

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

April, 2011

Some politics this month: mean, misogynistic and facts-averse in the big, bad world; hopeful and humanistic in our own little one (see the Election insert). We discover a new geological age and a new theory of what made us human, consider our snowballing stupidity, our declining language skills, the non-necessity of God, and sheep who make Bibles. We take our annual detour into silly non-news, and we start with one of our favorite conservative's take on a new kind of, well, us. – JR

THE NEW HUMANISM David Brooks

(Reprinted from The New York Times, March 7, 2011)

Over the course of my career, I've covered a number of policy failures. When the Soviet Union fell, we sent in teams of economists, oblivious to the lack of social trust that marred that society. While invading Iraq, the nation's leaders were unprepared for the cultural complexities of the place and the psychological aftershocks of Saddam's terror.

We had a financial regime based on the notion that bankers are rational creatures who wouldn't do anything stupid en masse. For the past 30 years we've tried many different ways to restructure our educational system – trying big schools and little schools, charters and vouchers – that, for years, skirted the core issue: the relationship between a teacher and a student.

I've come to believe that these failures spring from a single failure: reliance on an overly simplistic view of human nature. We have a prevailing view in our society – not only in the policy world, but in many spheres – that we are divided creatures. Reason, which is trustworthy, is separate from the emotions, which are suspect. Society progresses to the extent that reason can suppress the passions. This has created a distortion in our culture. We emphasize things that are rational and conscious and are inarticulate about the processes down below. We are really good at talking about material things but bad at talking about emotion.

When we raise our kids, we focus on the traits measured by grades and SAT scores. But when it comes to

the most important things like character and how to build relationships, we often have nothing to say. Many of our public policies are proposed by experts who are comfortable only with correlations that can be measured, appropriated and quantified, and ignore everything else.

Yet while we are trapped within this amputated view of human nature, a richer and deeper view is coming back into view. It is being brought to us by researchers across an array of diverse fields: neuroscience, psychology, sociology, behavioral economics and so on.

This growing, dispersed body of research reminds us of a few key insights. First, the unconscious parts of the mind are most of the mind, where many of the most impressive feats of thinking take place. Second, emotion is not opposed to reason; our emotions

assign value to things and are the basis of reason. Finally, we are not individuals who form relationships. We are social animals, deeply interpenetrated with one another, who emerge out of relationships.

This body of research suggests the French enlightenment view of human nature, which emphasized individualism and reason, was wrong. The British enlightenment, which emphasized social sentiments, was more accurate about who we are. It suggests we are not divided creatures. We don't only progress as reason dominates the passions. We also thrive as we educate our emotions.

When you synthesize this research, you get different perspectives on everything from business to family to politics. You pay less attention to how people analyze the world but more to how they perceive and organize it in their minds. You pay a bit less attention to individual traits and more to the quality of relationships between people.

DON'T MISS TOM FLYNN
at our Day of Reason Brunch May 1
Details page 6

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

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You get a different view of, say, human capital. Over the past few decades, we have tended to define human capital in the narrow way, emphasizing I.Q., degrees, and professional skills. Those are all important, obviously, but this research illuminates a range of deeper talents, which span reason and emotion and make a hash of both categories:

Attunement: the ability to enter other minds and learn what they have to offer.

Equipose: the ability to serenely monitor the movements of one's own mind and correct for biases and shortcomings.

Metis: the ability to see patterns in the world and derive a gist from complex situations.

Sympathy: the ability to fall into a rhythm with those around you and thrive in groups.

Limerence: This isn't a talent as much as a motivation. The conscious mind hungers for money and success, but the unconscious mind hungers for those moments of transcendence when the skull line falls away and we are lost in love for another, the challenge of a task or the love of God. Some people seem to experience this drive more powerfully than others.

When Sigmund Freud came up with his view of the unconscious, it had a huge effect on society and literature. Now hundreds of thousands of researchers are coming up with a more accurate view of who we are. Their work is scientific, but it directs our attention toward a new humanism. It's beginning to show how the emotional and the rational are intertwined. I suspect their work will have a giant effect on the culture. It'll change how we see ourselves. Who knows, it may even someday transform the way our policy makers see the world.

WELCOME TO THE ANTHROPOCENE

The Editors of *The New York Times*

(Reprinted from a New York Times editorial, 2/27/2011)

The edges of historical eras tend to be fuzzy. It would be nice to think that someone awoke in Florence, Italy, one day in the late 1300s – perhaps as spring started – and said, “Today the Renaissance begins!” We can be sure no one did, if only because historians discern such eras only in retrospect. The same is true of geological epochs. Humans existed when the Pleistocene ended and the Holocene began, 11,500 years ago. The geologic time scale, which defines geological periods, began to take its modern form only in the 19th century.

Among scientists, there is now serious talk that the Holocene has ended and a new era has begun, called the Anthropocene, a term first used in 2000 by Paul Crutzen, who shared a Nobel Prize for his work on the chemical mechanisms that affect the ozone layer.

The Royal Society has devoted a recent issue of its *Philosophical Transactions* to the Anthropocene. According to one of the papers, the name is “a vivid expression of the degree of environmental change on planet Earth.” It means

that human activity has left a “stratigraphic signal” detectable thousands of years from now in ice cores and sedimentary rocks.

Those of us alive today may well be able to say we were present when the Anthropocene epoch was formally adopted. But we will not be able to say we were present at the start of the Anthropocene. There is a strong case that the Anthropocene begins with the Industrial Revolution, around 1800, when we began to exert our most profound impact on the world, especially by altering the carbon content of the atmosphere.

Other species are embedded in the fossil record of the epochs they belong to. Some species, like ammonites and brachiopods, even serve as guides—or index fossils—to the age of the rocks they're embedded in. But we are the only species to have defined a geological period by our activity – something usually performed by major glaciations, mass extinction and the colossal impact of objects from outer space, like the one that defines the upper boundary of the Cretaceous.

Humans were inevitably going to be part of the fossil record. But the true meaning of the Anthropocene is that we have affected nearly every aspect of our environment – from a warming atmosphere to the bottom of an acidifying ocean.

