

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

May, 2010

A balancing act this month: We offer a new humanism and observe atheists in action; compare foam-at-the-mouth politics with the virtues of civility; and balance the dissemblings of the Vatican with ... well, there is no comparison, is there? We take note of the teeniest tick-tocks of time, pity Islamic fundamentalists and a new Dumbth nominee, engineer immortality, belie the liars for Jesus, promote two can't-miss events (page 7), and announce the new SHSNY Afterlife Contest! – JR

NEW FROM PAUL KURTZ: "NEO-HUMANISM"

(Excerpted from "Secular Humanist Takes On New Atheism" at www.huffingtonpost.com, 3/23/2010)

Concerned that his positive vision of humanism is being threatened and perhaps eclipsed with a new brand of acerbic atheism, Paul Kurtz has drafted and released a new "Neo-Humanist Statement of Secular Values and Principles." The lengthy document has been endorsed by close to 70 distinguished men and women, incorporating many of their suggestions. Kurtz was previously responsible for drafting three highly influential statements, including *Humanist Manifesto 2* in 1973, *A Secular Humanist Declaration* in 1980, and *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, released the same year.

Kurtz has been the leading intellectual and organizational figure in the atheist/freethought/humanist movement for over 40 years. Throughout his long career Kurtz has sought to develop a positive alternative to the reigning theological orthodoxies of the day. While Kurtz has spent much of his life critically examining religion, he believes that secular humanists need to emphasize and build positive alternatives to religion.

For Kurtz, it is not enough to reject God. He has always maintained that secular humanism and atheism are not identical. Throughout the years this put Kurtz at odds with atheist firebrand Madalyn Murray O'Hair. For many years both Kurtz and O'Hair were the leading foes of leaders of the religious right such as Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, David Noebel and others.

Now with the emergence of "the new atheism" Kurtz finds himself in the uncomfortable position of being the elder statesman and founder of a movement tempted by tactics he has warned against before.

"I hope this statement will help reorient the humanist movement in a positive and constructive direction by emphasizing what we are for rather than against," said Kurtz, who founded the Council for Secular Humanism in 1980 and the Center for Inquiry in 1991. He now serves as chair emeritus for both organizations.

Among the signers of this new statement, coming ten years after *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, are heavyweights Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, Colin McGinn, Steven Pinker, Lionel Tiger, Patricia Schroeder, Phillip Kitcher, Owen Flanagan, and Ann Druyan (the widow of Carl Sagan). Also included are movement insiders such as R. Joseph Hoffmann, Joe Nickell, James Randi, D.J. Grothe, Carleton Coon, Edd Doerr, Terry O'Neill, Dale McGowan, Anthony B. Pinn, along with

Read the
"Neo-Humanist
Statement of Secular
Values and Principles"
online at
www.paulkurtz.us.

many others.

Writing in the December 2009/January 2010 issue of *Free Inquiry*, the magazine he founded, Kurtz declared "militant atheism is often truncated and narrow-minded ... it is not concerned with the humanist values that ought to accompany the rejection of theism. The New Atheists, in my view, have made an important contribution to the contemporary cultural scene because they have opened religious claims to public examination. ... What I object to are the militant atheists who are narrow-minded about religious persons and will have nothing to do with

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.shsn.org

Individual membership \$40 per year; Family membership \$65; Subscription only \$30.

Articles published in PIQUE are archived in <http://www.shsn.org>. They may be reprinted, in full or in part, in other newsletters. The URL (<http://www.shsn.org>) should be referenced.

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

ATHEISTS AT PLAY IN NEW JERSEY A Report on American Atheists, Inc.'s 36th Annual Convention

Elaine Lynn

agnostics, skeptics, or those who are indifferent to religion, dismissing them as cowardly.

“While I certainly don’t believe that we ought to abandon our criticism of religious fanaticism or allow religious doctrine to dictate public policy, the future of the secular humanist and scientific rationalist movements depends upon appealing to a wider base of support,” continued Kurtz. Some 16 percent of the American population is not affiliated with any church, temple, or mosque – approximately 50 million Americans – whereas only two to three percent are estimated to be out-and-out atheists. Hence, Neo-Humanism wishes to address its message to a broader public who we believe should be sympathetic.”

Kurtz says that his new manifesto advances a new form of humanism that is not antireligious per se, nor avowedly atheist. “There are various forms of religious and non-religious beliefs in the world. On the one end of the spectrum are traditional religious beliefs; on the other ‘the new atheism.’ Not enough attention is paid to humanism as an alternative,” declares the statement.

“This statement aims to be more inclusive by appealing to both non-religious and religious humanists and to moderate religious believers who share common goals. It seeks to foster moderation rather than divisiveness and to spark a genuine conversation about meaning and value and the common problems that confront us all as a nation and inhabitants of planet Earth.”

WHY I DID NOT SIGN ON

John Rafferty

I was flattered when SHSNY member Stanley Friedland, working with Paul Kurtz to circulate the final draft of the new manifesto (see above), asked me to be a signatory along with such stars as James Randi, Steven Pinker, Ann Druyan, Edd Doerr and Rebecca Goldstein.

But, as I wrote in reply to Stan, I cannot get past my first reaction – why do we need another, new, name? I still feel (not “know,” of course, but “feel”) that Paul has been running away from “secular humanism” ever since Gingrich/Robertson/Falwell began to demonize us in the early 90s. I think this new tract’s only purpose is to justify changing names, and I don’t want to.

“Secular humanism” defines specifically what we in SHSNY are (at least what I am). Classically-defined “humanism” already incorporates religion-based but non-dogmatic humanisms like “Judaic humanism.” And it includes non-religious “secular” humanism – my kind.

Taxonomically, my *Family* is Freethinker (including atheists, skeptics, agnostics); my *Genus* is Humanist (including the religion-based); and my *Species* is secular.

That defines my philosophy, which Paul Kurtz helped form. “Neo-Humanism” does not.

