

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

September, 2010

We're *baaack!* We start afresh by re-visiting some old topics: why did God make atheists, why shouldn't religious leaders answer for stupidity, what's to worry about Democrats, and why is hate crime law hateful? We kick off (come on: it's fall, it's football) with swift kicks at the media, Prince Charles, the Vatican, the Pledge of Allegiance (really) and Gainesville, Florida. We salute Chris Hitchens, reason-based morality, and Australia's new P.M. But first, some funny. – JR

RELIGION: THE COMMERCIAL

(Transcribed from *FunnyOrDie.com*)

Are you unable to think for yourself? Are you capable of believing anything, as long as lots and lots of other people believe it, too? Do you enjoy reading the same stuff over and over and over, for the rest of your life?

Then you need *Religion*.

Take your pick, they're all pretty much the same. But in no time you'll get to enjoy all sorts of fun activities, like sitting on your knees and talking to your ceiling, like singing songs, dressing up in funny clothes, or starting a bloody, centuries-long war with another religion. You'll make lots of new friends, lose all sense of self-determination, and join a throng of literally billions of people just like you.

But wait, there's more. Buy into *Religion* today and we'll include a free, one-time offer of our book, *Believing in Stuff and Zany Rituals that Make No Sense and are a Complete Waste of Time*. Absolutely free!

And the great thing about *Religion* is, once you get it you can feel the need to tell everyone you know who doesn't have it how miserable and useless they are, and how less useless and miserable they could be, if only they were as smart as you and believed in stuff.

So don't delay: get *Religion* for your brain today!

Side effects include suicide bombing, unnecessary wars, senseless punishment, annoying brainwashed children, getting offended when people make fun of Religion, and the occasional sudden realization that everything you've been led to believe is a giant, massive lie, perpetrated only to keep idiots like you fearful of imaginary gods, and under control.

LET'S WATCH OUT FOR OUR LEFT FLANK

Charles M. Blow

(Reprinted from "Rise of the Religious Left," in *The New York Times*, July 2, 2010.)

Which political party's members are most likely to believe that Jesus will definitely return to earth before midcentury? The Republicans, right? Wrong. The Democrats.

This was revealed by a report issued by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. On the surface it may seem surprising, but, in fact, it's quite logical. Blacks and Hispanics, two highly religious groups, are a growing part of the Democratic Party. A June 2009 Gallup report found that blacks and Hispanics constituted 30 percent of the party. Recent polling by Pew puts the number at 37 percent.

According to a Gallup report, church attendance among blacks is exactly the same as among conservatives and among Republicans. Hispanics closely follow. Furthermore, a February Gallup report found that blacks and Hispanics, respectively, were the most likely to say that religion was an important part of their daily lives. In fact, on the Jesus question, nonwhite Democrats were roughly twice as likely as white Democrats to believe that He would return to earth by 2050.

Add to this the fact that, according to the 2009 Gallup report, 20 percent of the Democratic Party is composed of highly religious whites who attend church once a week or more, and you quickly stop second-guessing the Second Coming numbers.

Welcome to the Religious Left, which will continue to grow as the percentage of minorities in the country

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.

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and in the party grows.

People often ask whether the Republican Party will have to move to the left to remain viable. However, the question rarely asked is whether the growing religiosity on the left will push the Democrats toward the right.

At the moment, that answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, Barack Obama made a strong play for the religious vote on his march to the White House. It worked so well that it's likely to continue, if not intensify, among Democratic candidates. On the other hand, the religious left is not the religious right. The left isn't as organized or assertive. For the most part, it seems to have made its peace with the mishmash of morality under the Democratic umbrella, rallying instead around some core Democratic tenets: protection of, and equality for, the disenfranchised and providing greater opportunity and assistance for the poor.

The unanswerable questions are whether these highly religious, socially conservative Democrats will remain loyal to a liberal agenda as they become the majority of the party and their financial and social standing improves. Or whether Republicans will make headway in recruiting them. The future only knows.

Then again, the world as we know it may not have much of a future if, as these Democrats believe, a deity will soon descend from the sky.

CONGRATULATIONS, AUSTRALIA

Karen Frantz

(Excerpted from HumanistNetworkNews.org, 7/10/10)

Julia Gillard, Australia's new prime minister, has accomplished in that country what in the United States is nearly impossible: she's the leader of her country and she's an atheist.

When asked during a nationally-broadcast radio interview whether she believed in God, she replied.

"I'm not a religious person.. I am not going to pretend a faith I don't feel. And for people of faith the greatest compliment I could pay to them is to respect their genuinely held beliefs and not to engage in some pretense about mine. I think it's not the right thing."



WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #62

The Dove World Outreach Center, a church in Gainesville, Florida, that sports "Islam is of the Devil" signs on its front lawn, will hold an "International Burn a Quran Day" bonfire on September 11.

Pastor Terry Jones, who says protests like this give Muslims an opportunity to convert, reports that the church is receiving many Qurans for the special day.

WHY DID GOD CREATE ATHEISTS? – PART 2

Greta Christina

(Excerpted from AlterNet, 6/5/2010)

Editor: In Part 1 (PIQUE, July, 2010), Ms. Christina answered the traditional argument that belief in God only requires "opening one's heart." Here, she takes on another popular argument: "God loves you just the way you are."

There is another religious response to the puzzling question of why there are atheists. And unlike the unfalsifiable, goalpost-moving, "let's treat people like pariahs for wanting to be careful that the things they believe are true" hostility of "You haven't opened your hearts," it's a response that typically comes from more progressive, tolerant, pluralistic believers.

It's this: "God doesn't care if you're an atheist."