One of my favorite quotations is a statement Clarence Ayers made that “Our industrial revolution began, as some historians say, with half a dozen technical improvements in the textile industry; and it took us a century to realize that anything of moment had happened to us, beyond the obvious improvement of spinning and weaving.” – John Dewey in *A Common Faith*

GOD IS AN UNNECESSARY HYPOTHESIS

Philip Appleman

(Excerpted from “*The Labyrinth: God, Darwin, and the meaning of life,*” in *Free Inquiry, February/March, 2011*)

“God” is an unnecessary hypothesis, but for many people, suffering the terrors of the imagination, a seductive one. People in general have never exhibited much passion for the disciplined pursuit of knowledge, but they are always tempted by easy answers. God is an easy answer.

Why are we here? Where will we spend eternity? The brain has become capable of inventing questions to which there are no satisfactory answers. For such questions, God is a convenience: the unanswerable question is referred to the undefinable Being, and lo, we have the impression of an answer, though in fact we know no more than before. This seems to soothe some minds temporarily, as an empty bottle may soothe a crying baby; and the nourishment from each is the same. “God” is a term that deliberately masks our ignorance.

Whenever God is invoked, language and sense part company: for that very reason, God has practical and political uses that partly account for its survival as a

hypothesis. Among its other conveniences, God has always comforted aggressors by blessing the carnage of battle: armies carry their own chaplains. God is described as that which knows everything and is all-powerful; if so, then there is no escaping the conclusion that God is ultimately responsible for everything that happens: for the Holocaust, for the carpet-bombing of primitive villages, for the defilement of children, for slavery. Priests were on hand to sanction all of those activities: God is a serviceable bureaucrat.

The worship of the undefinable is necessarily illogical: "Praise the mercy and goodness of God for saving my life," says the survivor of an earthquake in which God, with indifference, has just brushed away a thousand lives.

The large brain, that masterpiece of evolution, capable of wonder but unpracticed in reasoning, throws patterns across the stars: Aquarius, Taurus, Capricorn. To invent these images is poetry; to believe in them is faith. God's survival depends upon our peopling the heavens with angels and archangels, chimeras of our banal imagination. No wonder the prophets thundered against the sin of knowledge, the sin of pride: God depends upon our ignorance as much as any magician.

Learning is hard work; imagining is easy. Given our notorious capacity for indolence, is it any wonder that school is so unpopular, faith so attractive? So we fumble through the labyrinth of our lives, making believe that we have heard answers to our questions, even to our prayers; and yet, deep down, we know that something is out of joint, has always been out of joint. How long? we lament. How long, O Lord?

JESUS AND MO INSTRUCT THE BARMAID IN METAPHOR

(Transcribed from jesusandmo.net, 3/11/2011)

Jesus: Barmaid, your criticism of theism is too crude.

Mohammed: Yeah, it's easy to attack people who believe in a literal, infinite, omniscient, beneficent, immortal deity.

Jesus: Sophisticated believers are different.

Mo: People who are mature in their faith know that God is a metaphor.

Barmaid: A metaphor for what?

Jesus: For the infinite, omniscient, beneficent, immortal deity, of course.

Barmaid: Wow, that is sophisticated.

WILL JESUS RETURN IN A UFO?

R. Georges Delamontagne (and George Carlin)

(Excerpted from "Secular Humanist" in The Voice of Sanity, newsletter of Upstate SC Secular Humanists, April, 2010)

It cannot possibly be a matter of pure coincidence that April Fool's Day and Easter Sunday are never more than one to two weeks apart, since they both provide perfectly legitimate and widely-accepted opportunities for tricksters to fool many of the people some of the time. On April Fool's Day, you can point up into the sky and exclaim

to your friend that "Look up there; there's a flying saucer, and there are mean-looking little green men inside looking down on us!" On Easter Sunday you can attend a church service celebrating a white man's rising from the dead and ascending into the sky (heaven) to sit at the right hand of his father, who happens to be invisible — which reminds me of a section of George Carlin's book, *When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?* entitled "They Came From Out Of The Sky":

"I find it discouraging — and a bit depressing — when I notice the unequal treatment afforded by the media to UFO believers on the one hand, and on the other, to those who believe in an invisible supreme being who inhabits the sky. Especially as the latter belief applies to the whole Jesus-Messiah-Son-of God fable.

"You may have noticed that, in the media, UFO believers are ... made to seem like kooks and quaint dingbats who have the nerve to believe that, in an observable universe of trillions upon trillions of stars, and most likely many hundreds of billions of potentially inhabitable planets, some of those planets may have produced life-forms capable of doing things we can't do.

"On the other hand, those who believe in an eternal, all-powerful being, a being who demands to be loved and adored unconditionally and who punishes and rewards according to his whims are thought to be worthy, upright, credible people. This in spite of the large numbers of believers who are clearly closed-minded fanatics.

"To my way of thinking, there is every bit as much evidence for the existence of UFOs as there is for the existence of God. Probably far more. ...

"Granted, the world of UFO-belief has its share of kooks, nuts and fringe people, but have you ever listened to some of these religious true-believers? ... But the marginal people in these two groups don't matter in these arguments. What matters is the prejudice and superstition built into the media coverage of the two sets of beliefs. One is treated reverently and accepted as received truth, the other is treated laughingly and dismissed out of hand.

"As evidence of the above premise, I offer the version of a typical television news story heard each year on the final Friday of Lent:

"Today is Good Friday, observed by Christians worldwide as a day that commemorates the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whose death redeemed the sins of mankind."

"Here's the way it *should* be written:

"Today is Good Friday, observed worldwide by Jesus buffs as the day on which the popular, bearded cultural figure, sometimes referred to as The Messiah, was allegedly crucified and — according to legend — died for mankind's so-called sins. Today kicks off a 'holy' weekend that culminates on Easter Sunday, when, it is widely believed, this dead 'savior' — who, by the way, claimed to be the son of a sky-dwelling, invisible being known as God — mysteriously 'rose from the dead.'"

"According to the legend, by volunteering to be killed and actually going through with it, Jesus saved

every person who has ever lived – and every person who will live – from an eternity of suffering in a fiery region popularly known as hell, providing – so the story goes – that the person to be ‘saved’ firmly believes this rather fanciful tale.”