Over 250 participants met April 2-4 in Elizabeth, NJ, for the 36th national convention of American Atheists, Inc. Blossoming trees celebrated spring as the first morning began with a warm, inspiring welcome from someone with a lifetime of achievement in the cause of secular humanism. Paul Kurtz spoke of his own positive approach to life, and toward other people who have yet to share his rational view of the world. He urged us to combat our society’s view of atheists as immoral people fueled by anger. The afternoon ended with a raucous mass de-baptism conducted by Legal Director Ed Kagin, who gave a long and angry, if incontrovertible, rant – this taped by ABC-TV, of course – about the ridiculous and immoral history of religions.

CUNY-Lehman Professor of Philosophy (and SHSNY Honorary Member) Massimo Pigliucci addressed the issue of knowledge and morality, emphasizing that morality is a philosophical rather than a scientific issue, a fact that cannot be overcome by increasing knowledge of neurophysiology or history. Atheism does not imply any particular moral or political perspective, he said, nor can such perspectives be based ultimately on science.

Investigative journalist and biographer Cecil Bothwell – one of the few openly atheist elected officials in the U.S., elected to Asheville, NC’s city council in 2009 – was an engaging speaker, telling us of his experience writing the first critical biography of Billy Graham. He discovered that Graham gave explicit military advice to every President he knew, even advising Nixon to bomb the dikes in North Vietnam, a tactic rejected because the inundation would cause as many as a million civilian casualties. Bothwell’s research also turned up the transcript of a discussion in which Graham raised the problem of the “satanic Jews” and suggested Nixon could do something about them after the 1972 election.

Wendy Kammerer, a lawyer and well-known social critic, discussed controversial issues of public education and religious freedom, including a case currently before the Supreme Court, *Christian Legal Society v Martinez*. Among her published works is *Sleeping with Extraterrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism and Perils of Piety*. She has played an active role in the American Civil Liberties Union for years, and her most recent book is titled *Worst Instincts: Cowardice, Conformity, and the ACLU*.

Historian Jeff B. Perry has completed the first volume of a Hubert Harrison biography, bringing to light a nearly-forgotten African-American writer, editor and activist (1883-1927), who was described by A. Philip Randolph as “the father of Harlem radicalism.” Perry has also edited Harrison’s papers, and published A

Hubert Harrison Reader.

Andy Thomson, a psychiatrist associated with the Richard Dawkins Foundation, is a provocative speaker who studies the evolution and function of religious belief. He attempted to demonstrate the criticality of rhythmic communal rituals by asking those of us who didn't mind being seen doing so in public to put our arms around each other and sing "Amazing Grace" while swaying from side to side. (We all seemed to feel pretty good, so that must mean something, right?) He asserted that all religions are based on elaboration of an original religion, the main features of which are, first, confusing the experiences we have when dreaming with those we have when awake and, second, their rhythmic communal rituals. He likened the latter to compulsive activity, which relieves anxiety. Thomson has a wildly optimistic belief that we are "tantalizingly close to a comprehensive cognitive neuroscience of religious belief with robust theories and empirical evidence." Check out a more general presentation of Thomson's approach to the plausible theory that religion is the by-product of cognitive mechanisms designed for other purposes, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1iMmvu9eMrg>.

"Amazing Grace" is one of my favorite religious songs, partly for the tune, whose origin in folk music is hazy, but primarily for its brilliant self-parody:

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved.*

But that wasn't the convention's only music. The hilarity into which the mass de-baptism dissolved was helped by three women in burkhas who sang, "Back in the Burkha Again," Gene Autry's "Back in the Saddle Again," with new lyrics by Helen and Ed Kagin.

*A burkha's a smothering affair,
No garment can ever compare,
It gets so hot in there they can barely breathe the air -
But sometimes under there they wear sexy underwear -
Back in their burkhas again.*

Overlapping schedules made it impossible to hear all the speakers, including Dan Barker, co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation; Terry Sanderson, President, and Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director, of the National Secular Society (UK); Eddie Tabash, constitutional lawyer on the boards of the Council for Secular Humanism and the Center for Inquiry; Tom Flynn, Executive Director of the Council for Secular Humanism and editor of *Free Inquiry*; and Sean Faircloth, Executive Director of the Secular Coalition for America. The Secular Student Alliance, an inspiring group, was also well-represented at the convention.

The event was a great opportunity to meet old friends and make new ones. It was educational, convivial and, between the music and the applause, it fulfilled my need for rhythmic communal rituals.

NOW YOU'RE GETTING MAD?

(An internet buzz forwarded by Bob Murtha)

You didn't get mad when the Supreme Court stopped a legal recount and selected a President. You didn't get mad when Cheney allowed energy company officials to dictate energy policy. You didn't get mad when the habeas corpus-killing Patriot Act was passed. You didn't get mad when we illegally invaded a country that posed no threat to us. You didn't get mad when we spent over 600 billion dollars (and counting) on said illegal war, or when the U.S. death count rose over 3,000. You didn't get mad when over 10 billion dollars vanished into thin air in Iraq. You didn't get mad when you found out we were torturing people. You didn't get mad when it came out that the government was illegally wiretapping Americans. You didn't get mad when Bush didn't even *try* to catch Osama Bin Laden in Tora Bora. You didn't get mad when you saw the disgusting conditions at Walter Reed. You didn't get mad when you found out thousands of Iraq/Afghanistan veterans were destitute and homeless. You didn't get mad when we let a major U.S. city drown. You didn't get mad when we gave a 900 billion dollar tax break to the rich. You didn't get mad when the man who is now the Minority Leader distributed tobacco lobbyist checks on the floor of the House of Representatives. You didn't get mad when a covert CIA operative was illegally outed. You didn't get mad when, via reconciliation, a trillion of our tax dollars were redirected to insurance companies for Medicare Advantage, which costs over 20 percent more for basically the same services that Medicare provides. You didn't get mad when the deficit hit the trillion dollar mark, and our debt hit the thirteen trillion dollar mark.