"As long as you're a good person," this idea goes, "as long as you love other people and try to do right by them, God's fine with you. God doesn't need your worship or your praise, or even your faith. God loves atheists, too. He doesn't care whether you believe in him."

Yeah. See, here's the problem with that.

God may not care whether I believe in him.

But I do.

I want to understand the world. I care about reality, more than I care about just about anything. If there really is a God who created everything, who guided the universe and the process of evolution so conscious life could come into being, who animates all life with his spirit – I bloody well want to know about it. I don't want to be flatly wrong about one of the hugest questions humanity is faced with. In my years as an atheist writer, I keep asking believers again and again, "Do you have some evidence for your belief? If you do, please tell me about it. I want to see it." And I'm not being snarky, or baiting them into a debate I know they can't win. (Well ... not mostly.) If I'm wrong about this, I sincerely want to know.

Why does God deny me that knowledge? Why does he give it to some people, and not others?

And maybe more to the point:

If there really were a loving creator of the universe who animates all life including my own, and from whom all that is good and valuable about the world emanates, I wouldn't want to be alienated from him. I'd want to be connected with him. (Her. It. Them. Whatever.) Especially the touchy-feely God that the progressive, tolerant, pluralistic believers believe in. There are certainly plenty of gods I wouldn't worship even if I thought they were real – the God of fundamentalist Christianity is a sadistic nutjob, and even if he existed I wouldn't give him the time of day. But the warm, gentle, "source of all life/force of goodness and love in the universe" God that progressive believers believe in? Sure, I'd want to know him. I'd have some serious questions for him – why is there suffering, why is there evil, why can't the Cubs win a goddamn

pennant to save their lives—but I'd happily have a beer with the guy. We could be friends. I mean, he's the source of all life, the force of goodness and love in the universe. Of course I'd want that in my life. Why wouldn't I?

If God exists, then why isn't he reaching out to me? Isn't it cruel of him to reach out to some people but not to others? (Not to mention the manipulative game-playing he seems to be doing, where he reveals himself in wildly different, even contradictory ways to different people, and then sits back while they duke it out over which one is right.) Why does he manifest in some people's hearts, but not in others? Why is he being such a passive-aggressive jerk?

Let me be very clear about this: I am entirely happy to be an atheist. I'm not one of these whiny, moody, "I wish I could believe" atheists that so many believers think is the only valid kind of atheism. I am tickled pink to be an atheist. I won't pretend that I didn't lose a form of comfort when I left my beliefs – but I gained so much in return that the loss is a clear bargain. And the comforts I have now are far more comforting, since they're built on a foundation of reality. I don't have the constant nagging feeling in the back of my head that my beliefs are just wishful thinking, and that I've built my philosophy on a foundation of sand. I'm persuaded that God does not exist, and that's just ducky with me.

But I'm happy with my atheism because I'm persuaded that it's correct. I'm happy not feeling God in my life because I'm persuaded that God doesn't exist. If God really existed, I sure as heck would want to know about it. So why don't I?

If God really exists – why don't I know about it?

As an atheist, I have some really good answers for why people believe in God even though he doesn't exist. The human mind is prone to numerous cognitive errors – and many of those cognitive errors make people susceptible to religion. We tend to see intention, even where no intention exists. We tend to see patterns, even where no pattern exists. We give excessive weight to personal emotional experience, and aren't good at applying critical thought to those experiences. We don't have a good intuitive understanding of probability, and tend to think events are more improbable than they really are. We tend to believe what authority figures tell us. We tend to believe what we're taught as children. We tend to believe what people we know and trust tell us. We're reluctant to question the things that everyone else in our social group believes, etc. People believe all sorts of things that aren't true, and from an atheist/materialist viewpoint, that makes sense. Atheism is not even a little inconsistent with the belief in gods who don't exist.

But the belief in God is very much inconsistent with the existence of atheists. I have yet to see a religious believer give a good answer for why God exists – but

not everyone experiences him or believes in him. I have yet to see a good answer for why God bestows the experience of his existence (however inconsistently and contradictorily) onto some people – but not onto others. I have yet to see a good answer for why God is all-powerful and all-knowing and all-good – or even anything close to all-powerful and all-knowing and all-good – and still isn't perceived by everybody.

Does anybody have one?

And if you say "mysterious ways," I'm going to scream.

HEY, GETCHA RED-HOT OPINIONS HERE!

John Rafferty

Indicting the idiocy of the media is now common to the point of cliché. Even the most-watched opinionators and bloviators, right *and* left on TV (there is no left on commercial radio) rant about the dumbing down of news as if it were happening everywhere except in their own studios. (I especially love the Murdoch Empire's Fox News fulminating about "mainstream media" as if Fox were some lonely little, unknown outpost of integrity.)

And nothing sums up how far we've fallen from the era of Murrow and Cronkite than this below, reprinted from XKCD.com, "a webcomic of romance, sarcasm, math and language":

Of course, with the coming of the internet and the blogosphere the problem has metastasized into a chaos of misinformation. For every real news outlet produced by people who actually, you know, *know* things,

there are ten times ten thousand internet chat rooms, online forums and Facebook message boards on which pimply kids in their underwear in their parents' basements can pontificate on international politics, climate change and Lady Gaga lyrics. And ten times ten thousand more blogs where the delusional and the deceitful (think Andrew Breitbart's sliming of Shirley Sherrod in July) can simply make up "news."

