

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

July, 2011

Sumer is icumen in, but before the weather gets too hot, let's look again at climate change (not "global warming," which gives the idiots an excuse to horse-laugh every time snows fall). Excuses? We consider the Catholic Church's latest, then visit evangelicals in our own public schools. We revisit end-of-life issues, entertain another epiphany, nominate a foregone conclusion for a Dumbth, and suggest a new award. But first, let's celebrate Independence Day. See you in September. – JR

NO PIQUE IN AUGUST

The Editor, as well as all our local and national staff, and all our correspondents and stringers in all our bureaus worldwide, will be on vacation.

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: "A PROFOUNDLY SECULAR EVENT"

Gordon S. Wood

(Excerpted from *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815; Chapter 16, "Republican Religion."*)

The American Revolution broke many of the intimate ties that had traditionally linked religion and government, especially with the Anglican Church, and turned religion into a voluntary affair, a matter of individual free choice. But contrary to the experience of eighteenth-century Europeans, whose rationalism intended to erode their allegiance to religion, religion in America did not decline with the spread of enlightenment and liberty. Indeed, as Tocqueville was soon to observe, religion in America gained in authority precisely because of its separation from governmental power.

At the time of the Revolution few could have predicted such an outcome. Occurring as it did in an enlightened and liberal age, the Revolution seemed to have little place for religion. Although some of the founders, such as Samuel Adams, John Jay, Patrick Henry, Elias Boudinot, and Roger Sherman, were fairly devout Christians, most leading founders were not deeply or passionately religious, and few of them led much of a spiritual life. As enlightened gentlemen addressing each other in learned societies, many of the leading gentry abhorred "that gloomy superstition disseminated by ignorant illiberal creatures" and looked forward to the day when "the phantom of darkness will be

dispelled by the rays of science, and the bright charms of rising civilization." Most of them, at best, only passively believed in organized Christianity and, at worst, privately scorned and mocked it. Although few of them were outright deists, that is, believers in a clockmaker God who had nothing to do with revelation and simply allowed the world to run in accord with natural forces, most, like South Carolina historian David Ramsay, did tend to describe the Christian church as "the best temple of the reason." Like the principal sources of their Whig liberalism – whether the philosopher John Locke or the Commonwealth publicists John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon writing as "Cato" – the Founders viewed religious enthusiasm as a kind of madness, the conceit "of a warmed or overweening brain." In all of his writings Washington rarely mentioned Christ, and, in fact, he scrupulously avoided testifying to a belief in the Christian gospel. Many of the Revolutionary leaders were proto-Unitarians, denying miracles and the divinity of Jesus. Even puritanical John Adams thought that the argument for Christ's divinity was an "awful blasphemy" in this new enlightened age.

Jefferson's hatred for the clergy and organized religion knew no bounds. He believed that members of the "priestcraft" were always in alliance with despots against liberty. "To this effect," he said – privately, of course, not publicly – "they have perverted the purest religion ever preached to man, into mystery and jargon unintelligible to all mankind and therefore the safer engine for their purposes." The Trinity was nothing but "Abracadabra" and "hocus-pocus ... so incomprehensible to the human mind that no candid man can say he has any idea of it." Ridicule, he said was the only weapon to be used against it.

Most of the principal Founders seem to be mainly interested in curbing religious passion and promoting liberty.

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They attached to their Revolutionary state constitutions of 1776 ringing declarations of religious freedom, like that of Virginia's, stating that "all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience." And they used this enlightened faith in liberty of conscience to justify disestablishing the Anglican Church everywhere. ...

With many of the Founders holding liberal and enlightened convictions, politics in the Revolutionary era tended to overwhelm religious matters. During the Revolution political writings, not religious tracts, came to dominate the press, and the clergy lost some of their elevated status to lawyers. The Revolution destroyed churches, interrupted ministerial training, and politicized people's political thinking. The older established churches were unequipped to handle a rapidly growing and mobile population. The proportion of college graduates entering the ministry fell off, and the number of church members declined drastically. It has been estimated that scarcely one in twenty Americans was a formal member of a church. All this has led more than one historian to conclude that "at its heart, the Revolution was a profoundly secular event."