You finally got mad when the government decided that every American has the right to see a doctor.

Yes, illegal wars, lies, corruption, torture, stealing your tax dollars to make the rich richer, are all okay with you, but helping other Americans, Oh, *Hell* no ... and *now* you're mad!

THE SENSIBLE VIRTUES

Garrison Keillor

(Excerpted from *salon.com*, 4/14/2010)

Said it before, say it again: It's a great country, and one of its beauties is freedom of expression, freer now than ever before, and another is a general amiability that you find everywhere, the helpfulness of strangers, the pleasure of small talk. Of course it's spring and the air is brisk and this makes for public happiness. And I've just come from Nashville and Seattle, two mightily congenial cities. The young and restless stroll the downtown honky-tonks and a sweet breeze blows,

laden with flowers, and it is darned near idyllic.

For all the talk of political polarization and the anger of the right wing, you don't see this in everyday life as you gad about the byways. You're not accosted by irate people demanding that they get their country back. The Internet is full of old growlers, of course, and if you opine on public issues, you'll get anonymous mail calling you a baby-killer, torturer, tool of Satan, cat strangler and babbling idiot, which you accept as your due, like the static electricity you collect walking across a carpet. A slight shock, but it doesn't turn on any light bulbs.

So what else have we learned lately? That the dishonesty of distinguished old Wall Street firms such as Lehman Brothers and Bear Stearns makes the Mafia look pretty straight. That it is dangerous to be a president: people may try too hard to please you and land the plane in thick fog and kill you and everyone aboard; you'd be better off in economy, seat 27E, on the scheduled flight to Smolensk. That it may have been a mistake to cut Greece into the European Union, that its political culture is just too different from that of Northern Europe. That the Republican Party is now united on a strategy of running against our cautious and conciliatory president as a dangerous radical, and it won't fly, especially not if Mrs. Palin becomes the public face of the party.

These little lessons seem to push a person toward a modest, pragmatic view of life and those dull virtues that we rebelled against back in our salad days — don't run in the dark, don't be a jerk, get over yourself, do your work, avoid self-pity, pay attention, know that the law of gravity applies to you too, and hang on to your old friends because there may come a day when there's no good reason for people to like you except out of habit. These are sensible virtues of middle-class people that strike you in middle age as vital to the preservation of life. You don't have to be so smart to make your way through adult life, but you should know the basic rules.

... The sensible virtues of industry, honesty, modesty, are ones prized by working people and so they should be the prime values of the Democratic Party. Mr. Obama was elected, in part, because he was seen as embracing them. When we execute a massive bailout of the banks, necessary as that is, we put aside those virtues, and that's why the billions for Wall Street led to the populist backlash and put the party at risk at the start of what should've been a successful year, but it's possible to work our way back to our core value, which is to honor work.

The young and the restless are dismissive of the sensible virtues, on the basis of poor information, as middle-class and vanilla, but you wouldn't dismiss vanilla if you'd ever tasted real vanilla, which is as rich and mysterious as chocolate. They only know the vanilla that McDonald's sells, which is completely artificial. The

blandness is in them, not in the vanilla, and their dismissiveness is pure horse hockey. Which is itself rich and mysterious, but not as good as vanilla.

CLONING, "ENGINEERED IMMORTALITY," AND THE LONG VIEW Flash Light

Mike Treder, of the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies, and Prof. Massimo Pigliucci, Chair, Philosophy Dept., CUNY-Lehman College, engaged in a discussion of scientifically engineered immortality on Bloggingheads.tv.*

Although Treder and Pigliucci were debating radical life extension, the errors in logic made by Pigliucci in this debate are similar to the errors made by SHSNY members who have opposed Dr. Chic Schissel's bid for immortality via cloning, which was discussed in prior issues of PIQUE (April, July, 2008; November, 2009).

Pigliucci spoke against such immortality. His first argument was extremely weak. He suggested that after such a long life one would have seen and done everything and therefore one would become bored to death. However, there are always new plays being written, new books to read, new art to see, new scientific discoveries to absorb, etc. Treder utterly defeated Pigliucci's first objection by pointing out that if one did get bored to death, one could choose to stop living at that point.

Pigliucci's second objection seemed to have a bit more force. He said that by not dying, one contributes to overpopulation, and therefore choosing immortality is unethical. However, if one has no children, one has not "created" anyone to take her/his place when s/he dies, hence there can be no ethical objection on these grounds to her/his clone taking her/his place since there would be no net population increase. If not having children were a requirement for those wishing engineered immortality, it would probably be the most effective incentive for population control ever proposed.

Treder failed to make the most compelling ethical argument in favor of engineered immortality, namely that it encourages everyone to take the long view. No longer could a person say, "I'll be dead before that problem would affect me," and therefore ignore global warming, proliferation of nuclear waste, pollution of the water supply, etc.

Finally, Treder failed to point out that engineered immortality would at last disprove the validity of Pascal's Wager, and would thereby liberate countless millions encouraged by Pascal to remain victims of superstition.

Despite the fact that the SHSNY Board has shortsightedly refused to host the ceremony celebrating Chic's DNA preservation at a SHSNY event, I remain as convinced as ever that Chic is on the right ethical path, and therefore I will begin to seek another appropriate

venue for such a ceremony.

*<http://video.nytimes.com/video/2010/03/15/opinion/1247467360304/blogginheads-death-optional.html>.

GREAT MINDS THINK ALIKE

In the same week that Iranian cleric Hojatolislam Kazem Sedighi offered his explanation of earthquakes, i.e., “Many women who do not dress modestly ... lead young men astray, corrupt their chastity and spread adultery in society, which increases earthquakes,” Rush Limbaugh speculated that the volcano eruption—in Iceland—might be God showing his anger for passage of health care reform. In America.