For instance:

1. A couple of months ago, "new atheist" Christopher Hitchens revealed that he'd been diagnosed with esophageal cancer, and would undergo treatment;

2. Immediately, several popular Christian bloggers speculated about whether Hitchens would, *in extremis*,



“come to Jesus”;

3. Within days, right-wing and fundamentalist radio –and Fox News–began “reporting” on “widespread speculation” about the chances of a possible conversion;

4. Less than a week after Hitchens’ announcement, CNN and NBC were referring to “the controversy.”

What controversy? What *news*? The only news is that Christopher Hitchens has a particularly vicious and deadly form of cancer. And the only opinion I have (aside from my general disgust with the media) is my dismay that we will probably soon lose my favorite atheist drunk (I vote Dawkins for Best Sober), a man who can write as trenchantly and wittily as in this that follows.

LOONY PRINCE CHARLEY

Christopher Hitchens

(Excerpted from “Heir to throne attacks science, good sense,” in *The Australian*, June 19, 2010.)

This is what you get when you found a political system on the family values of Henry VIII. At a point in the not-too-remote future, the stout heart of Queen Elizabeth II will cease to beat. At that moment, her firstborn son will become head of state, head of the armed forces, and head of the Church of England.

In strict constitutional terms, this ought not to matter much. The English monarchy, as has been said, reigns but does not rule. From the aesthetic point of view it will matter a bit, because the prospect of a morose bat-eared and chinless man, prematurely aged, and with the most abysmal taste in royal consorts, is a distinctly lowering one. And a king does have the ability to alter the atmosphere and to affect the ways in which important matters are discussed.

So the speech made by Prince Charles at Oxford last week might bear a little scrutiny. Discussing one of his favorite topics, the “environment,” he announced that the main problem arose from a “deep, inner crisis of the soul” and that the “de-souling” of humanity probably went back to Galileo.

In his view, materialism and consumerism represented an imbalance, “where mechanistic thinking is so predominant” and which “goes back at least to Galileo’s assertion that there is nothing in nature but quantity and motion.” He described the scientific world view as an affront to all the world’s “sacred traditions.” Then for the climax:

“As a result, nature has been completely objectified

– she has become an it – and we are persuaded to concentrate on the material aspect of reality that fits within Galileo’s scheme.”

We have known for a long time that Prince Charles’ empty sails are so rigged as to be swelled by any passing waft or breeze of crankiness and cant. He fell for the fake anthropologist Laurens van der Post. He was bowled over by the charms of homeopathic medicine. He has been believably reported as saying that plants do better if you talk to them in a soothing and encouraging way. But this latest departure promotes him from an advocate of harmless nonsense to positively sinister nonsense.

We owe a huge debt to Galileo for emancipating us all from the stupid belief in an Earth-centered or man-centered (let alone God-centered) system. He literally taught us our place and allowed us to make extraordinary advances in knowledge. None of these liberating undertakings have required any sort of assumption about a soul. That belief is at best optional.

In the controversy that followed the Prince’s remarks, his most staunch defender was John Taylor, a scholar whose work I had last noticed when he gave good reviews to the psychokinetic (or whatever) capacities of the Israeli conjurer and fraud Uri Geller. The heir to the throne seems to possess the ability to surround himself – perhaps by some mysterious ultramagnetic force? – with every moon-faced spoon-bender, shrub-flatterer, and water-diviner within range. ...

The prince’s official job description as king will be “defender of the faith,” which currently means the state-financed absurdity of the Anglican Church, but he has more than once said publicly that he wants to be anointed as defender of all faiths – another indication of the conceit he has developed in six decades of performing the only job allowed him by the hereditary principle: that of waiting for his mother to expire.

A hereditary head of state, as Thomas Paine so crisply phrased it, is as absurd a proposition as a hereditary physician or a hereditary astronomer. ...

An awful embarrassment awaits the British if they do not declare for a republic based on verifiable laws and principles, both political and scientific.

THE MORAL NATURALISTS

David Brooks

(Excerpted from *The New York Times*, July 22, 2010)

Where does our sense of right and wrong come from? Most people think it is a gift from God, who revealed His laws and elevates us with His love. A smaller number think that we figure the rules out for ourselves, using our capacity to reason and choosing a philosophical system to live by.

Moral naturalists, on the other hand, believe that we have moral sentiments that have emerged from a long



history of relationships. To learn about morality, you don't rely upon revelation or metaphysics; you observe people as they live. ...

For moral naturalists the story of our morality begins back in the evolutionary past. It begins with the way insects, rats and monkeys learned to cooperate. By the time humans came around, evolution had forged a pretty firm foundation for a moral sense. Jonathan Haidt of the University of Virginia argues that this moral sense is like our sense of taste. We have natural receptors that help us pick up sweetness and saltiness. In the same way, we have natural receptors that help us recognize fairness and cruelty. Just as a few universal tastes can grow into many different cuisines, a few moral senses can grow into many different moral cultures.

Paul Bloom of Yale notes that this moral sense can be observed early in life. Bloom and his colleagues conducted an experiment in which they showed babies a scene featuring one figure struggling to climb a hill, another figure trying to help it, and a third trying to hinder it.

At as early as six months, the babies showed a preference for the helper over the hinderer. In some plays, there is a second act. The hindering figure is either punished or rewarded. In this case, 8-month-olds preferred a character who was punishing the hinderer over ones being nice to it.

This illustrates, Bloom says, that people have a rudimentary sense of justice from a very early age. This doesn't make people naturally good. If you give a 3-year-old two pieces of candy and ask him if he wants to share one of them, he will almost certainly say no. It's not until age 7 or 8 that even half the children are willing to share. But it does mean that social norms fall upon prepared ground. We come equipped to learn fairness and other virtues. ...

The moral naturalists differ over what role reason plays in moral judgments. Some, like Haidt, believe that we make moral judgments intuitively and then construct justifications after the fact. Others, like Joshua Greene of Harvard, liken moral thinking to a camera. Most of the time we rely on the automatic point-and-shoot process, but occasionally we use deliberation to override the quick and easy method. We certainly tell stories and have conversations to spread and refine moral beliefs.