“Don’t wait for it to happen. The aliens will land first.”

ON THE QUALITY OF BELIEF Chic Schissel

The word “belief” is defined as something one accepts as true or real. I agree with Flash Light (“The Question is: Is Atheism a Belief? The Answer is: Yes.” PIQUE, March) when he says that atheism is “only a belief.” But “belief” is a multi-faceted concept: beliefs exhibit a wide range of quality of accuracy. In my opinion the quality of a belief is not based on its utility but on the probability of its accuracy, this probability established by the prevailing scientific consensus.

All beliefs do not enjoy the same quality. Belief in the theory of evolution enjoys a high quality of accuracy because science has shown it has a high degree of probability. On the other hand, the quality of belief in creationism suffers from low demonstrated probability. But they are both “beliefs.”

To say that religion and atheism are both beliefs is to imply some similarity, a far-fetched inference. Religious belief has historically shown considerable utility, but is mired in low probability. “Belief” in atheism, perhaps lower in utility, holds a higher probability.

I don’t mean to confuse utility with quality. Religion has been useful to “the masses” as a consolation, and useful to the leadership and clergy as a bludgeon to keep the masses under control. Atheism has not enjoyed similar utility.

OF BABIES AND BATHWATER Dale McGowan

(Excerpted from The Separationist, newsletter of Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry (SC), March, 2011)

How we do love analogies, especially when they get us where we wanted to go anyway. One such first popped up in a 1512 satire by a German monk named Thomas Murner. “To throw the baby out with the bath water” is to rid one’s self of a bad thing while destroying in the process whatever good there was as well.

Often, we hear that the “baby” is all that is good and noble and life-affirming in religion, like frequent instructions to not kill or lie or hate. The “bathwater” is all that is ignoble and life destroying in religion – like frequent instructions to kill and lie and hate. There’s rarely a middle path, because religious systems lack procedures for compromise. Real change is accomplished only by calving off denominations, and within a given church, it is silently implied that one must take the bad with the good, all or nothing, or risk losing the good entirely.

Hogwash. There is something between throwing out the baby and letting it marinate endlessly in the cold and filthy water.

WHERE IS KEITH OLBERMANN WHEN WE NEED HIM?

John Rafferty

[Based on “The Craziest Wingnut in America Wants to Criminalize Unauthorized Vaginal Bleeding” on altnet.org, 2/23/11]

Keith is gone from MSNBC, and so, sadly, is his nightly feature, “Worst Person in the World.” How then, to commemorate Georgia state Representative Bobby Franklin (R-Marietta), who would have walked off with the title on any given night, perhaps for any given year?

Mr. Franklin, so “libertarian” in his views that he once introduced a bill to abolish driver’s licenses in Georgia, has also proposed a bill requiring rape and sexual assault victims – but not victims of any other crimes – to be called “accusers” unless there is a conviction in their cases.

Not misogynistic enough for the “Worst Person” title? Then try Mr. Franklin’s latest – a bill to investigate all unsupervised miscarriages as crime scenes, i.e.:

“When a spontaneous fetal death required to be reported by this code section occurs without medical attendance at or immediately after the delivery ... the proper investigating official shall investigate the cause of fetal death and shall prepare and file the report within 30 days ...”

One-third of all pregnancies miscarry, but that is of no matter to Mr. Franklin. Should a woman have an unattended miscarriage in Georgia – which some simpleton sheriff’s deputy suspects may have been *an abortion!* – she could have to defend herself against charges of felony homicide.

The penalty for which, in Georgia, is death.

IN NEWT GINGRICH’S WORLD ADULTERY IS PATRIOTIC AND ONE PLUS ONE PLUS ONE EQUALS TWO

John Rafferty

The former Speaker of the House and far-right faux intellectual who railed against a Democratic “culture of corruption” in the early 90s and demanded the impeachment of adulterer Bill Clinton at the same time he was cheating on his own second wife (no, wait, not wife), has settled down with his third (no, second) wife and with Roman Catholicism.

Here’s how the once and once-again GOP presidential hopeful explained his past serial adulteries to Christian Broadcasting Network’s David Brody on March 8 at the Iowa Faith and Freedom Coalition gathering:

“There’s no question at times of my life, partially driven by how passionately I felt about this country, that I worked far too hard and things happened in my life that were not appropriate.”

Aha! It was his passionate dedication to America that caused “things” to “happen” – like cheating on his cancer-stricken first wife with his soon-to-be second wife (no, wait, not wife), and cheating on his M.S.-stricken second wife (no, wait, not wife) with his eventual third (no, second) wife. He

just couldn't compartmentalize his passions!

Now we know, and it's okay, Newt, we understand – “stuff happens.”

That third wife (*second*, goddammit!), Callista, has introduced once born-again-Baptist Newt to Catholicism, and to the all-forgiving Mother Church's concepts of the “remission of sins” and of – Oooh, yes! – annulment.

Presto converto! Newt is now a Catholic, his erstwhile second marriage is annulled and down the memory hole, so he's only been married twice, and therefore he and *second* wife Callista never committed adultery. See? Arithmetic and morality, hand in glove, like “love and marriage.”

And now Newt can get on with the country's business, i.e., campaigning far to the religious right of any and all other contenders on “morals” and “values” issues, and in particular against “secularists,” “secular humanists,” “atheists” and “secular atheists” (sic). All of whom he excoriated in Iowa (site of the first 2012 Presidential caucus) as evils more dangerous to the country, about which he is so passionate, than the Nazis or Soviets ever were.

Makes sense in Newt World. Our world.

IS LANGUAGE IN DECLINE? MAYBE. AND MAYBE THAT'S A GOOD THING.

Robert Lane Greene

(Excerpted from *Schott's Vocab on NYTimes.com Opinion Today*, March 8. Mr. Greene's new book is *You Are What You Speak*.)

Lynne Truss wrote a little book about punctuation, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, which sold in the millions (to Ms. Truss's own surprise) and made her a household name (at least in language-nerd circles). What sold so many books, I imagine, was Truss's tone, never less than urgent and sometimes downright furious: nobody knows how to punctuate any more, and if we don't stop the rot we're doomed!