THE DANGEROUS IDEA OF A "CHRISTIAN NATION"

Stuart Whatley

(Excerpted from "The dangers of seeing America as a 'Christian nation'" on CSMonitor.com, 7/20/2010)

Christian traditionalists see American freedom as derived from Christian faith. That flies in the face of the historical record – and it distorts today's political debates.

With a creeping rise in secularists and nonbelievers today, some American Christian traditionalists see a politically existential threat. One is reminded of John Kennedy Toole's cantankerously amusing character, Ignatius J. Reilly, in *A Confederacy of Dunces* – combative towards modern culture and nostalgic for the halcyon days of Thomas Aquinas. This traditionalist camp is deeply perturbed by new threads in the social fabric and insistent that America is a Christian nation – demographically as well as politically.

This tension transcends a historical argument about the roots of American liberty. It goes to the heart of some of today's most trenchant political debates, such as same-sex marriage, prayers at town meetings, US foreign policy toward Israel, and end-of-life issues germane to healthcare reform. Is America really a Christian nation? Demographics give a clear answer. In 2008, 76 percent of Americans called themselves "Christian." That's down 10 points since 1990, but still an overwhelming and defining majority. Meanwhile, just 1.6 percent of Americans professed to be agnostics or atheists, more than double the amount in 1990.

History gives a more-muddled answer. The United States' political origin as a "Christian nation" is a far more contentious issue, often reduced to each side drawing lines

in the sand with fanciful single-factor readings of complex past events. A prime example comes from Jonah Goldberg, writing in the latest issue of *Reason*: "Our constitutional order rests on the conviction that we are endowed by our creator with certain rights. Both the abolitionist and civil rights movements were religious in nature."

Mr. Goldberg's oblique claim belongs to those who see American freedom as a Christian brand – available for all, but religiously trademarked nonetheless. But those who state outright that Christianity was the driving force behind the settling and political conception of the United States rely on contrived historicism.

There are insidious intellectual implications to maintaining such a position: namely, the view that Christianity itself plays a defining, prerequisite role not just in the character and culture of America, but in its philosophical embrace of individual liberty as well.

A hefty segment of American Christians believes that its specific version of God is the inspiration for all men's conception of freedom. If the United States is a wholly Christian nation then the syllogism follows that the liberty it affords to all is specifically Christian-furnished.

Indeed, the Declaration of Independence does make quick mention of God and a Creator, but not one of its 27 specific grievances has anything to do with religious liberty, and the nature of that "Creator" is hopelessly vague. Most everyone for whom rights were secured at the drafting and signing of the United States Constitution was a Christian, but that document makes no mention of any god. And historically, some of the first settlers to America – Christian separatist pilgrims – were indeed seeking religious liberty, but they arrived at Plymouth 13 years after European bullionist policies had already sent the Virginia Company to settle Jamestown.

So, did Christian culture or religiosity alone derive American notions of liberty? Christianity has long been a mercurial political instrument used to justify the rule of despots and democrats alike, depending on the century. Of course, the "Christian nation" argument also asserts that, despite its past shortcomings, it is Christian ecumenism itself that advises individual liberty and equal rights. Indeed, an important facet of Christian belief is free will under God. This seems to align with previous understandings of freedom, which often centered on individual agency.

Aristotle defined it quite simply as, "to live as one wants." Unfortunately, Christianity failed through much of its history to extend this position beyond personal, household religiosity. By contrast, at its outset, the notion of American freedom was predominantly political and populist in nature. As the 20th-century philosopher John Dewey observed, "the freedom for which our forefathers fought was primarily freedom from a fairly gross and obvious form of oppression, that of arbitrary political power exercised from a distant center."