For people wary of abstract theorizing, it's nice to see people investigating morality in ways that are concrete and empirical. But their approach does have certain implicit tendencies.

They emphasize group cohesion over individual dissent. They emphasize the cooperative virtues, like empathy, over the competitive virtues, like the thirst for recognition and superiority. At [a recent] conference, they barely mentioned the yearning for transcendence

and the sacred, which plays such a major role in every human society.

Their implied description of the moral life is gentle, fair and grounded. But it is all lower case. So far, at least, it might not satisfy those who want their morality to be awesome, formidable, transcendent or great.

Comment: That last point is crucial: people "who want their morality to be awesome, formidable, transcendent or great" (emphasis added) will ignore the work of the moral naturalists – or any scientists – and will instead continue to "rely upon revelation and metaphysics," and research, observation and facts be damned. – JR

... AND THE FLESH BLEEDS

Carlos Ruiz Zafón

(Excerpted from *The Angel's Game*, a novel.)

Eulalia asked: "And what are you doing reading all about angels and devils? Don't tell me you're a repentant ex-seminarist."

"I'm trying to find out what the origins of different religions and myths have in common," I explained.

"What have you discovered so far?"

"Almost nothing. I don't want to bore you with my lament."

"You won't bore me. Go on."

"Well, what I've found most interesting so far is that, generally speaking beliefs arise from an event or character that may or may not be authentic and rapidly evolve into social movements that are conditioned and shaped by the political, economic, and societal circumstances of the group that accepts them. Are you still awake?"

Eulalia nodded.

"A large part of the mythology that develops around each of these doctrines, from its liturgy to its rules and taboos, comes from the bureaucracy generated as they develop and not from the supposed supernatural act that originated them. Most of the simple, well-intentioned anecdotes are a mixture of common sense and folklore, and all the belligerent force they eventually develop comes from a subsequent interpretation of those principles, or even their distortion, at the hands of bureaucrats. The administrative and hierarchic aspects seem to be crucial in the evolution of belief systems. The truth is first revealed to all men but very quickly individuals appear claiming sole authority and a duty to interpret, administer, and, if need be, alter this truth in the name of the common good. To this end they establish a powerful and potentially repressive organization. This phenomenon, which biology shows us is common to any social group, soon transforms the doctrine into a means of achieving control and political power. Divisions, wars, and breakups become inevitable.

"Sooner or later, the word becomes flesh, and the flesh bleeds."

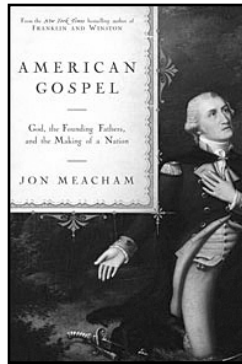
SHSNY BOOK CLUB: SEPTEMBER - NOVEMBER 2010

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 16,
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**

***AMERICAN GOSPEL:
God, the Founding Fathers,
and the Making of a Nation*
by Jon Meacham**

Debates about religion and politics are often more divisive than illuminating. Secularists point to a "wall of separation between church and state," while many conservatives act as though the Founding Fathers were apostles in knee breeches. As *Newsweek* managing editor Jon Meacham shows in this brisk narrative, no extreme has it right. At the heart of the American experiment lies the God of what Benjamin Franklin called "public religion," a God who invests all human beings with inalienable rights, in a nation that protects private religion from government interference. It is a great American balancing act, and it has served us well. — *Paperback*



"...a refreshingly clear, balanced, and wise historical portrait of religion and American politics at exactly the moment when such fairness and understanding are much needed. Anyone who doubts the relevance of history to our own time has only to read this exceptional book." — *David McCullough, author of 1776.*

"An absorbing narrative full of vivid characters and fresh thinking.

... For me this book was nonstop reading." — *Elaine Pagels*

"... an insightful and eloquent account." — *Tom Brokaw*

***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, October 14, 6:30-8:00
at the Muhlenberg Library
*THE BOTANY OF DESIRE:
A Plant's-Eye View of the World*
by Michael Pollan**

Erudite, engaging and highly original, journalist Pollan's fascinating account of four everyday plants and their coevolution with human society challenges traditional views about humans and nature, using the histories of apples, tulips, potatoes and cannabis to illustrate the complex, reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world. He shows how these species have successfully exploited human desires to flourish. Pollan's clear, elegant style enlivens even his most scientific material, and his wide-ranging references and charming manner do much to support his basic contention that man and nature are and will always be "in this boat together." — *Paper*

**Thursday, November 4, 6:30-8:00
at the Muhlenberg Library
*GUNS, GERMS, AND STEEL:
The Fates of Human Societies*
by Jared Diamond**

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, by National Medal of Science winner Diamond "... is a brilliantly written, passionate, whirlwind tour through 13,000 years of history on all the continents — a short history of everything about everybody. The origins of empires, religion, writing, crops, and guns are all here. ... Its account of how the modern world was formed is full of lessons for our own future. After reading the first two pages, you won't be able to put it down." — *Paul Ehrlich*

"Fascinating ... lays a foundation for understanding human history." — *Bill Gates* — *Paperback*

SHSNY CALENDAR: SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER 2010

SUNDAY, SEPT 19, 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.

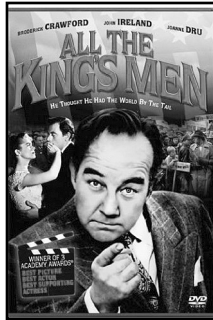
Everyone interested in getting together with 20 or more like-minded humanists and rationalists for good pan-Asian food and lively talk in a charming East-side setting, is welcome. Bring friends!