But Truss should be seen in historical perspective. She's convinced that English is in decline today. So was George Orwell, who complained that English was “in a bad way” in his 1946 essay “Politics and the English Language.” Half a century earlier, an eccentric Cornell professor given to gripping the lectern and repeating himself two or three times, forced his students to buy and read a guide to improving their writing. Half a century later, Will Strunk's “little book” was edited by E.B. White into the now-famous *Elements of Style*.

But this is by no means even a twentieth century phenomenon: in 1712 Jonathan Swift wrote that “our Language is extremely imperfect ... its daily Improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily Corruptions.”

Lynn Truss, rather than having discovered a pressing new problem, is heiress to a centuries-long tradition of declinism. Millenniums-long, if you count other languages: Cicero complained that the Latin he heard around him was “disgraceful” in the first century B.C.

Could the sticklers be on to something? One thing is clear: language is always changing. But educated people,

and especially language pundits, cherish the traditional language they learned in their education. Change *must* be bad, they reckon, because the language they once learned in school was good. The logic doesn't work, though; when a good thing changes it can become another good thing. Latin didn't become grunting and gobbledygook over centuries of change that Cicero decried: it became French, Italian and the other Romance languages.

Perhaps the sticklers are on to something in another vein, though. To many of them, language today, even formal language, seems so slovenly. Once upon a time, politicians and other leading figures buttoned up their English in its Sunday best for public occasions. Speeches were an opportunity to show mastery of formal rhetoric. At the turn of the last century, William Jennings Bryan, known as a populist no less, could say “The humblest citizen in all the land when clad in the armor of a righteous cause is stronger than all the whole hosts of error that they can bring.” Try to imagine Sarah Palin complaining about “all the hosts of error” of the Obama administration. We now value spontaneity and authenticity rather than elaboration and polish. For some, this is decline. For others, change.

Finally, I think there's a third thing sticklers misinterpret. They assume that language knowledge is getting worse because they're seeing so much more language that seems incompetent to them, from the apostrophes that drive Lynne Truss bananas (“tomato's on sale”) to teen text-speak (“UR 2 KEWL”) that so many parents hate. But in fact, seeing more of this kind of thing could actually indicate the *opposite* of what sticklers think.

Illiteracy has fallen from one in five people to almost nonexistent over a century and a bit. But “illiteracy” clearly isn't a single on-or-off switch. It's not just “you can read and write or you can't.” Literacy is a continuum of skills. Basic education now reaches virtually all Americans. But many among the poorest have the weakest skills in formal English.

That combines with another fact: more people are writing than ever before. Even most of the poor today have cell phones and internet. When they text or scribble on Facebook, they're *writing*. We easily forget that this is something that farmhands and the urban poor almost never did in centuries past. They lacked the time and means even if they had the education.

So a bigger proportion of Americans than ever before write sometimes, or even frequently, maybe daily. Naturally that means more people are writing with poor grammar and mechanics. Education is universal, and every texter and Facebooker is a writer. A century ago, a nation of 310 million engaged with the written word on a daily basis was unthinkable. Now its uneven results are taken as proof by some that language skills are in decline. That is far from obvious. We may just be seeing more of language's real-world diversity – dialect, nonstandard grammar and all – in written form, whereas 150 years ago those same people would never write.

That's something to celebrate, not to complain about.

SHSNY CALENDAR: APRIL - JUNE 2011

**SHSNY DAY OF REASON CELEBRATION
BRUNCH/LECTURE/DISCUSSION
SUNDAY, MAY 1, at 12 Noon, at
PETE'S TAVERN, 129 East 18 Street (at Irving Place)
with guest speaker
TOM FLYNN
Executive Director, Council for Secular Humanism,
and Editor, *Free Inquiry Magazine*, on
"WHO ARE THESE DOUBTERS, ANYWAY?
THE DEMOGRAPHY OF UNBELIEF"**

We've seen the various religion polls and the reported percentages of unbelievers – and the polls vary widely. Which surveys are reliable? In an illustrated presentation Tom Flynn explores how sociologists and pollsters have measured religious belief and unbelief from the mid-twentieth century to today. What do polls on religion really mean (e.g., how many "no religious preference" people are really atheists?).



Proclaim and celebrate the National Day of Reason (not prayer) at historic Pete's Tavern, enjoy a sumptuous (and reasonable) brunch, and get involved with a fascinating talk.

Brunch is \$25

for your choice of 11 entrees, one drink (Bloody Mary, Mimosa, etc.), coffee or tea, including all taxes and tips.

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PLANNING AHEAD

Holidays, double bookings and other screwups and disasters aside, the usual monthly schedule of SHSNY events is:

Book Club: First Thursday
at the Muhlenberg Library.

Movie Night: Second Monday
at Stone Creek Lounge.

Brunch: Third Sunday
at BXL East Bistro.

Great Lectures: Fourth Tuesday
at Stone Creek Lounge.

SUNDAY, APR 14, 3:00 pm

BEING GOOD: A PUBLIC DIALOGUE ON MORALITY

CFI-NYC's Michael De Dora and Fox News contributor Father Jonathan Moris debate: "What makes a person moral?"

\$5 at the door (CFI members free) at Tishman Auditorium at NYU (Vanderbilt Hall), 40 Washington Square South. Info: www.centerforinquiry.net/nyc/events

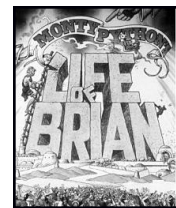
**MONDAY, APRIL 4, 7:00 p.m.
SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)
"MONTY PYTHON'S
LIFE OF BRIAN"**

Celebrate both Pass-over and Easter with the Pythons in this hilarious send-up of the New Testament. Born on the original Christmas Day in the stable next door to Jesus, clueless Brian (Graham Chapman) grows up to stumble into a Pythonically anarchic anti-Roman group and is hailed by a mob as the Messiah. Tried before a lisping Pontius Pilate (Michael Palin, silly, of course), he winds up on Calvary, where Eric Idle, also on a cross, leads all the crucified in a tuneful, whistling rendition of "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life."