MAY IS “LYING FOR JESUS” MONTH

John Rafferty

As if the phony first-Thursday-in-May National Day of Prayer isn’t egregious enough, every year some fathead congressman attempts to designate the whole first weekend in May as “Ten Commandments Weekend.” And, as in previous years and previous proposals, half-truthing about American history is wholly okay in the name of religion.

Rep. Paul Broun (R-GA) includes a quote from John Quincy Adams in one of the “Whereas” clauses of his proposed House Resolution 1175, i.e.: “Whereas the sixth President of the United States, John Quincy Adams, declared the Ten Commandments to be ...

‘laws essential to the existence of men in society, and most of which have been enacted by every nation, which ever professed any code of laws.’”

As Chris Rodda pointed out on HuffingtonPost.com on March 22, “Broun omits the part of the quote in which Adams made it clear that many of the laws of the Old Testament were ‘adapted to that time only’ and binding only on the ancient Jews. Here’s what Adams actually wrote, in a letter to his son:

‘The law given from Sinai ... contained many statutes adapted to that time only, and to the particular circumstances of the nation to whom it was given; they could of course be binding upon them, and only upon them, until abrogated by the same authority which enacted them, as they afterward were by the Christian dispensation; but many others were of universal application – laws essential to the existence of men in society, and most of which have been enacted by every nation, which ever professed any code of laws.’”

Not quite the same, is it? Well, so what? The important thing is to get everyone in America – “citizens of all faiths and religious persuasions to reflect on the important impact that the Ten Commandments have had on the people and national character of the United States.”

That means *you*, Baha’is and Muslims, (secularists,

too?). Pay attention, because, as another of Rep. Broun’s “Whereas” clauses emphasizes, the laws of *his* religion “transcend the diversity of cultural expression and faith in the United States.” In other words, to hell with any opinions that aren’t “Judeo-Christian.”

But for *real* fundamentalist Christian bigotry, get acquainted with The National Day of Prayer. “What is Wrong With The National Day of Prayer?” Americans United for Separation of Church and State asks.

Plenty. Start with nationaldayofprayer.org, the “official site” which peddles all the usual “Christian nation” and “Biblical foundation” trumpery, and which is dressed up to look like a U.S. government website, which it is not. Congress did create the National Day of Prayer in 1952, and did codify it in 1988 (after pressure from the Religious Right) as the first Thursday in May, but there is nothing “official” about the NDP.

The National Day of Prayer Task Force is a private group based in Colorado Springs and run by Shirley Dobson, wife of Religious Right radio broadcaster James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, but you’d never know that from its “official site.” And what else I’m sure the hundreds of states, counties and municipalities that celebrate NDP and “America’s Judeo-Christian heritage” don’t know is that the NDP Task Force allows no “Judeo” nonsense in or at its “official” events.

“The Task Force,” Americans United explains, “is exclusionary and does not permit participation by non-fundamentalist Christians. The materials it distributes promote a rigid fundamentalist outlook not shared by most Americans. Volunteers are required to sign a statement of faith reflecting fundamentalist tenets, list church affiliation and provide clergy references. Volunteers are ordered to make sure no non-Christians speak at NDP events. Non-Christians may only attend as long as they agree to remain silent.”

“Remain silent.” Really.

The alternative: The National Day of Reason

“The purpose of the National Day of Reason is to celebrate reason—a concept all Americans can support—and to raise public awareness about the persistent threat to religious liberty posed by government intrusion into the private sphere of worship.” So states the NDR website, which you can visit at nationaldayofreason.org. And come celebrate reason with your fellow (and sororal) freethinkers at our (early) Day of Reason Brunch at Pete’s Tavern Sunday, May 2 – see page 7 for the details.

News Flash: Day of Prayer “Unconstitutional”

Judge Barbara Crabb of U.S. District Court in Madison, Wisconsin has ruled—in a lawsuit brought by the Freedom From Religion Foundation—that the National Day of Prayer violates the constitutional separation of church and state and — *is unconstitutional!*

Hey, Barack! Barbara Crabb for the Supreme Court!

SHSNY BOOK CLUB: MAY - JULY 2010

THURSDAY, MAY 20, 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

IN GODS WE TRUST:

***The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*
by Scott Atran**

"*In Gods We Trust* is by far the best exploration so far of the evolutionary basis of religious behavior," says James Fox, Professor of Anthropology, Stanford University

"Scott Atran, a cognitive anthropologist and psychologist, presents in this volume a rich, nuanced cognitive-evolutionary account of religion From this vantage, religion is not doctrine, or institutions, or even faith. Religion ensues from the ordinary workings of the human mind as it deals with emotionally compelling problems of human existence, such as birth, aging, death, unforeseen calamities, and love... . I have little but praise for this marvelous book... . It does not take long to realize that one is dealing with a formidable mind; Atran is not only a fine writer, his breadth of knowledge and intellectual depth are nothing short of inspiring. This book is one to read slowly and savor. Keep a post-it pad handy, to mark the pages: the scope of this book is so wide-ranging that whatever your research interest in evolutionary psychology, it is bound to be touched upon at some point in these 400 pages of informative analysis." — *Human Nature Review*



***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

**Thursday, June 17,
6:30-8:00 p.m.**

**at the Muhlenberg Library
*GOOD WITHOUT GOD:
What a Billion Nonreligious
People Do Believe*
By Greg M. Epstein**

The Humanist chaplain at Harvard, Epstein makes a bold claim for what nonbelievers — as many as a billion worldwide — do share and believe in *Good Without God*, the book that was the focus of our "A million New Yorkers are good without God" NYC subway poster campaign last fall.

Beyond Hitchens, Dawkins and Harris, at a time when debates about faith, reason, morality, and spirituality rage more fiercely than ever — leaving millions searching for something they can believe in — Epstein explains how humanism offers comfort and hope that affirms our ability to pursue ethical lives of personal fulfillment in which we can aspire together for the greater good of all.

