future. Boston said that issues of major import like this are often decided by the same five members of the court.

All three panelists weighed in on the subject of public education. Susan Jacoby described how some school boards have turned Charter Schools toward religious uses in both New York and Connecticut. In New York City itself, there is one charter school focused on Islam, and another focused on “Hebrew” teachings.

So we must be especially wary of the movement toward charter schools, just as we must of our old friend, vouchers.

## SPEAKING OF WHICH ... EAST RAMAPO, AGAIN John Rafferty

No issue generated as much controversy in these pages last year as the "Secularism vs. Democracy" articles and subsequent reader response in June, July and September, 2009 PIQUE.\*

Based originally on an "Our Towns" column in *The NYTimes* by Peter Applebome, the question raised herein was the conundrum caused by the Orthodox Jews of the town of Monsey - a minority population who do not send their children to the public schools in the East Ramapo (NY) school district, and who resented the high taxes they had to pay for said schools - winning fair and open elections to garner a majority position on that district's school board, then instituting cost cuts, including the closing of a school.

Do secular values like free public education trump majority rule, or should the democratic electoral process under law be inviolate? That question elicited eleven (mostly) well-reasoned reader essays that ranged from "to hell with the bigots" to "to hell with public schools."

Well, guess what's popped up again. The black hats of Monsey - *they're baack!*

In another "Our Towns" column December 7, Mr. Applebome reports that relations between the district's majority population and the board's "private school community" majority (aka the black-hat Jews of Monsey) have only gotten worse, with board meetings turned into accusation-filled shouting matches.

But some things never change - in this case the almost predictable tone-deaf chutzpah of the religious self-righteous. While cutting costs everywhere else (lay-offs are also rumored), the "private school community" majority has hired a Long Island lawyer, one Albert D'Agostino, whose specialty seems to be finding ways to obtain "special education services" funds for - you know what's coming, don't you? - *private school students*.

Bad enough? Not yet. Mr. D'Agostino's fee is four times that of the board's current lawyers.

Oh, and Mr. D'Agostino is under investigation by the New York State Attorney General's office.

Stay tuned.

*\*All issues of PIQUE except the most recent are available to read or download at [www.shsnny.org](http://www.shsnny.org) - click on the PIQUE link - from January, 2002, and in pdf format from January, 2005.*

## UNDERSTANDING "THE CULTURE OF LIFE"

G. Beer

The Culture of Life (CoL) is an attractively named aspirational principle that is widely supported in the United States. Its main purpose is to influence the laws of the land and it will certainly affect, or be a factor in thwarting, the current health insurance initiative.

"The Culture of Life" was introduced by Pope John Paul II during a 1993 tour of the U.S. Basically, the CoL holds that human life, at all stages from conception until natural death, is sacred, a gift from God. Therefore, CoL opposes all practices seen to be destructive of human life.

Social conservatives primarily endorse its opposition to euthanasia, abortion and embryonic stem cell research. Contraception is also opposed by the CoL, even though it doesn't destroy life, merely inhibits new life. Liberals can endorse its opposition to capital punishment and war, also its opposition to greed, degradation, sadistic humiliation, narcissism, selfishness and poverty, which seem to have been included as an afterthought. To understand the CoL, take a brief review of the consequences of its most controversial demands.

By preventing euthanasia the CoL condemns many people to months or years of pain and suffering, even though they beg for the relief of death. As in the 2005 Terri Schiavo case, "natural death" can be construed to mean cessation of all physiological activity, even when that activity is maintained only by artificial means.

Embryonic stem-cell research promises to provide relief, even cures, for many ailments and defects that have no current remedy. The CoL opposes that research because embryos are killed in the process. But the embryos used are surplus, from in-vitro fertilization procedures (there are more than 400,000 of them), and will eventually be destroyed anyway. (Recently stem cells have been created from somatic - body - cells, but these do not have the potency of embryonic stem cells, and there are potential safety problems.)