Order off the menu; individual checks.

October brunch: 10/24

MONDAY, SEPT 27, 7:00 p.m. SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT Stone Creek Bar & Lounge 140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves) "ALL THE KING'S MEN"

As we enter yet another political season, let's watch Willie Stark (Broderick Crawford) as a model politician — until he's corrupted by the very



system he tries to reform. Based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel (itself based loosely on the real-life Louisiana demagogue Huey Long), the film was nominated for seven Academy Awards in 1949; it won Best Picture, as well as Best Actor and Best Actress for stars Crawford and Mercedes McCambridge (later the voice of the possessed Regan in *The Exorcist*).

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.

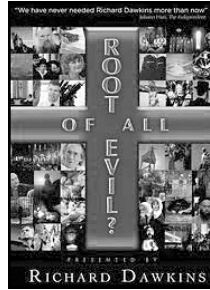
Check out the Stone Creek menu and prices online at www.stonecreeknyc.com.

*October Movie Night: 10/18
"The Crucible"*

*Save the date ... for a new
SHSNY monthly event:*

GREAT LECTURES Premiere TUESDAY, OCTOBER 12, 7:00 - 9:00 p.m. Richard Dawkins "THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL?" Stone Creek Bar & Lounge 140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

A British TV documentary that was the precursor of Dawkins's 2006 best-selling book, *The God Delusion*, this fast-paced illustrated lecture, now on DVD, explores the unproven beliefs that are treated as factual by religion, and the real dangers to society of those delusions embraced by the religious.



Each Great Lectures evening will begin with a viewing of a DVD, followed by a Q&A and general discussion led by SHSNY Board Member Bob Murtha.

Great Lectures Night is FREE.

Check out the Stone Creek menu and prices online at www.stonecreeknyc.com.

November Lecture & Date: TBA

SUNDAY, SEPT 26, 10 a.m. Foley Square (Centre/Worth Sts) NYC'S 7TH ANNUAL WEDDING MARCH

Join Center For Inquiry-NYC and CFI-Long Island in the march, sponsored by Marriage Equality New York, whose mission is to raise awareness of the right of all persons to enter into legally recognized gender-neutral civil marriage. RSVP to this Meetup at: <http://cfinewyork.net/calendar/14306881/>

OTHER EVENTS

Sundays:

Religion on the Line

6-9:00 a.m. — WMCA, 770 AM

Equal Time for Freethought

6:30 p.m. — WBAI-NY 99.5FM

Religion & Ethics Newsweekly

6:30 p.m. — Channel 13

Wednesdays:

Atheism History Week - 5:30 p.m.

Hosted by SHSNY President John Rafferty. On MNN Channel 67 and RNN Channel 110 in Manhattan, and simultaneously anywhere via live streaming on your computer at www.mnn.org

Thursdays:

NYCity Atheists TV - 7:00 p.m.

Atheist Book Club - 7:30 p.m., hosted by SHSNY VP/Secretary Elaine Lynn. Both on MNN Channel 67 and RNN Channel 110 in Manhattan, and simultaneously anywhere via live streaming on your computer at www.mnn.org

Fridays:

Drinking With Atheists — Meet every Friday Night, at a venue to be announced, with like-minded friends for a fun evening of conversation. Details at: www.meetup.com/RichiesList/

Various Dates & Times:

Agnostic A.A. — Seven A.A.-endorsed meetings. Schedules: agnosticAAnyc.org/meetings.html

FOR UPDATES ON ALL SHSNY EVENTS ...

... check the website at www.shsnyc.org and/or 212-308-2165 and/or our MeetUp site at <http://humanism.meetup.com/155/>

Check Richie's List, too, at <http://atheists.meetup.com/515/>

HOLD RELIGIOUS LEADERS ACCOUNTABLE

Lawrence M. Krauss

(Excerpted from "Faith and Foolishness," in *Scientific American*, August, 2010)

I don't know which is more dangerous, that religious beliefs force some people to choose between knowledge and myth or that pointing out how religion can purvey ignorance is taboo. To do so risks being branded as intolerant of religion. The kindly Dalai Lama, in a recent *New York Times* editorial, juxtaposed the statement that "radical atheists issue blanket condemnations of those who hold religious beliefs" with his censure of the extremist intolerance, murderous actions and religious hatred in the Middle East. Aside from the distinction between questioning beliefs and beheading or bombing people, the "radical atheists" in question rarely condemn individuals but rather actions and ideas that deserve to be challenged.

Surprisingly, the strongest reticence to speak out often comes from those who should be most worried about silence. Last May I attended a conference on science and public policy at which a representative of the Vatican's Pontifical Academy of Sciences gave a keynote address. When I questioned how he reconciled his own reasonable views about science with the sometimes absurd and unjust activities of the Church—from false claims about condoms and AIDS in Africa to pedophilia among the clergy—I was denounced by one speaker after another for my intolerance.

Religious leaders need to be held accountable for their ideas. In my state of Arizona, Sister Margaret McBride, a senior administrator at St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix, recently authorized a legal abortion to save the life of a 27-year-old mother of four who was 11 weeks pregnant and suffering from severe complications of pulmonary hypertension; she made that decision after consultation with the mother's family, her doctors and the local ethics committee. Yet the bishop of Phoenix, Thomas Olmsted, immediately excommunicated Sister Margaret, saying, "The mother's life cannot be preferred over the child's." Ordinarily, a man who would callously let a woman die and orphan her children would be called a monster; this should not change just because he is a cleric*.

Keeping religion immune from criticism is both unwarranted and dangerous. Unless we are willing to expose religious irrationality whenever it arises, we will encourage irrational public policy and promote ignorance over education for our children.