**Thursday, July 8,
6:30-8:00 p.m.**

**at the Muhlenberg Library
*NONSENSE ON STILTS:
How to Tell Science from Bunk*
By Massimo Pigliucci**

Noted skeptic, philosopher (and SHSNY Honorary Member) Massimo Pigliucci separates fact from fantasy in this entertaining exploration of the nature of science and the borderlands of fringe science. Pigliucci cuts through the ambiguity to look more closely at how science is conducted, how it is disseminated, how it is interpreted, and what it means to our society.

"A refreshingly original excursion over the unmarked territory separating science from pseudo-science and non-science."

SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY - JUNE 2010

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

A SERIOUS MAN

Larry Gopnik has hit a "rough patch" in Joel Coen and Ethan



Coen's 1960s-set, dark Jewish-culture comedy: people are dropping dead all around him, it doesn't look like he's going to get tenure, his wife wants a divorce and his whining kids only add to the heavy load. Larry is just looking for some help. Can a few rabbis guide him to life's answers, or will God speak to Larry out of the film's final-scene whirlwind?

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

*June 7: You Choose: May Movie Night attendees will choose between Elia Kazan's 1957 masterpiece about fame and corruption in America, **A Face in the Crowd**, and 1998's comic fantasy about the "perfect-world" 1950s, **Pleasantville**.*

SUNDAY, MAY 16, 12:30
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 20 or more like-minded humanists and rationalists for good pan-Asian food and lively talk is welcome. Bring friends!

June brunch: 6/27

Reserve your space now for ...

SHSNY'S DAY OF REASON CELEBRATION BRUNCH
SUNDAY, MAY 2, 12 NOON

at historic

PETE'S TAVERN

129 East 18 Street (at Irving Place)

with guest speaker

JASON TORPY



President, Military Assoc. of Atheists & Freethinkers, on
ALL ENEMIES, FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC:
Service as a U.S. Military Atheist

Proclaim and celebrate reason (rather than prayer) at New York's oldest operating bar and restaurant, enjoy a sumptuous (reasonable) brunch, and get involved with a fascinating talk.

"Just as many military service members struggle with the physical and mental stress of both combat and noncombat service, nontheists have traditionally had the additional stress of ever-present religious bias in both military and civilian leadership."

West Point graduate Jason Torpy, an SHSNY member who also sits on the boards of the Secular Coalition for America and the American Humanist Association, will discuss bias against nontheists and aggressive (and unconstitutional) Christian proselytizing in the military. The Q&A will focus on what *we* can do.

Brunch is \$20, for your choice of 11 entrees, one drink (Bloody Mary, Mimosa, etc.), coffee or tea, including all taxes and tips — cash or check only at the door, please.

Space is limited — *reservations are a must!* Phone 212-308-2165 (leave a call-back number) or email editor@shsn.org *today*, please.

Save the date!

GALA BOOK-SIGNING PARTY
WEDNESDAY, MAY 19, 6:30-10 p.m.

at Cellar 58,

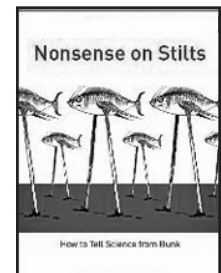
58 Second Ave. (3rd-4th Streets)

for Massimo Pigliucci's

NONSENSE ON STILTS:

How to Tell Science from Bunk

Join CUNY-Lehman Professor of Philosophy (and SHSNY Honorary Member) Massimo for conversation and complimentary Italian finger food at a charming Italian wine bar/restaurant (cash bar). Yes, you can buy a book, and have it autographed, too.



WOMEN CAN CLEAN UP THE MESSSES CREATED BY MEN IN DRESSES

Maureen Dowd

(Excerpted from "Worlds Without Women," by Maureen Dowd, in The New York Times, 4/11/2010)

When I was in Saudi Arabia, I had tea and sweets with a group of educated and sophisticated young professional women.

I asked why they were not more upset about living in a country where women's rights were strangled, an inbred and autocratic state more like an archaic men's club than a modern nation. They told me, somewhat defensively, that the kingdom was moving at its own pace, glacial as that seemed to outsiders.

How could such spirited women, smart and successful on every other level, acquiesce in their own subordination?

I was puzzling over that one when it hit me: As a Catholic woman, I was doing the same thing.

I, too, belonged to an inbred and wealthy men's club cloistered behind walls and disdaining modernity.

I, too, remained part of an autocratic society that repressed women and ignored their progress in the secular world.

I, too, rationalized as men in dresses allowed our religious kingdom to decay and to cling to outdated misogynistic rituals, blind to the benefits of welcoming women's brains, talents and hearts into their ancient fraternity.

To circumscribe women, Saudi Arabia took Islam's moral codes and orthodoxy to extremes not outlined by Muhammad; the Catholic Church took its moral codes and orthodoxy to extremes not outlined by Jesus. In the New Testament, Jesus is surrounded by strong women and never advocates that any woman—whether she's his mother or a prostitute—be treated as a second-class citizen.

Negating women is at the heart of the church's hideous—and criminal—indifference to the welfare of boys and girls in its priests' care. ...

(Excerpted from "A Nope for Pope," by Maureen Dowd, in The New York Times, 3/28/2010)

Yup, we need a Nope. A nun who is pope.

The Catholic Church can never recover as long as its Holy Shepherd is seen as a black sheep in the ever-darkening sex abuse scandal.

Now we learn the sickening news that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, nicknamed "God's Rottweiler" when he was the church's enforcer on matters of faith and sin, ignored repeated warnings and looked away in the case of the Rev. Lawrence C. Murphy, a Wisconsin priest who molested as many as 200 deaf boys. ... Father Murphy appealed to Cardinal Ratzinger for leniency and got it, partly because of the church's statute of limitations.

Since when does sin have a statute of limitations?

The pope is in too deep. He has proved himself anything but infallible. ...

Because he did not defrock the demented Father Murphy, it's time to bring in the frocks.