With this in mind, Dewey points out that American freedom at the time of the Revolution could essentially be boiled down to a libertarian skepticism of government

generally, and the right to vote.

This formulation was not without complications. Dewey saw freedom as a moving target – “an eternal goal [that] has to be forever struggled for and won anew.” Indeed, as Tocqueville realized early on, strict majoritarianism in the absence of effective government to safeguard individual liberties has just as much potential for tyranny as any other form of rule. Presumably, those in the majority who assert that the United States is a Christian nation prefer it this way. If they already see American freedom as derived from their own faith, then why shouldn’t they?

The dangerous implications of thinking in such a way should be obvious. A case in point is the Texas school board curriculum revisions, which recast American history in Christian terms and dangerously undermine accepted science. Because the Texas board is a parliamentary body ... comprised predominantly of traditionalist Christians, [their] deliberations fulfilled Dewey and Tocqueville’s warnings, as well as an observation from H.L. Mencken, who described American democracy as “a pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance.”

Seeing American freedom as Christian freedom sets the stage for political battles much larger than Texas school books and secular billboards. The historical debate over the Christianity or secularism of the Founders will continue to be caviled over ad infinitum. More urgent and insidious is the claim by members of one side that they have first dibs to the freedom all should equally enjoy.

**“COME OVER AND HELP US”
PURITAN FOREIGN POLICY, 1631 – 2012
Sarah Vowell**

(Excerpted from The Wordy Shipmates, itself excerpted on delanceyplace.com, April 20)

I concentrate on John Winthrop and his *Arbella* shipmates in the 1630s [because America is still] haunted by the Puritans’ vision of themselves as God’s chosen people, as a beacon of righteousness that all others are to admire. The most obvious and influential example of that mind-set is Winthrop’s sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity,” in which he calls on New England to be “as a city upon a hill.” The most ironic and entertaining example of that mind-set is the Massachusetts Bay Colony’s official seal. The seal, which the Winthrop fleet brought with them from England, pictures an Indian in a loincloth holding a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other. Words are coming out of his mouth. The Indian says, “Come over and help us.”

That is really what it says.

The worldview behind that motto – we’re here to help, whether you want our help or not – is the Massachusetts Puritans’ most enduring bequest to the future United States. And like everything the Puritans believed, it is derived from Scripture. In Acts 16, one night the Apostle Paul has a vision. In the vision, a Macedonian man appears and tells him, “Come over into Macedonia, and help us.” So Paul heads west. And so westward sails the *Arbella* in 1630.

And then one night almost three centuries later President William McKinley will pray to God and God will tell him to help the Filipinos by Christianizing them (even though they have been Catholics for two hundred years), “and the next morning,” he says, “I sent for the chief engineer of the War Department (our mapmaker) and told him to put the Philippines on the map of the United States.” So westward sail the gunboats toward Manila Bay.

And then in the 1960s, President John F. Kennedy, believing that the United States must “bear the burden ... of helping freedom defend itself,” invades Vietnam; otherwise, he explains, “if we stop helping them, they will become ripe for internal subversion and a Communist takeover.” So westward sail the aircraft carriers toward Saigon harbor.

And then, because the U.S. will keep on going west to help people until we’re going east, the warships and the F-17 stealth fighters hurry toward the Persian Gulf. On March 19, 2003, President George W. Bush announces that “American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to defend the world from grave danger.” Five days earlier, Vice President Dick Cheney appeared on *Meet the Press* and his words redrew the Massachusetts Bay Colony seal, replacing the Indian with a citizen of Baghdad, begging, “Come over and help us.” Of the American invasion, Cheney claimed, “My belief is that we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators.”

After all, we’re there to help.