The CoL forbids abortion, even when the infant would be badly deformed, able to live only briefly and/or in misery; even when continuing towards birth would endanger the health or the life of the mother, or when the pregnancy was caused by incest or rape. Some CoL advocates are willing to make exceptions for such cases; others work themselves to frenzy over the pain they imagine a fetus suffers during abortion, no matter its stage of development.

The CoL opposes prevention of unwanted pregnancies, whether by contraception (the most effective method - condoms - also prevents venereal diseases, including AIDS) or by RU486, the "morning after pill," even though every prevented pregnancy eliminates the possibility of an abortion.

CoL advocates oppose use of HPV vaccine for cervical cancers caused by the most common of the papilloma viruses, which are transmitted via sexual intercourse. This vaccine is 100% effective when administered to pre-pubescent girls. They oppose it because it makes sex less dangerous. Cancer, it seems, is the lesser evil.

Obviously, all of these CoL strictures either cause

suffering or prohibit efforts to prevent or relieve suffering. This is what everyone should understand about the Culture of Life: *it is also a culture of suffering.*

For advocates of the CoL, suffering itself is a much-admired virtue, glorified ever since the Crucifixion. Clearly, suffering for a faith intensifies devotion to it, which is most important for them. This explains their exaltation at the deathbed suffering of the late Pope John Paul II, held up as an example to the world.

Not incidentally, CoL advocates also oppose homosexuality and same-sex marriage unconditionally, even though, like contraception and the HPV vaccine, these have nothing to do with the preservation or destruction of life per se. Which reveals their underlying and overriding obsession – not-for-procreation sex.

So the CoL is not only about life, it's also about suffering, which they adore, and recreational or purely affectionate sex, which they detest.

To support their cause they dream up “facts”: they grossly exaggerate the danger of abortion (actually, when done by a doctor, it is safer than childbirth); they tell people in countries devastated by AIDS that condoms do not prevent HIV transmission; they equate abortion with genocide and their opponents with Nazis; they reject factual sex education (more effective than the fanciful “abstinence-only” sex education they promote) for reducing unwanted pregnancies *and abortions.*

This is not to imply that all CoL proponents are insincere or unkind. Certain of their righteousness, they support many, many efforts throughout the world that aid the needy and the afflicted – while they proselytize. But they fail to realize, or else don't care, that these good works pale to insignificance when weighed against the wretchedness that often results from acceptance of the burdens of the Culture of Life.

The name “Culture of Life” and its inspirational phrases like “choose life” and “guard the sanctity of human life” are seductions designed to conceal the consequences of the CoL and its fundamental insensitivity. Often, to “choose life” is to choose misery.

## MODERN JUDAISM

*In Israel:*

(Based on “Weird But True” in The New York Post 12/12)  
Ultra-Orthodox rabbis living in Israel and in another century have told their followers to shun the Internet – even religiously conservative sites – because it is a world filled with “lies and terrible impurity. Those who enter the world of the Internet will never return.”

*In Brooklyn:*

(Based on “Hipsters Repaint ...” in The NY Post 12/8)  
Just before the November election, and at the request of the Hasidic community, New York Pander-in-Chief Michael Bloomberg had 14 blocks of Bedford Avenue in

Williamsburg sandblasted to remove painted bicycle lanes. Why? Because “scantly clad hipster cyclists” (including many artists who also live in the Brooklyn neighborhood) made it difficult, the Hasids said, to obey religious laws forbidding them from staring at members of the opposite sex in various states of undress.