Pope Benedict has continued the church's ban on female priests and is adamant against priests' having wives. He has started two investigations of American nuns to check on their "quality of life" – code for seeing if they've grown too independent. As a cardinal he wrote a Vatican document urging women to be submissive partners and not take on adversarial roles toward men.

But the completely paternalistic and autocratic culture of *Il Papa* led to an insular, exclusionary system that failed to police itself, and that became a corrosive shelter for secrets and shame.

If the church could throw open its stained glass windows and let in some air, invite women to be priests, nuns to be more emancipated and priests to marry, if it could banish criminal priests and end the sordid culture of men protecting men who attack children, it might survive. It could be an encouraging sign of humility and repentance, a surrender of arrogance, both moving and meaningful.

Cardinal Ratzinger devoted his Vatican career to rooting out any hint of what he considered deviance. The problem is, he was obsessed with enforcing doctrinal orthodoxy and somehow missed the graver danger to the most vulnerable members of the flock.

The sin-crazed "Rottweiler" was so consumed with sexual mores—issuing constant instructions on chastity, contraception, abortion—that he didn't make time for curbing sexual abuse by priests who were supposed to pray with, not prey on, their young charges. ...

Decade after decade, the church hid its sordid crimes, enabling the collared perpetrators instead of letting the police collar them. In the case of the infamous German priest, one diocese official hinted that his problem could be fixed by transferring him to teach at a girls' school. Either they figured that he would not be tempted by the female sex, or worse, the church was even less concerned about putting little girls at risk.

The nuns have historically cleaned up the messes of priests. This is a historic mess. Benedict should go home to Bavaria. And the cardinals should send the white smoke up the chimney, proclaiming *Habemus Mama!*

Pope Ratzinger should not resign. He should remain in charge of the whole rotten edifice—the whole profiteering, woman-fearing, guilt-gorging, truth-hating, child-raping institution—while it tumbles about his ears, amid a stench of incense and a rain of tourist-kitsch sacred hearts and proposterously crowned virgins.

– Richard Dawkins

WHO'S REALLY TO BLAME

Mary Elizabeth Williams

(Excerpted from "Catholic Priest Molestation: The Blame Game" on salon.com, 4/12/2010)

The church wants you to know who the *real* culprits are:

The Jews

What's Catholicism without a little Jew baiting? On the Catholic Web site Pontifex, Italian Monsignor Giacomo Babini was quoted as saying of the whole hullabaloo, "I think that it is primarily a Zionist attack, in view of its power and refinement. They do not want the church; they are its natural enemies. Deep down, historically speaking, the Jews are God-killers." Babini has subsequently denied he made the statements.

Working Women

Speaking to the *Times* (UK) last month, the Vatican's chief exorcist, Father Gabriele Amorth, connected the dots by saying, "Compare the world of today to when I was a boy in Modena: families and parish communities were strong, women did not go out to work. Now they have to because one income cannot support a family. So young people are left to their own devices, they get into bad company, they have lost their roots and replaced them with the negative influences of television and the internet, or the occult."

The Masons

In a March 26 story on the war "between the church and the world," Italian Democrat Maurizio Ronconi told the *Guardian* (UK) that, "For years, a Masonic-secularist offensive against Catholics has been under way." And in his Pontifex interview, Giacomo Babini took a brief break from dissing the Jews to mention those other "eternal enemies of Catholicism ... the freemasons."

Homosexuals

In late March, the Catholic League's Bill Donohue took it upon himself to take out an ad in *The New York Times* to declare that "*The Times* continues to editorialize about the 'pedophilia crisis' when all along it's been a homosexual crisis ... Most of the molesters have been gay." And just in case there was any ambiguity there, he followed up by telling CNN that "there's a connection between homosexuality and the sexual abuse of minors."

Secularism

After a horrifying report by the Commission of Investigation into how the Archdiocese of Dublin mishandled decades of sex abuse in churches, Pope Benedict issued a letter profusely apologizing for the epic fail. He also, however, noted "the rapid transformation and secularization of Irish society," observing that while all this molesting was going on, "All too often, the sacramental and devotional practices that sustain faith and enable it to grow, such as frequent confession, daily

prayer and annual retreats, were neglected."

The New York Times

In March, following a scathing series on the ever-evolving scandal, the American Cardinal William J. Levada wrote on the Vatican's own Web site, "I am not proud of America's newspaper of record, *The New York Times*, as a paragon of fairness" and asked the paper "to reconsider its attack mode about Pope Benedict XVI and give the world a more balanced view of a leader it can and should count on."

Satan

Who but the Vatican exorcist would tell CNN that "The devil tempts everyone - people in politics, in economics, in sport. And naturally, he tempts, above all, the religious leaders, so you shouldn't be surprised if the devil tempts those in the Vatican. That's his job ... Pedophiles are not possessed by the devil ... they are tempted by the devil."

Pedophiles Hiding Within a Powerful Institution Protecting its Own Interests

It's just a crazy theory I'm working on.

FOR ALL THOSE CLIMATE-CHANGE DENIERS (LIKE JAMES INHOFE, SENATOR FROM BIG OIL) WHO MOCKED AL GORE DURING LAST WINTER'S SNOWSTORMS

(Reprinted from *The New York Times*, 3/26/2010)

*Past Decade Was Warmest on Record,
Meteorological Agency Reports*

The last decade was the warmest on record, the World Meteorological Organization said in a report on March 25. The finding by the association, a United Nations agency, corroborates research by NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, which has already said that its measurements show that the period from 2000 to 2009 was the warmest since modern instrumental recording of temperatures began in the 1850s.

Comment: Inexplicably, this news ran as the third of six sound-bite-sized items in a "World Briefing" box on a way-inside page of The Times, not on page 1. - JR

PITY THE POOR ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALIST, BESET ON ALL SIDES BY, WELL, THE WORLD

John Rafferty

Insurgent Islamist groups in Somalia, like Hizbul Islam and The Shabab, which are what passes for government in large parts of that failed state, are working mightily to march Somalia back to the 7th Century. But it's hard.