**“PERFIDIOUS PROVERBS AND OTHER POEMS:
A SATIRICAL LOOK AT THE BIBLE”**

Philip Appleman

Reviewed by John Rafferty

Our own Phil Appleman has done it again. This new collection of poems (some old) by the award-winning poet, Darwin scholar and long-time SHSNY member, is a poetry lover’s and humanist’s delight.

Perfidious goes on sale this month (Humanity Books, ISBN 978-1-61614-385-5, paper, and ... -440-1, e-book), but the advance notices are great. Poet and *The Nation* columnist Katha Pollitt says:

“I love Philip Appleman’s witty and passionate takedowns of religion, God, and the nature that dooms us all – especially his updates on the Bible. If only he had been in on writing the original!”

Nice boost for a fellow poet, but no, I’d rather have Phil Appleman right here and now, conjuring images (and ideas) like this, in the closing lines of his poem, “Eve” ...

I didn’t ask
to be cursed with curiosity, I only wanted
the apple,
and of course that promise – to be
like gods. But then,
maybe we are like gods.
Maybe we’re all exactly like gods.
And maybe that’s our really original
sin.

WHY SARAH GETS A DUMBTH NOMINATION (BILL-O AND NEWT, TOO), BUT NOT RAND

John Rafferty

*"[Paul Revere]... warned, uh, the British that they weren't gonna be takin' away our arms, uh, by ringing those bells, and um, makin' sure as he's riding his horse through town to send those warning shots and bells that we were going to be sure and we were going to be free, and we were going to be armed."**

Regular readers of PIQUE undoubtedly thought, "Dumbth!" when they first heard or read the above Sarah Palin quote from her "family vacation" bus tour in New Hampshire on June 3. And they were right: the half-term ex-governor of Alaska, whom millions of Americans believe could or should be the next President of all fifty states, is our third Dumbth nominee of 2011.

But while Palin was confusing the recipients of Paul Revere's warnings, and making the American Revolution about gun rights rather than political independence, libertarian Senator Paul Rand of Kentucky did not earn a nomination for the following the week before:

"I'm not for profiling people on the color of their skin, or on their religion, but I would take into account where they've been traveling ... whether or not they've been going to radical political speeches by religious leaders. It wouldn't be that they are Islamic. But if someone is attending speeches from someone who is promoting the violent overthrow of our government, that's really an offense that we should be going after – they should be deported or put in prison."

Okay, why no Dumbth nomination for Sen. Paul, in spite of some readers' expectations? Because what he said wasn't counter-factual or clueless. His suggestion, to imprison or deport someone for merely attending a speech (even a curious bystander?) would be an outrageous double violation of the First Amendment (freedom of speech and freedom of assembly clauses). Wrong, mean-spirited, and subversive of our most basic freedoms. But not dumb.

Sarah Palin, on the other hand, again displayed her willful and woeful ignorance of American history, just as Newt Gingrich, who passes for an intellectual in some right-wing circles, won his third Dumbth nomination (PIQUE, May) for his logic-defying contention that the U.S. could

"... become a secular atheist country, potentially one dominated by radical Islamists."

And why Fox News' Bill O'Reilly garnered 2011's first Dumbth nomination (PIQUE, January) with his spectacularly stupid "proof" of why religion is not a scam:

"Tide goes in, tide goes out. ... It always comes in, and always goes out. You can't explain that."

See? It's not the nastiness, it's the stupidity!

*Thanks to Christine Rafferty for the impeccable transcription.



A call to conservatives.

There is no conspiracy at PIQUE to target only conservative public figures "who need to have their illogic pointed out." We liberals know we are too often just as prone to dumbth thinking. So please find—and send to editor@shsny.org—your best liberal gaffes (No, no Weiner jokes, please).

SHOULD WE HAVE A GOOD-GUY AWARD?

(Based on an article on salon.com, May 20, from which some of the following is excerpted.)

Consider: Bradlee Dean, founder of a Minnesota-based ministry that targets public school students with evangelizing "shock treatment" – delivered the opening prayer for a session of the Minnesota legislature, which is currently considering a constitutional amendment against gay marriage.