*For more on this case, see *PIQUE*, July, 2010, page 4.

If a woman grows old and weary and dies bearing children, it is of no consequence. Let her die bearing children. That is what she is here for."

— Martin Luther

FAMOUS CHRISTIAN QUILTS CHRISTIANITY

(Excerpted from *The Huffington Post*, July 30)

Anne Rice, the best-selling author best known for *Interview With a Vampire* and other vampire novels, has had a religious conversion: She's no longer a Christian. On Facebook she has written:

"In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. In the name of Christ, I quit Christianity and being Christian. Amen."

Raised as a Catholic, Rice had rejected the church early in her life but renewed her faith in recent years and in 2008 released the memoir *Called Out of Darkness: A Spiritual Confession*. But, she says, she had been having doubts for the past two to three years.

"I believed for a long time that the differences, the quarrels among Christians didn't matter a lot for the individual, that you live your life and stay out of it. But I began to realize that it wasn't an easy thing to do. I came to the conclusion that if I didn't make this declaration, I was going to lose my mind."



IF ROMAN POLANSKI WERE A PRIEST ...

Maureen Dowd

(Excerpted from "Rome Fiddles, We Burn," in *The New York Times*, July 16, 2010)

If the Vatican is trying to restore the impression that its moral sense is intact, issuing a document that equates pedophilia with the ordination of women doesn't really do that. ...

The church still believes in its own intrinsic holiness despite all evidence to the contrary. It thinks it's making huge concessions on the unstoppable abuse scandal when it's taking baby steps. The casuistic document did not issue a zero-tolerance policy to defrock priests after they are found guilty of pedophilia; it did not order bishops to report every instance of abuse to the police; it did not set up sanctions on bishops who sweep abuse under the rectory rug; it did not eliminate the statute of limitations for abused children; it did not tell bishops to stop lobbying legislatures to prevent child-abuse laws from being toughened. There is no moral awakening here. The cruelty and indecency of child abuse once more inspires tactical contrition. All the penitence of the church is grudging and reactive. Church leaders are merely as penitent as they need to be to protect the institution. ...

If Roman Polanski were a priest, he'd still be working here.

Stupefyingly, the new Vatican document also links raping children with ordaining women as priests,

deeming both “*graviora delicta*,” or grave offenses. Clerics who attempt to ordain women can now be defrocked.

... After the Vatican launched two inquisitions of American nuns, it didn’t seem possible that the archconservative *Il Papa* and his paternalistic redoubt could get more unenlightened, but they have somehow managed it. Letting women be priests – which should be seen as a way to help cleanse the church and move it beyond its infantilized and defensive state – is now on the list of awful sins right next to pedophilia, heresy, apostasy and schism. ...

If a society makes strides in not subordinating women, why can’t the church reflect that? If men prove that all-male hierarchies can get shamefully warped, why can’t they embrace the normality of equality? The Vatican’s insistence on male prerogative is misogynistic poppycock – enhancing American Catholics’ disenchantment with Rome.

Increasingly ... the Vatican of the new millennium seems like the Soviet Politburo of the 1980s. They pretend to believe what they preach, while we pretend to obey them. One day, this surreality will pop like a bubble. One day.” – *Andrew Sullivan (who is a Catholic)*

IRVING JACKS, 1925-2010

Dr. Irving Jacks, whose wit and infectious good humor enlivened many SHSNY gatherings, died June 19 at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital of complications from COPD. He was 84 years old.

Dr. Jacks was born on July 4, 1925, and grew up on New York City’s lower east side. Irving was a psychologist who loved the intellectual pursuit of his profession and loved imparting what he knew to others. He was a professor at Penn State, Parsons College and Illinois State University, where he founded a program in corrections. He returned to New York City in 1981, and was a fellow at the Albert Ellis Institute.

Until his death, Dr. Jacks provided psychotherapy to clients about whom he cared deeply. He was a long-time volunteer at the New York’s International Center, where he assisted and befriended his “conversation partners,” forming cherished relationships. Irving was a strong supporter of Israel and an active member of SHSNY.

From the ISHV press-release announcement, July 1:

“HUMANISTS ANNOUNCE FORMATION OF NEW INSTITUTE DEDICATED TO ETHICS”

Branchishing a statement of “Neo-Humanist” values, a group of leaders in the humanist movement has established a new non-profit aiming to re-humanize secularism.

“We aim to be inclusive and to work with religious and non-religious groups to help solve common problems

facing the planetary community,” Paul Kurtz, chairman of the new Institute for Science and Human Values (ISHV), said. Kurtz also said the group will promote scientific inquiry and critical thinking in evaluating claims and “develop values that are naturalistic and humanistic in character and appropriate to the 21st century.” He said religion is often at the root of society’s ethical values, and that ISHV wants to reevaluate them on rational grounds.

“We’re going to enlist the brightest scientists and scholars, and not just in the United States but everywhere there are humanists,” Kurtz said. “We want to find out how to better develop the common moral virtues that we share as human beings.”

Kurtz is an emeritus professor of philosophy and has been involved in humanist, skeptical, and secularist movements for more than 30 years. In 1991 he brought together two organizations, one focused on skepticism and the other on humanism, to form the Center for Inquiry (CFI). Kurtz resigned from CFI’s board in May of this year. ...

Kurtz, with input from other prominent humanists, has composed a “Neo-Humanist Statement of Secular Principles and Values” that will help guide the new organization’s activities. It is the latest public declaration of a humanist movement that has been punctuated by similar documents in 1933, 1973, and 2003. The Statement is signed by more than 100 prominent Humanists, including Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker, former Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder, and writer Ann Druyan, wife of the late Carl Sagan.