Maniacally funny.

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.

Check out the menu and prices at www.stonecreeknyc.com



SUNDAY, APRIL 10, 12 NOON OUR MONTHLY BRUNCH GET-TOGETHER

at BXL East, 210 East 51 St.

We'll meet at Noon at our new favorite bistro just east of 3rd Avenue, for outstanding Belgian fare, with dishes ranging from \$7 to \$16, and prix-fixe Sunday Brunch (including a drink) for \$18. Check it out at bxlcafe.pgraphic.com/

Everyone interested in getting together with 15-20 or more like-minded humanists and rationalists for good grub (huge selection of beers!) and lively talk in a charming East-side setting is welcome.

Bring friends!

May brunch: 5/15

SHSNY CALENDAR: APRIL - JUNE 2011

GREAT LECTURES

TUESDAY, APRIL 26, 7 p.m.

"THE ATHEISM TAPES"

ARTHUR MILLER

**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**

"Fascinating" – and even "hugely entertaining" – are the best words to describe the short interviews of six of today's leading men of letters and science conducted by playwright and atheist Jonathan Miller for this 2004 BBC series.

Great Lectures leader Bob Murtha has presented the DVDs and led the after-viewing discussions of three of those interviews so far: of philosophers Colin McGinn and Daniel Dennett, and of physicist Steven Weinberg, each discussing his intellectual journey, and offering illuminating analyses of nontheism from his individual perspective.



This month: Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Arthur Miller (*All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, and more), whose 70-year career has included youthful communism, battles with McCarthyism, and marriage to Marilyn Monroe. Should be "fascinating."

To come: theologian Denys Turner and, of course, Richard Dawkins.

**Great Lectures Night is FREE.
Part 5: May 24.**

SCHEDULES CHANGE! CHECK FOR UPDATES

at 212-308-2165 ... on our website at www.shsny.org and/or www.meetup.com/shsny-org/

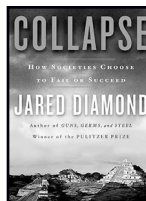
SHSNY BOOK CLUB

TUESDAY, APRIL 14, 6:30 pm

**Muhlenberg Branch Library
209 West 23 St. (at 7th Av.)**

***COLLAPSE: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*
by Jared Diamond**

In a follow-up to his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (Editor Elaine Lynn's January book club choice), UCLA



Professor of Geography Diamond explores the geographic and environmental reasons why some human populations have flourished and others have died. *Collapse* examines why ancient societies, including the Anasazi of America's Southwest, the Maya, the Easter Islanders, and the Viking colonies of Greenland, as well as modern ones such as Rwanda, have fallen apart – and looks closely at some at-risk communities right here in America. Montana, once one of the richest states, now ranks among the poorest, having squandered its nonrenewable mineral resources and over-logged its forests. *Paperback*

"Diamond's most influential gift may be his ability to write about geopolitical and environmental systems in ways that don't just educate and provoke, but entertain."

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.

May Book Club

Thursday, May 12, 6:30 p.m.

at the Muhlenberg Library

THE PRINCIPAL

UPANISHADS:

The Essential Philosophical Foundation of Hinduism (Sacred Wisdom)

The Upanishads, the sacred writings of Hinduism, predate recorded history. Since they were "revealed" to the Rishis of the Vedic civilization some 5,000 to 10,000 years ago, many have come to regard them as perhaps the greatest of all the books in the history of world religions, the work that contains the kernel of the mystical and philosophical truths that form the basis of all religious thinking today. An \$11 hardcover edition is translated by Alan Jacobs, with an introduction by David Frawley.

June Book Club

Thursday, June 2, 6:30 p.m.

at the Muhlenberg Library

TALIBAN: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia (2nd Edition)

by Ahmed Rashid

"The single best book available on the Taliban." Ahmed Rashid is a Pakistani journalist who has personally interviewed many of the Taliban's leaders (and whose rage against them comes to the surface). Originally published before September 11, 2001 (and updated in this 2d Edition), *Taliban* is essential reading for all who hope to understand the aftermath of that black day. It includes details on how and why the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, the government's oppression of ordinary citizens (especially women), the heroin trade, oil intrigue, and bin Laden's sinister rise to power. — *Paperback*

PEEK

Newsletter of the Sexual Humorist Society of New York

April 1, 2011

In keeping with an ancient tradition (2007), on this date we put aside weightier considerations (church/state, war/peace, mayo/Miracle Whip) to make the connection between two broadcasters and to introduce a troubled teen, but first, to announce the news story of the millenium. – JR

MIRAMAX, DREAMWORKS, AOL, GOOGLE, NEWS CORP, MICROSOFT, CITICORP AND GOD INK PACT TO PRODUCE "SECOND COMING"

HOLLYWOOD, CA – In a celebrity-studded press conference here April 1, top executives of the world's leading media corporations announced the imminent Second Coming of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

"We're all thrilled that we've been entrusted by God Himself with this blockbuster property," said Harvey Weinstein, head of Miramax Pictures. "There is no doubt in my mind that this will be the biggest media event of 2012."

"2012, 2013, whenever – we're not committing to any actual launch, or should I say 'Return' date, yet," interrupted Rupert Murdoch of News Corp. He was joined at the podium by Steven Spielberg of Dreamworks, who noted that a multi-media event of this "historic magnitude" will require immense preparation, "and right now we're tied up in post-production on 'Toy Story Six'."

Although The Almighty Himself was not present (scheduling conflict), Bill Gates announced that God has agreed that Jesus will use Microsoft's new WindowsPU format while on Earth. When a reporter questioned why the most vocal participants in the conference announcing the return of Jesus and the validation of the Christian religion and its eschatology were two Jews, Weinstein and Spielberg; a believer in *feng shui*, Murdoch; and an atheist, Gates, Mr. Gates responded, "What's your point?"