Not resting after introducing the most extreme forms of *sharia* law to those parts of the country they terrorize control—including amputating the hands and feet of thieves and beheading or stoning to death adulterers and "modesty" transgressors—they labor to

control every aspect of daily life, and to shut out the poisonous contagion of the Western world.

Soccer is banned as un-Islamic. Bras, too – they're un-Islamic *and* "deceptive." All non-Islamic holidays and internationally-recognized days, like World AIDS Day, in a country racked by the disease, are *verboten*.

Next, *music*. Not the usual suspects like misogynistic rap or demonically-inspired rock 'n roll, but, you know, Mozart and Lil' Kim and Cole Porter and "Happy Birthday" – music, *all* of it, of any kind, all "un-Islamic." Fourteen Somali radio stations stopped playing music on April 13, after Hizbul Islam ordered them to "stop playing songs or face 'serious consequences.'"

Not to be outdone, the very next day The Shabab outlawed school bells. Because, according to one source quoted in *The Times*, they might sound like church bells.

Or maybe ... *music!*

Busy, busy. The crazies' work is never done.

ONE BUSINESS FAILURE WE CAN CELEBRATE

Petula Dvorak

(Excerpted from The Washington Post, 4/13/2010)

The Divine Mercy Care Pharmacy in Chantilly (VA), was a self-described "pro-life" pharmacy that opened less than two years ago to great fanfare, with a Catholic priest sprinkling holy water on the strip-mall store.

Divine Mercy proudly and purposefully limited what it would stock on its shelves. But it turns out that no birth control pills, no condoms, no porn, no tobacco and even no makeup added up to one thing:

No customers.

The store went out of business last month. There is no word on whether the priest returned for last rites.

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #66

Remember last month's article, in which Texas school board member Dr. Don McLeroy called the far-right changes to the state's social studies curriculum "adding balance," because the board considered the classic curriculum "skewed too far to the left"?

Further reading of the new rules turns up this example of "balance": Texas high school students will now study the presidential inaugural addresses of Jefferson Davis alongside those of Abraham Lincoln.

CHRISTIAN SOLDIER OVERDID IT A TAD

Michael Goodwin

(Reprinted from Mr. Goodwin's column in The New York Post, 3/31/2010, and forwarded by Richard Milner.)

Midwesterners have a gift for understatement, but the ex-wife of the man busted for plotting a Christian militia uprising takes the cake. Leader David Stone reportedly planned to kill a cop, then bomb the funeral to kill others.

"It started out as a Christian thing," Stone's ex said. "You go to church. You pray. You take care of your family. I think David started to take it a little too far."

Ya think?

ALL IN GOOD TIME

Natalie Angier

(From Ms. Angier's book, The Canon, excerpted on delanceyplace.com, 3/25/2010 – italics added.)

What happens in subsections of seconds? In a tenth of a second, we find the proverbial "blink of an eye," for that's how long the act takes. In a hundredth of a second, a hummingbird can beat its wings once. ... A *millisecond*, 10^{-3} seconds, is the time it takes a typical camera strobe to flash. Five-thousandths of a second is also the time it takes a Mexican salamander ... to snag its prey.

In one *microsecond*, 10^{-6} seconds, nerves can send a message of pain in your neck to your brain. On the same scale, we can illuminate the vast difference between the speed of light and that of sound: in one microsecond, a beam of light can barrel down the length of three of our metric-resistant football fields, while a sound wave can barely traverse the width of a human hair.

Yes, time is fleeting, so make every second and every partitioned second count, including *nanoseconds*, or billionths of a second, or 10^{-9} seconds. Your ordinary computer certainly does. In a nanosecond, the time it takes you to complete one hundred-millionth of an eye blink, a standard microprocessor can perform a simple operation: adding together two numbers. ... The fastest computers perform their calculations in *picoseconds*, or trillionths of a second, that is, 10^{-12} seconds. ...

Ephemera, however, are all relative. When physicists, with the aid of giant particle accelerators, manage to generate traces of a subatomic splinter called a heavy quark, the particle persists for a picosecond before it decays adieu. Granted, a trillionth of a second may not immediately conjure Methuselah or Strom Thurmond to mind, but Dr. Robert Jaffe observed that the quark fully deserves its classification among physicists as a long-lived, "stable" particle. During its picosecond on deck, the quark completes a trillion, or 10^{12} , extremely tiny orbits. By contrast our seemingly indomitable Earth has completed a mere 5×10^9 orbits around the sun in its 5 billion years of existence, and is expected to tally up only another 10 billion laps before the solar system crumples and dies. ... In a very real sense, then, our solar system is far less "stable" than particles like the heavy quark. ...

Scaling down to an even less momentous moment, we greet the *attosecond*, a billionth of a billionth of a second, or 10^{-18} seconds. The briefest events that scientists can clock, as opposed to calculate, are measured in attoseconds. It takes an electron twenty-four attoseconds

to complete a single orbit around a hydrogen atom – a voyage that the electron makes about 40,000 trillion times per second. There are more attoseconds in a single minute than there have been minutes since the birth of the universe.

Still, physicists keep coming back to the nicking of time. In the 1990s, they inducted two new temporal units into the official lexicon, which are worth knowing for their appellations alone: the *zeptosecond*, or 10^{-21} seconds, and the *yoctosecond*, or 10^{-24} seconds. The briskest time span recognized to date is the *chronon*, or Planck time, and it lasts about 5×10^{-44} seconds. This is the time it takes light to travel what could be the shortest possible slice of space, the Planck length, the size of one of the hypothetical “strings” that some physicists say lie at the base of all matter and force in the universe.

A DELIGHTFUL NEW BOOK AND A NEW SHSNY CONTEST

John Rafferty

I have very recently read one of the most original and funny books I have come across in years. It is a slim and inexpensive paperback named *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*, by David Eagleman, an imaginative young author of whom I think we will hear a great deal in the future.