Read the end of the prayer – complete with a baseless claim about President Obama's religion – for yourself:

"I know this is a non-denominational prayer in this Chamber and it's not about the Baptists and it's not about the Catholics alone or the Lutherans or the Wesleyans. Or the Presbyterians, the evangelicals or any other denomination, but rather the head of the denomination and his name is Jesus. As every President up until 2008 has acknowledged. And we pray it. In Jesus' name."

Immediately, the Republican Speaker of the House, Kurt Zellers, stood up, telling his colleagues:

"Members, I can only ask for your forgiveness. That type of person will never ever be allowed on this House floor again as long as I have the honor of serving as Speaker."

And then he had Dean's words expunged from the record. Wow.

Not only was Zellers defending separation of church and state, he was doing it *from the right*, bucking the radical fundamentalists who dominate Republican politics and intimidate thoughtful and moderate conservatives all across the country.

So, we have a Dumbth Award. How about the opposite, a "Good Guy" Award for public figures who take risks to defend rationality, science, freethinking and, as in the case of Kurt Zellers, American ideals?

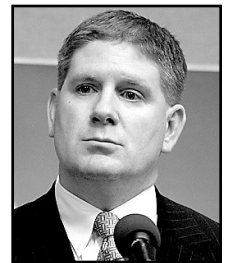
Opinions, please. And a better name than Good Guy.

CHIC SCHISSEL EXPLAINS THE MAY 21 MISTAKE

Harold Camping now claims he made a mistake calculating the date of the Rapture as May 21. It occurs to me that the mistake he made was not of the date, but of language. It's not the Rapture where God will intervene, it's the Rapture.

In God We Truss.

I hope this clears things up.



Save the Date! Save the Date! Save the Date! Save the Date! Save the Date!

Saturday, August 20, 7:00 p.m.,

at

The New York Society for Ethical Culture
2 West 64th Street, NYC

**The Secular Humanist Society of New York,
The New York Society for Ethical Culture,**

and

Reasonable New York

present

Good Without God: Ethics for Freethinkers

a panel discussion among



Michael DeDora
*Executive Director,
Center for Inquiry-NYC*



Anne Klaeyesen
*Leader,
New York Society
for Ethical Culture*



Massimo Pigliucci
*Chair, Dept. of Philosophy,
Lehman College, CUNY*



Roy Speckhardt
*Executive Director,
American Humanist
Association*



Moderated by
John Rafferty, *President,
Secular Humanist Society of New York*

What are “humanist ethics”? How do they differ from the religion-based variety? In the absence of a God, are there no absolutes for freethinkers? If there are, what are they? Or are all questions of ethics, of morality, of good and evil, situational? If so, is that a bad thing? Speaking of evil, do we believe in it? And where do we go from here?

Don't miss this outstanding evening of ideas and ideals. Then join the conversation.

A Wine & Cheese Reception

... will follow, from 9-10:00 p.m. in the Social Hall (downstairs from the Auditorium). Meet and mingle with the panelists and a hundred or more of your fellow humanists, skeptics, rationalists and freethinkers from among the nine organizations in the Reasonable New York consortium. Learn more at www.reasonablenewyork.org.

Suggested Donation for the evening: \$10

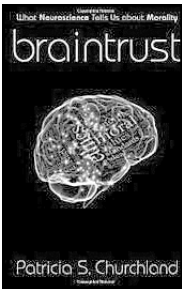
SHSNY CALENDAR: JULY - OCTOBER 2011

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURSDAY, JULY 7, 6:30 pm
Muhlenberg Branch Library
209 West 23 St. (at 7th Av.)

BRAINTRUST:

**What Neuroscience Tells Us
 About Morality**
 by Patricia Churchland



What is morality? Where does it come from? And why do most of us heed its call most of the time? In *Braintrust*, neurophilosophy pioneer Patricia Churchland argues that moral-

ity originates in the biology of the brain. She describes the “neurobiological platform of bonding” that, modified by evolutionary pressures and cultural values, has led to human styles of moral behavior.