Last to speak at the meeting was Ross D. Norbert, Citicorp 2d Vice President for Intellectual Properties and Media Relations, who insisted that, "Citicorp is investing \$80 million in naming rights," and that the banking mega-corporation will "vigorously protect, in court if necessary," its copyright name, "The Citicorp Second Coming." Or, in brief in headlines, tweets and texts, "CitiComing." – JR

GAY TEEN WORRIED HE MIGHT BE CHRISTIAN

(Excerpted from The Onion - 1/12/10)

LOUISVILLE, KY – At first glance, high school senior Lucas Faber, 18, seems like any ordinary gay teen. He's a member of his school's swing choir, enjoys shopping at the mall, and has sex with other males his age. But lately, a growing

worry has begun to plague him, a gnawing feeling that, deep down, he may be a fundamentalist Christian.

"I don't know what's happening to me," Faber admitted to reporters. "It's like I get these weird urges sometimes, and suddenly I'm tempted to attend a megachurch service, or censor books in the school library. Even the thought of organizing a CD-bonfire turns me on. I feel so confused."

Faber's sock drawer is home to a number of illicit magazines he has secretly accepted from street preachers. "It's like I don't even know who I am anymore," the frightened teenager said. "Keeping this secret obsession with radical right-wing dogma hidden away from my parents, teachers, and schoolmates is tearing me apart."

"A week ago, I was *this* close to picketing an abortion clinic," the mortified teenager said, his eyes welling up with tears. "I know it's wrong, but I wanted so badly to do it anyway. I even made one of those signs with photos of dead fetuses and hid it in my closet. I felt so ashamed, yet, at the same time, it was all strangely titillating."

According to Faber, his first experience with evangelical Christianity was not all that different from other gays his age. "Sure, I looked at the Book of Leviticus once or twice – everybody has," Faber said. "We all experiment a little bit with that stuff when we're growing up. But I was just a kid. I didn't think it meant anything."

GLENN BECK DEMANDS POSTHUMOUS PARDON FOR JOSEPH GOEBBELS

(Inspired by "Defiant Labour MPs Stand by Goebbels" in *The Daily Mash*, 10/10/10)

Defying his sponsors and his Fox News bosses, commentator Glenn Beck has called for an international tribunal to "clear Joseph Goebbels' name."

"I learned everything I know about broadcasting from studying Reich Chancellor Goebbels," Beck said April 1st, "and I believe the way the so-called 'winners' of World War II have dealt with him was very unbalanced. They're riding roughshod over his right to appeal, just because he's dead."

"This is about democracy," he continued. "It's about making sure that people are able to say whatever they want regardless of how true it happens to be." – JR

Here endeth 2011 PEEK. April fool!

WHY ARE WE SMARTER THAN CHIMPS? WE'RE MORE SOCIAL, LESS PROMISCUOUS

Nicholas Wade

(Excerpted from "New View of How Humans Moved Away From Apes" in The New York Times, 3/10/2011)

Anthropologists studying living hunter-gatherers have radically revised their view of how early human societies were structured, yielding new insights into how humans evolved away from apes.

Early human groups, according to the new view, would have been more cooperative and willing to learn from one another than the chimpanzees from which human ancestors split about five million years ago. The advantages of cooperation and social learning then propelled the incipient human groups along a different evolutionary path.

Anthropologists have assumed until now that hunter-gatherer bands consist of people fairly closely related to one another, much as chimpanzee groups do, and that kinship is a main motive for cooperation within the group. Natural selection, which usually promotes only selfish behavior, can reward this kind of cooperative behavior, called kin selection, because relatives contain many of the same genes.

A team of anthropologists led by Kim S. Hill and Robert S. Walker analyzed data from 32 living hunter-gatherer peoples and found that the members of a band are not highly related. Fewer than 10 percent of people in a typical band are close relatives, meaning parents, children or siblings, they report in *Science*.

Michael Tomasello, a psychologist at the Max Planck Institute, said the survey provided a strong foundation for the view that cooperative behavior, as distinct from the fierce aggression between chimp groups, was the turning point that shaped human evolution. If kin selection was much weaker than thought, "then other factors like reciprocity and safeguarding one's reputation have to be stronger to make cooperation work."

The finding corroborates an influential new view of early human origins advanced by Bernard Chapais, a primatologist, in his book *Primeval Kinship*. Dr. Chapais showed how a simple development, the emergence of a pair bond between male and female, would have allowed people to recognize their relatives, something chimps can do only to a limited extent. When family members dispersed to other bands, they would be recognized and neighboring bands would cooperate instead of fighting to the death as chimp groups do.

In chimpanzee societies, males stay where they are born and females disperse at puberty to neighboring groups, thus avoiding incest. The males, with many male relatives in their group, have a strong interest in cooperating within the group because they are defending both their own children and those of their brothers and

other relatives.

Human hunter-gatherer societies have been assumed to follow much the same pattern, with female dispersal being the general, though not universal, rule and with members of bands therefore being closely related to one another. But Dr. Hill and Dr. Walker find that though it is the daughters who move in many hunter-gatherer societies, the sons leave the home community in many others. In fact, the human pattern of residency is so variable that it counts as a pattern in itself, one that the researchers say is not known for any species of ape or monkey. Dr. Chapais calls this "bilocality."

Modern humans have lived as hunter-gatherers for more than 90 percent of their existence as a species. If living hunter-gatherers are typical of ancient ones, the new data about their social pattern has considerable bearing on early human evolution. On a genetic level, the finding that members of a band are not highly interrelated means that "inclusive fitness cannot explain extensive cooperation in hunter-gatherer bands," the researchers write. Some evolutionary biologists believe that natural selection can favor groups of people, not just individuals, but the idea is hotly disputed.

Dr. Hill said group selection, too, could not operate on hunter-gatherer bands because individuals move too often between them, which undoes any selective effect. But hunter-gatherers probably lived as tribes split into many small bands of 30 or so people. Group selection could possibly act at the level of the tribe, Dr. Hill said, meaning that tribes with highly cooperative members would prevail over those that were less cohesive, thus promoting genes for cooperation.

The new data on early human social structure furnishes the context in which two distinctive human behaviors emerged, those of cooperation and social learning, Dr. Hill said. A male chimp may know in his lifetime just 12 other males, all from his own group. But a hunter-gatherer, because of cooperation between bands, may interact with a thousand individuals in his tribe. Because humans are unusually adept at social learning, including copying useful activities from others, a large social network is particularly effective at spreading and accumulating knowledge. ...