Tales from the *afterlives*, plural? In *Sum*, Eagleman posits forty different afterlife possibilities, forty different quite short, fanciful essays on how we might spend eternity if we weren't going to be just, well, dead. As the book's back-cover copy promises:

In one afterlife, you may find that God is the size of a microbe and unaware of your existence. In another version, you work as a background character in other people's dreams. Or you may find that God is a married couple, or that the universe is running backward, or that you are forced to live out your afterlife with annoying versions of who you could have been.

Herewith, the title essay:

SUM

David Eagleman

(Excerpted from *Sum, Forty Tales from the Afterlives*)

In the afterlife you relive all your experiences, but this time with the events reshuffled into a new order: all the moments that share a quality are grouped together.

You spend two months driving the street in front of your house, seven months having sex. You sleep for thirty years without opening your eyes. For five months you flip through magazines while sitting on a toilet.

You take all your pain at once, all twenty-seven intense hours of it. Bones break, cars crash, skin is cut, babies are born. Once you make it through, it's agony-free for the rest of your afterlife.

But that doesn't mean that it's always pleasant. You

spend six days clipping your nails. Fifteen months looking for lost items. Eighteen months waiting in line. Two years of boredom: staring out a bus window, sitting in an airport terminal. One year reading books. Your eyes hurt, and you itch, because you can't take a shower until it's your time to take a marathon two-hundred-day shower. Two weeks wondering what happens when you die. One minute realizing your body is falling. Seventy-seven hours of confusion. One hour realizing you've forgotten someone's name. Three weeks realizing you are wrong. Two days lying. Six weeks waiting for a green light. Seven hours vomiting. Fourteen minutes experiencing pure joy. Three months doing laundry. Fifteen hours writing your signature. Two days tying shoelaces. Sixty-seven days of heartbreak. Five weeks driving lost. Three days calculating restaurant tips. Fifty-one days deciding what to wear. Nine days pretending you know what is being talked about. Two weeks counting money. Eighteen days staring into the refrigerator. Thirty-four days longing. Six months watching commercials. Four weeks sitting in thought, wondering if there is something better you could be doing with your time. Three years swallowing food. Five days working buttons and zippers. Four minutes wondering what your life would be like if you reshuffled the order of events. In this part of the afterlife, you imagine something analogous to your Earthly life, and the thought is blissful: a life where episodes are split into tiny swallowable pieces, where moments do not endure, where one experiences the joy of jumping from one event to the next like a child hopping from spot to spot on the burning sand.

THE SHSNY AFTERLIFE CONTEST

So, what's *your* idea of an afterlife? Jerry Falwell is your butler. Marilyn Monroe (or James Dean) has been waiting for you. Calories really don't count. You have lunch every week with Socrates, Jefferson and Freud. You play piano better than Rubinstein. There are no Republicans (or Democrats). You spend each afternoon as a cat on a sunny windowsill.

Funny and fanciful or grim and medieval; virgin-rich Islamic or emotion-starved Buddhist; a Porsche and an endless highway or a thousand-year colonoscopy ... in a short essay (100-words-or-thereabouts maximum, please), let your imagination run free and tell us what you imagine, hope or fear the afterlife (if there were an afterlife) might be.

E-mail your ideas to editor@shsny.org (or snail mail them to SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, FDR Station, New York, NY 10150-7661) – by May 16, please.

The contest?

The writer of the most interesting essay (you, maybe), in the opinion of the judge (me, definitely), will win a copy of *Sum* right now and, sometime in the future, have his/her idea of the afterlife come true. – JR

**A DUMBTH NOMINEE,
WHO MAKES THE OTHERS LOOK SMART**

Meet Rep. *Hank Johnson*, a Democrat elected to enact the nation's laws by the people of Georgia's 4th Congressional District. On March 25, during a House Armed Services Committee hearing on Pentagon plans to greatly increase the number of sailors and marines and their families on the island of Guam, he pointed out that the island was quite small, and then warned Admiral Robert Willard, who commands the Navy's Pacific Fleet, that:

"My fear is that the whole island will become so overly populated that it will tip over and capsize."

The admiral paused (probably thinking "WTF?"), then deadpanned: "We don't anticipate that."

The next day, Johnson's office tried to explain away the remark as "a metaphor" (for what?), but the congressman is immortalized on You Tube using his hands to indicate exactly how the island might tip over.

Rep. Johnson joins the 2010 bumper crop of Dumbth nominees: Fox News' *Brit Hume*, who in January advised Tiger Woods to recover from scandal by giving up Buddhism and "turning to the Christian faith to make a total recovery"; *Pat Robertson* (again!), already the



holder of a Dumbth Lifetime Achievement Award, who said Haitians brought the earthquake on themselves because their ancestors in 1804 "swore a pact with the Devil" to get rid of French rule; actor *Danny Glover*, whose contention was that the earthquake was caused by "global warming and climate change"; and actor *Craig T. Nelson*, who complained about government bailouts with the ringing declaration, "I've been on welfare and food stamps ... did anyone help me?"

SHSNY's Dumbth Award, for new readers who may not know, is given annually to the witless or willfully stupid public figure who most egregiously ignored science and/or reason during the previous year. Like our first (2005) winner, TV personality *Star Jones*, who told a national audience she was "blessed" because God postponed the 2004 Christmas week tsunami that killed 200,000 people until after her November honey-moon. Or

last year's (2009) winner, *Pope Benedict XVI*, who earned the horse's ass trophy for opining that the distribution of condoms would only make the problem of AIDS in Africa worse.

Your nomination(s) for this year's least-favored idiot or villain will be accepted until December 31 at editor@shsn.org.

**Fun New Reader Contest:
Imagine the Afterlife
Page 11**

**Day of Reason Brunch
at Pete's Tavern,
Sunday, May 2
Page 7**

**Paul Kurtz introduces
"Neo-Humanism"
Page 1**

Secular Humanist
Society of New York
FDR Station
PO Box 7661
New York, NY
10150-7661