The result is a provocative genealogy of morals that asks us to reevaluate the priority given to religion, absolute rules, and pure reason in accounting for the basis of morality.

Patricia Churchland makes a compelling case that morality is woven into our brains, anchored in the neurobiology of attachment and bonding.

“This smart, lucid and often entertaining book will give any curious mind a good overview of how the brain learns to distinguish right from wrong.” — *New Scientist* — Hardcover or Kindle

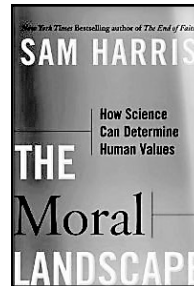
Join us even if you haven't finished reading.
The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!
Every SHSNY Book Club is a Book Swap, too.

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURSDAY, AUGUST 4, 6:30
Muhlenberg Branch Library
209 West 23 St. (at 7th Av.)

THE MORAL LANDSCAPE:

How Science Can Determine Human Values
 by Sam Harris



It used to be a given that religion was the source of all important knowledge, both the “how” of the universe — what it is like, and how it works — and the “why” — why it exists at all, and why human life has a place in it.

Harris argues forcefully for the superiority of science over religion as a means of determining morality and understanding the subtle gradations between permanent truths and culturally and historically determined values.

“I was one of those who had unthinkingly bought into the hectoring myth that science can say nothing about morals. To my surprise, *The Moral Landscape* has changed all that for me. It should change it for philosophers, too.”

— *Richard Dawkins*

And start reading ...

September Book Club
Thursday, Sept. 1, 6:30 p.m.
at the Muhlenberg
CONSCIOUSNESS EXPLAINED
by Daniel Dennett

Dennett’s view of the brain as a massive parallel processor is a familiar one. What is different in his counter-intuitive theory is the claim that human consciousness,

rather than being “hard-wired” into the brain’s innate machinery, is more like software “running on the brain’s parallel hardware” and is largely a product of cultural evolution. — *Paperback*

October Book Club

Date/Time TBA

at a new Book Club venue:

**The Community Church
 of New York**

(Details in September PIQUE)

SELF COMES TO MIND:

**Constructing the
 Conscious Mind**

by Antonio Damasio

Damasio explains that many species, such as social insects, have minds, but humans are distinguished by the “autobiographical self,” which adds flexibility and creativity, and has led to the development of culture, a “radical novelty” in natural history.

BRUNCH!

SUNDAY, JULY 17, 12 NOON

and

SUNDAY, AUGUST 21, NOON

Gather for our

MONTHLY CASUAL BRUNCH

GET-TOGETHER

at BXL East, 210 East 51 St.

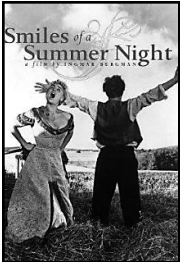
We’ll meet at Noon at our new favorite bistro just east of 3rd Avenue, for outstanding Belgian fare, with dishes ranging from \$7 to \$16, and prix-fixe Sunday Brunch (including a drink) for \$18. Check it out at bxlcafe.pregraphic.com/

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!

SHSNY CALENDAR: JULY - OCTOBER 2011

MONDAY, JULY 11, 7:00 p.m.
SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)
"Smiles of a Summer Night"



The movie on which Sondheim's "A Little Night Music" was based. Director Ingmar Bergman weaves an intricate romantic ruse with his film about a country estate that

becomes a matchmaking haven in turn-of-the-century Sweden. During a long, lazy summer, eight singles gradually become four couples, switching partners along the way. A classic, and great fun.