Dr. Chapais said that the new findings "validate and enrich" the model of human social evolution proposed in his book. "If you take the promiscuity that is the main feature of chimp society, and replace it with pair bonding, you get many of the most important features of human society," he said. ...

But this cooperation did not mean that everything was peaceful. The bands were just components of tribes, between which warfare may have been intense. "Males could remain as competitive and xenophobic as before at the between-tribe level."

SLOUCHING TOWARD “JERSEY SHORE”

Leonard Pitts

(Reprinted from “Losing the race for intelligence,” Mr. Pitt’s Op-Ed column in The Miami Herald, 2/2/2011)

ITEM: *Only 28 percent of high school science teachers consistently follow National Research Council guidelines encouraging them to present students with evidence of evolution. Thirteen percent “explicitly advocate creationism or intelligent design.”*

These are among the findings of Penn State political scientists Michael Berkman and Eric Plutzer after examining data from a representative survey of 926 high school biology teachers. Writing in the Jan. 28 issue of *Science* magazine, they report that most science teachers — 60 percent — cheat controversy by such stratagems as telling students it does not matter if they “believe” in evolution, so long as they understand enough to pass a test. Or they teach evolution on a par with creationism and encourage students to make up their own minds.

Once upon a time, there lived a stupid giant. The giant had not always been stupid. Or, perhaps it is more accurate to say the giant had once revered intelligence, reason and the byproducts thereof. Indeed, the giant was renowned for an ingenuity and standard of living that made it the envy of the world.

But much of the world did more than envy the giant. Much of the world admired and respected it. Its basic decency, along with its strength and intelligence, set it apart. There came a time, however, when, though the giant retained its strength and arguably even its decency, it lost its intelligence.

No one can say exactly how and when the loss occurred. There was no great blast of thunder and lightning to herald it, no sudden instant when the giant’s intelligence plummeted dramatically from the instant before.

No, stupidity crept over the giant with the stealth of twilight, a product less of one abrupt moment than of a thousand moments of complacency, of resting on laurels, of allowing curiosity to be teased and bullied out of bright children, of dumbing down textbooks so kids could get better grades with less work, of using “elite” like a curse word. And of behaving as if knowing things, and being able to extrapolate from and otherwise make critical use of, the things one knows, was a betrayal of some fundamental human authenticity — some need to “keep it real.”

Stupidity stole over the giant until it could no longer tell science from faith, or conventional wisdom from actual wisdom and in any event, valued ideological purity above them all. Stupidity snaked over the giant until science teachers shrank from teaching science, history books contained history that wasn’t history, late-night comics got easy laughs from people on the street who could not say when the War of 1812 was fought, political leaders told outright lies with blithe smiles and no fear of being caught and you would not have been surprised to hear that someone had fixed mathematics, so that 2+2 could now equal 17, thus preserving the all-important self esteem of second-grade kids.

Some regarded the giant’s stupidity as a danger. They reasoned that when one is so big that one’s merest movement or slightest utterance affects the entire world, it’s a good idea if those movements and utterances are animated by something more than autonomic function.

Others saw the giant’s stupidity as an opportunity. They learned eagerly until they surpassed the giant’s intellect. They grew until they rivaled the giant’s size and strength. They did not attempt to match the giant’s decency. They considered decency a hindrance.

And the giant? It sat on its haunches in the mud as the world changed about it and new giants rose and shook their fists. The giant did not notice. It was watching “Jersey Shore” on MTV.

And it lived obliviously ever after.

WHY DO INTELLIGENT RIGHT-WINGERS DENY THE SCIENCE OF CLIMATE CHANGE?

Naomi Klein

(Excerpted from Amy Goodman’s “Democracy Now” column on altnet.org 3/9/2011)

Something is going on on the right, and I think we need to understand what that is. Why is climate change seen as such a threat? I don’t believe it’s an unreasonable fear. I think it’s unreasonable to believe that scientists are making up the science. They’re not. It’s not a hoax. But actually, climate change really is a profound threat to a great many things that right-wing ideologues believe in. So, in fact, if you really wrestle with the implications of the science and what real climate action would mean, here are just a few examples of what it would mean.

It would mean upending the whole free trade agenda, because it would mean that we would have to localize our economies, because we have the most energy-inefficient trade system that you could imagine. And this is the legacy of the free trade era. So, this has been a signature policy of the right, pushing globalization and free trade. That would have to be reversed.

You would have to deal with inequality. You would have to redistribute wealth, because this is a crisis that was created in the North, and the effects are being felt in the South. So, on the most basic, basic, “you broke it, you bought it,” polluter-pays principle, you would have to redistribute wealth, which is also against their ideology.

You would have to regulate corporations. You simply would have to. I mean, any serious climate action has to intervene in the economy. You would have to subsidize renewable energy, which also breaks their worldview.

You would have to have a really strong United Nations, because individual countries can’t do this alone. You absolutely have to have a strong international architecture.

So when you go through this, you see, it challenges everything that they believe in. So they’re choosing to disbelieve it, because it’s easier to deny the science than to say, “OK, I accept that my whole worldview is going to fall

apart," that we have to have massive investments in public infrastructure, that we have to reverse free trade deals, that we have to have huge transfers of wealth from the North to the South. Imagine actually contending with that. It's a lot easier to deny it.

But what I see is that the green groups, a lot of the big green groups, are also in a kind of denial, because they want to pretend that this isn't about politics and economics, and say, "Well, you can just change your light bulb. And no, it won't really disrupt. You can have green capitalism." And they're not really wrestling with the fact that this is about economic growth. This is about an economic model that needs constant and infinite growth on a finite planet.

So we really are talking about some deep transformations of our economy if we're going to deal with climate change. And we need to talk about it.

DO HALF OF IOWA REPUBLICANS REALLY BELIEVE OBAMA IS A MUSLIM?

Tyler Kingkade

(Excerpted from *WashingtonIndependent.com*, 2/8/2011)

Live on Sean Hannity's program, pollster Frank Luntz hosted a focus group of Iowa Republican caucus-goers, gauging their reaction to President Barack Obama's interview with Fox News' Bill O'Reilly.