### *About those Artists & Hasids:*

When artists began moving into low-rent Williamsburg several years ago, the Hasidim staged demonstrations and petitioned “G-d” for help. In March, 2004 PIQUE, we reprinted the prayer (translated from the Hebrew) they taped on trees and lampposts. Here it is again:

FOR THE PROTECTION  
OF OUR CITY OF WILLIAMSBURG  
FROM THE PLAGUE OF THE ARTISTS  
*Master of the Universe, have mercy upon us  
and upon the borders of our village and do not  
allow the persecution to come inside our home;  
please remove from upon us the plague of the artists,  
so that we shall not drown in evil waters, and so that they  
shall not come to our residence to ruin it.*

## SHAMELESS

From the recently-released documents relating to lawsuits brought against the Roman Catholic Diocese of Bridgeport, Conn., alleging decades of sexual abuse of children by its priests while Edward Egan was the diocese's bishop, we have now-Cardinal Archbishop of New York Egan's testimony.

“I am not aware of those things. I am aware of the claims of those things, the allegations of those things. I am aware that there are a number of people who know one another, some are related to one another, have the same lawyers and so forth.” And ...

“It's marvelous, when you think of the hundreds and hundreds of priests and how very few have even been accused, and how very few have even come close to having anyone prove anything.”

## WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #79

Ten years ago a Texas jury – rightly – quickly found Khristian Oliver guilty of murdering an elderly man whose house he was robbing. Then, to decide whether Oliver should be executed, four jurors brought Bibles into the jury room, read from “the good book” aloud, and consigned Oliver to the gas chamber.

A Texas state appeals court rejected Oliver's plea to strike down the sentence because, it said, he had not “presented clear and convincing evidence” that the Bible influenced the jury's decision, even though four of the jurors subsequently testified that it had. Eventually the Roberts/Scalia/Thomas Supreme Court upheld Texas.

On November 6 in Texas, where hearily half of all the executions in the U.S. take place, Oliver was killed.



## SIGNS OF OUR TIMES

In December, HuffingtonPost.com posted images of dozens of what it calls "The Funniest Protest Signs of 2009." We've sampled what we think are the best of the best for you here, in two categories of particular interest to secular humanists.

### 1. Political protests

In a sea of "abolish the government" (really) placards at a "tea-bagger" rally, a young man holds up:

**ANGRY MOB**

In another right-wing mob scene, with arrows on his sign pointing at the people around him, a man announces:

**WE HAVE NO IDEA**

**WHAT WE'RE TALKING ABOUT!**

Which would include the clueless woman hoisting:

**NO PUBIC OPTION**

And this litterateur:

**THANK YOU, FOX NEWS,  
FOR KEEPING US INFROMED**

But best of all among the sign-waving tea-baggers is:

**STOP! YOU'RE STARTING  
TO SCARE GEORGE ORWELL**

### 2. Same-Sex Marriage rallies

Protesting Mormon anti-gay support for California's Proposition 8, a little boy holds up a handmade sign:

**MY TWO MOMS CAN BEAT UP  
YOUR 14 WIVES**

A logic-minded young man advertises that:

**JESUS HAD TWO DADDIES**

A pudgy gay guy slyly vamps the camera while his sign asks the question:

**WOULD YOU RATHER  
I MARRIED YOUR DAUGHTER?**

And a young woman explains it all with a two-sider:

*Front*

**IT'S ALL THE STRAIGHTS' FAULT,**

*Reverse*

**THEY'RE THE ONES WHO  
KEEP HAVING GAY BABIES**

## WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #125

"... no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any office or public Trust under the United States."

- U.S. Constitution, Article VI

Cecil Bothwell is an avowed atheist who was elected to the Raleigh, North Carolina, City Council last November. Now his political opponents have joined with Christian fundamentalists to sue the city for swearing him into office December 7, citing a provision of the 1868 state constitution that disqualifies office-holders "who shall deny the being of Almighty God."

The provision is *prima facie* unconstitutional - that is settled law - and the creeps have no expectation at all of winning in court. So why do it?

To make Bothwell spend his time and money defending himself, and to frustrate his avowed agenda of working for government reform and water conservation, and against the death penalty.

SHSNY 22nd Anniversary  
& Darwin Day  
Chinese Banquet  
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FDR Station  
PO Box 7661  
New York, NY  
10150-7661