NEO-HUMANIST STATEMENT OF SECULAR PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

Paul Kurtz

Preamble

Our planetary community is facing serious problems that can only be solved by cooperative global action. Fresh thinking is required. Humanity needs to reconstruct human values in the light of scientific knowledge. We introduce the term “Neo-Humanism” to present a daring new approach.

The Next Step Forward

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. This Statement advocates non-religious secular Neo-Humanism.

Sixteen Recommendations

Neo-Humanists:

(1) aspire to be more inclusive by appealing to both non-religious and religious humanists and to religious believers who share common goals;

- (2) are critical of theism;
- (3) are best defined by what they are for, not what they are against;
- (4) wish to use critical thinking, evidence, and reason to evaluate claims to knowledge;
- (5) apply similar considerations to ethics and values;
- (6) are committed to a key set of values: happiness, creative actualization, reason in harmony with emotion, quality, and excellence;
- (7) emphasize moral growth (particularly for children), empathy, and responsibility;
- (8) advocate the right to privacy;
- (9) support the democratic way of life, tolerance, and fairness;
- (10) recognize the importance of personal morality, good will, and a positive attitude toward life;
- (11) accept responsibility for the well-being of society, guaranteeing various rights, including those of women, racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities; and supporting education, health care, gainful employment, and other social benefits;
- (12) support a green economy;
- (13) advocate population restraint, environmental protection, and the protection of other species;
- (14) recognize the need for Neo-Humanists to engage actively in politics;
- (15) take progressive positions on the economy;
- (16) hold that humanity needs to move beyond ego-centric individualism and chauvinistic nationalism to develop transnational planetary institutions to cope with global problems—such efforts include a strengthened World Court, an eventual World Parliament, and a Planetary Environmental Monitoring Agency to set standards for controlling global warming and ecology.

LETTERS

Michael DeDora on CFI/CSH/CSI

I would like to reply to two of your points about the Center for Inquiry (CFI) in the July issue of PIQUE. I normally do not publicly involve myself in such matters, but since CFI-NYC and SHSNY work closely, you are affiliated with the Council for Secular Humanism, and PIQUE reaches a sizable number of concerned secularists, I think I have a responsibility to provide some possible clarification.

The first reply regards news of CFI offices being closed. CFI headquarters in Amherst did not deny that CFI was closing offices in Washington, DC, and Tampa. That much is true. Instead, CFI denied that it was closing operations in those places. Operations will continue in both DC and Tampa, just without physical spaces. These moves are rather unfortunate, because having public space is optimal. But they are the result of a realistic

reading of the economy and finances.

Further, CFI has operated successfully without such a space before. For example, in NYC we have been without public space since September 2009, and we have done quite well.

The second reply regards your claim that “it’s hard to identify any of the leading lights in the secular community—outside the present CFI/CSH/CSI leadership structure in Amherst—who have not sided with Paul [Kurtz].” I must ask you here to provide examples of leading skeptics and secularists and their position on this matter. As far as I know, most of the leading lights have remained neutral on this issue. To be sure, some have spoken out, like James Randi. But he spoke out by signing a CFI staff-written letter that detailed support for the current CFI management and Board of Directors (at: <http://cfistaff.wordpress.com>).

From personal conversations and observations, I gather that most leading lights in the secular community are quietly hoping CFI pulls through this unfortunate situation. I believe we will.

Reasonably yours,

Michael De Dora, Executive Director , CFI/NYC

Response: We are corrected. – JR

Art Harris on Paul Kurtz

Re: “*Secular Schism Widens, Threatening a Movement’s Finances – and Future?*” (PIQUE, July)

As a long-time friend of Paul Kurtz and one of the early members of the Center For Inquiry, I took umbrage at his treatment by the board. I still cannot sort out all the opposing views and actions that occurred, but knowing Paul as a reasonable man, feel that the board acted in a heavy-handed and unseemly manner. To this end, I am not renewing any CFI publications, and with donations to CFI dwindling, I believe a foreclosure is in the works.

I agree with Paul in that the best way to oppose religion is not to ridicule or dwell upon its iniquities but to allow the believer, by questioning and discussion, to discern the fallacy that is religion.

Religion has been selling snake oil for thousands of years and the sellers are well entrenched. Few if any of them are willing to do a day’s work, so rooting them out will take a Herculean effort.

Atheism has been growing in this supposedly Christian nation, and while 82 percent claim to be Christian, regular church attendance is only 18 percent and dropping. Our battle is only begun. Our goal must be to roll back the political power and influence that religion has, which is far in excess of its actual numbers.

Al Henick Roughs Up “Touchdown Jesus”

Re: “*Statue of Jesus Destroyed by Act of God*” (PIQUE, July),

about the "Touchdown Jesus" statue struck by lightning and totally destroyed. We asked for a football joke.

God saw the replay and overturned the touchdown - vigorously. I call it "unnecessary roughness."

Chic Schissel on Obama's "Targeted Killings"

Re: "Okay, Fellow Liberals, What's the Party-Line Position on This?" (PIQUE, June) on the Obama administration's policy of targeted killings of terrorists without a trial.

We are in a fanatic-religion-generated war unlike any other, since this time the capacity to destroy the planet's human life actually exists. We liberals would like to believe that the religious fanatics represent but a small minority of Islam and, indeed, some Muslim intellectuals have condemned the terrorism. But I wait, so far in vain, for any major leader of Islam to unequivocally come out and forcefully say that their religion does not support suicide bombings or rocket attacks or terror bombings or random murder of Americans, Jews, and other infidels. I am waiting to hear such a leader condemn these actions, to tell his followers that this behavior is against their religion and will not be rewarded in heaven. Until that happens I become more and more willing to take any measures that might increase our security.