After a question by O'Reilly about the Muslim Brotherhood's role in transitioning a government for Egypt, Luntz began to ask the Iowa Republicans why the meters showed them all having such a negative reaction to Obama's answers.

One woman said she believed the president's religious convictions guide his policies. When Luntz asked her to clarify, she said, "I believe that he is a Muslim." Luntz then asked the rest of the group how many believed Obama is Muslim. About a dozen, or nearly half, raised their hands.

"Now do you understand the implications of what you're saying here?" Luntz asked. "What the media's going to say about this group and about the Iowa Caucus voters in the future? Do you realize what you're opening up here?"

After that comment, several others of the focus group said they believed Obama's religious belief is "liberalism," which they said was "the most intolerant of all."

Although it is not true that all conservatives are stupid people, it is true that most stupid people are conservative. – *John Stuart Mill*

MOHAMMED BAKES JESUS A GOOD FRIDAY CRUCIVERSARY CAKE

(Transcribed from *jesusandmo.net*, 3/21/08)

Mohammed (bearing a cake with crucifix-shaped candle): Happy Cruciversary, Jesus!

Jesus (under covers, in bed): Leave me alone.

Mo: Why do you never want to celebrate the day you died painfully and humiliatingly nailed to a lump of wood?

Jesus: Go figure.

Mo: Look, I made you a cake with one of those candles that comes alight again when you blow it out – it's symbolic.

Jesus: A cruciversary cake. Gee, thanks.

Mo: I used *self-rising* flour, and a *recycled* paper plate.

Jesus: I'm not getting up til Sunday.

CREAM OF BIBLE SOUP

Laura Miller

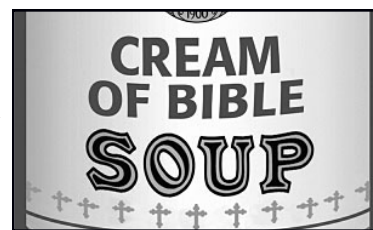
(Excerpted from "The Rise and Fall of the Bible":

Rethinking the Good Book, on *salon.com*, 2//13/2011)

In his new book, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book*, religion professor Timothy Beal describes all the angst and doubt that Bible reading provoked in him during his youth, as well as the frustration many American Christians experience as a result of their own encounters with the book. This doesn't prevent them from buying truckloads of the things – Beal notes that "the average Christian household owns nine Bibles and purchases at least one new Bible every year" – but actually reading them is another matter. Beal believes that's because today's Christians are seeking a certainty in their holy book that simply isn't there, and shouldn't be.

The Rise and Fall of the Bible is a succinct, clear and fascinating look at two phenomena: what Beal calls "biblical consumerism" – in which buying Bibles and Bible-related publications and products substitutes for more meaningful encounters with the foundational text of Western Civilization – and the history of how the book came to be assembled.

The latter story, albeit in a severely mangled form, came as a revelation to many readers of Dan Brown's bestselling novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. Beal, who teaches an introductory course in biblical literature



at Case Western Reserve University, estimates that more than half of the students who come to his classes know more about the Bible from Brown's conspiracy-crazed potboiler than from "actual biblical texts."

For anyone with more than a passing familiarity with biblical history, however, the historical portions of *The Rise and Fall of the Bible* will be old news. The thing is, many Americans – especially those raised in the less reflective Christian denominations – know nothing about how the Bible was compiled. That's why so many of them were amazed to learn from *The Da Vinci Code* that the Old and New Testaments are assemblages of texts written at different times by different authors, most of whom were not eyewitnesses to the events they describe. In Brown's crackpot version, the Emperor Constantine gets cast as the arch-villain, ordaining that conservative texts be officially canonized, while more politically radical (and less misogynistic) works got kicked out of the scripture clubhouse. The real story is even more unstable than Brown's inaccurate potted version, with dozens of official

and semiofficial variations (including or excluding certain marginal books) produced in the centuries after the death of Jesus. ...

Some of the most interesting chapters in *The Rise and Fall of the Bible* explore the world of Bibles created for specific subcultures and needs: the manly Metal Bible and Duct Tape Bible, kicky handbag/Bible combos and special editions geared toward teenagers, African-American women and so on. These can contain as much as 50 percent “supplemental” material, “explaining” the scripture according to the taste of the intended audience. Then there are Biblezines, publications in which articles about how to grill steaks or talk to girls (in the case of a Biblezine for boys) share the page with biblical quotations. Well-meaning older relatives give this material to young Christians, hoping it will make the Bible itself seem more “readable.” Beal thinks the kids just wind up reading the articles and skipping the quotations. He compares Biblezines to the “sweeter and more colorful roll-ups, punches, sauces and squirtable foams that I buy for my kids’ lunches” in lieu of the unprocessed fresh fruit they refuse to eat. At least you can tell yourself you’re giving them fruit.

Even more insidious, in Beal’s eyes, is the trend over the past couple of centuries away from word-for-word translations of the Bible and toward “functional equivalence” and “meaning driven” translations. These considerably fiddled-with versions iron out the wrinkles and perplexities in the ancient texts and nudge them closer toward the advice, directives and “values” so many people expect from their Bible. Beal argues that the Bible industry resorts to this

sort of thing precisely because the Bible doesn’t offer cut-and-dried guidance – or Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth, as one popular modern acronym would have it. ...

Beal thinks the current boom in biblical consumerism amounts to a “distress crop,” the last great efflorescence of the old authoritative ideal before people move on and learn to embrace biblical ambiguity. I’m not so sure.

FLOCK Billy Collins

(Reprinted from his book, *The Trouble With Poetry*)

*It has been calculated that each copy of the Gutenberg Bible ...
I required the skins of 300 sheep.*

I can see them squeezed into the holding pen
behind the stone building
where the printing press is housed,
all of them squirming around
to find a little room
and looking so much alike
it would be nearly impossible
to count them,
and there is no telling
which one will carry the news
that the Lord is a shepherd,
one of the few things they already know.

Correction: As Anton Spivak has pointed out, humanist-humorist Steve Allen, who coined the word “dumbth,” died in 2000, not 1990, as purported in March PIQUE.

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