Dissenting views:

"Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

– Benjamin Franklin

"He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you." – Nietzsche

Dennis Middlebrooks (in *The New York Post*) On the Pledge of Allegiance

Ed: *The Arlington (MA) High School banned the Pledge of Allegiance in class, citing "sensitivity to the diverse population," which prompted outcries from Post readers. On July 8, The Post printed Dennis' comment, reprinted here.*

Instead of condemning the Massachusetts school, *The Post* should question why the United States is the only democracy in the world that has mandated a daily loyalty oath, a hallmark of feudalism and tyrannies, from its school children.

There was no Pledge of Allegiance from 1776 to 1892, yet somehow America managed to achieve and preserve its independence, maintain democracy, abolish slavery and expand from the eastern seaboard to the Pacific Ocean.

RE: LETTERS AND PIQUE EDITORIAL POLICY

We received a pretty good short letter commenting on a piece that ran in July PIQUE. I'd love to have run it, but it was signed "anon." Just so everyone knows – no anonymous contributions allowed. – JR

I TOLD YOU, I TOLD YOU, AND I TOLD YOU John Rafferty

I hate hate crime law. In the first article I ever wrote for PIQUE, "Hate Crime Laws: A Dissenting View," in April, 1999, when the law was limited to matters of "religion, national origin or color," I argued against:

"... new proposals that would extend the scope of that law to include 'real or perceived sex orientation, gender or disability,' and push the envelope three ways: first, by adding three new categories of victim (does anyone really hate the crippled and blind?); second, by opening that 'real or perceived' floodgate that will lead to enormous new prosecutorial possibilities."

I believed then, and still do, that "hate crime" is a dangerous, unconstitutional weapon to put in the hands of pandering politicians and headline-hungry prosecutors. Eleven years ago I asked:

"... if 'death or bodily injury' defines the scope of this new law today, can anyone doubt that in another decade, civil lawsuits and cowed congressmen won't broaden it step by step, to include financial loss, career non-advancement or job loss, and even psychic or emotional distress? Will Big Brother investigate the motivations of and prosecute for 'hate crime' the African separatist group that refuses to hire a white P.R. agency? The fundamentalist church that declines to marry a lesbian couple? The Serbian-American landlord who won't rent a room to a Muslim tenant?"

And even eventually me, for writing a letter like this?

In these pages in October, 2001 ("I'm Afraid to Hate Myself"), I argued against more new legislation and my hero, Ted Kennedy, and agreed with my nemesis, Orrin Hatch, "that the inclusion of sex as a protected class would make 'every rape, every domestic abuse, every assault between genders' a federal crime."

I got a lot of grief ("You're defending rapists?") for that one. And more for "This is America, We Don't Punish People for What They Think," in June, 2007, when I wrote that:

"... extending protection from violent or discriminatory acts of hate to gay and lesbian Americans is a rotten idea."

"In fact, I think all hate crime law is a totally misguided liberal attempt (hey, I'm a liberal!) to change people's hearts and minds through legislation, with the courts as judges of right thinking and the police as its enforcers – an idea that has more in common with fascism than liberalism."

"For the fourth time in these pages, I'm going to say it: This is America, we don't punish people for what they think."

Okay, that's what, as the headline here reads, "I told you." So what? Have my decade-old dire predictions come true, or not? Am I Cassandra or Munchausen?

In a June 22 article in *The New York Times*, "A Novel Twist for Prosecution of Hate Crimes," reporter Anne Bernard writes:

"In the public's imagination, the classic hate crime is an assault born of animus against a particular ethnicity or sexual orientation ... but in Queens since 2005, at least five people have been convicted of, or pleaded guilty to, committing a very different kind of hate crime – singling out elderly victims for nonviolent crimes like mortgage fraud because they believed older people would be easy to deceive and might have substantial savings or home equity. ...

"The legal thinking behind the novel method is that New York's hate crimes statute does not require prosecutors to prove defendants 'hate' the group the victim belongs to, merely that they commit the crime because of some belief, correct or not, they hold about the group.

"New York's law is ambiguous. It says prosecutors must prove only a crime was committed 'because of a belief or perception regarding the race, color, national origin, ancestry, gender, religion, religious practice, age, disability or sexual orientation of a person.'"

Did you get all that? First, the original three categories of

protected groups (religion, national origin, color) have now been extended to ten. ("Ancestry"? What the hell does that mean?) But why stop at ten?

How about Republicans? (Or Democrats.) Will every political slanging match that turns into a bar brawl be investigated for "I hate Republicans" remarks?

Yankees fans? *Everyone* hates smug, front-runner Yankees fans. So be careful in arguments with them about whether Steinbrenner should be in the Hall of Fame. (*Ed: No!*)

And so now we have what S.J. Perelman used to call "the beauty part": today in New York you don't even have to hate anyone to be convicted of a hate crime!

I told you.

HELP WANTED! CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS!

John Rafferty needs help with **Membership**: keeping the lists, sending the renewal letters and follow-ups, helping SHSNY grow. PC familiarity is a must. 2-3 mornings a month until you take over and do it yourself at home.

Book Club Editor Elaine Lynn and **Great Lectures** Leader Bob Murtha each need a backup, a reliable Number Two – one evening (usually a Thursday for Book Club, a Tuesday for Great Lectures) a month.

Events Chair Lee Loshak needs help arranging meeting places, restaurants, etc. – schedules will vary.

Call 212-308-2165 or email editor@shsnny.org

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Call for Volunteers!

Page 7
New "Great Lectures"
monthly SHSNY event.

Page 1
Democrats more religious
than Republicans?

"I'm an atheist - that's it."
(See stamp above right)
Katharine Hepburn.
U.S. Postal Service honors