MONDAY, AUGUST 8, 7:00 pm
SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
"A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy"

Another country weekend party! "Crackpot inventor" Woody Allen and Mary Steenburgen host six consenting adults who swap beds – and partners – in this romantic comedy set in the early 1900s. With Mia Farrow, José Ferrer, Tony Roberts and Julie Hagerty, the film borrows pieces of its plot from Ingmar Bergman's "Smiles of a Summer Night" and Jean Renoir's "Rules of the Game."



SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.
 Check out the menu and prices at www.stonecreeknyc.com

GREAT LECTURES
TUESDAY, JULY 26, 7 p.m.
"THE VIRUS OF FAITH"
Richard Dawkins
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

How is it, that despite science having exposed old religious myths, militant faith is back on the march? The mechanism for perpetuating beliefs that Dawkins describes as leading to murderous intolerance, is by imposing religion on children who are too inexperienced to judge it for themselves.



We wouldn't categorize children according to their parents' political stance, says Dawkins, since they are too young to make up their minds about such matters. But we segregate them in sectarian religious schools, where they are taught superstitions drawn from ancient scriptures of dubious origin, which promote a contradictory and poisonous system of morals.

Dawkins compares this to a virus, which infects the young and is passed down the generations.

Great Lectures Night is FREE

PLANNING AHEAD

Holidays 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.

GREAT LECTURES
TUESDAY, AUGUST 23, 7 p.m.
"DOES GOD EXIST: A Debate"
Christopher Hitchens
& William Lane Craig
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

Craig is one of the world's foremost Christian apologists. Hitchens is a leading spokesman for the "new atheism" movement.

On April 4, 2009, in front of an overflow crowd and a global internet audience, they debated the origin and design of the universe, the implications of human morality, the deity of Jesus, and the validity of Christ's resurrection. It was a compelling clash of world-views and an examination of the major arguments for and against Christianity and atheism.



Great Lectures Night is FREE.

Tuesday, July 12, 6-10:00 at
Irish Rogue
356 West 44 St. (at 9th Ave.)
New York Philosophy
presents

Cocktails & Conversations:
"Conspiracy Theories"

Enjoy drinks, lively discussions.
 RSVP at nyphilosophy.com

SAVE THE DATE!
SATURDAY JULY 23
REASONABLE NEW YORK
PICNIC!

Freethinkers will gather on Governor's Island or in Central Park. Watch reasonablenewyork.org for details.

CLIMATE CHANGE: FIVE FACTS AND A COROLLARY – UPDATED

Giddian Beer

Note: An earlier version of this article, “Global Warming: Five Facts and a Corollary,” was published in May, 2008 PIQUE. (View it at the website, shsny.org.) Recent events require revisiting the topic.

5 FACTS:

1. Concern about global warming has reduced public attention to the many other threats against the health of our planet and the lives of its inhabitants. Some of these, such as loss of water resources, are much aggravated by global warming; others, such as deforestation, contribute to it; while still others, such as over fishing, pollution and soil depletion, are mostly independent of it. Each of these, by itself, portends seriously for the future of humanity. Collectively they portend eventual disaster.

2. Even if our emissions of greenhouse gases (mainly carbon dioxide, but also methane and a few others) could be reduced enough so that natural processes remove equal amounts, the gas concentrations in the atmosphere would continue increasing for a while because of rain forest destruction and out-gassing of methane from melting permafrost. So temperature increase would persist for quite a few decades until a new equilibrium could be established. The consequence would be degradation or ruin of many habitats and environments worldwide. Adaptation would be very difficult.

3. But something different will happen. Only a few of the goals for combating global warming contemplate such drastic limits to our greenhouse gas emissions. All the others, the main ones, call for reduction by some percentage, to be attained some years in the future. Therefore, the concentrations will continue to rise indefinitely. There will be no equilibrium; heating will increase, and accelerate, without limit. The result will be devastation to *all* habitats. Adaptation will be impossible.

4. An example? The planet Venus is enveloped by a heavy, 96 percent carbon dioxide atmosphere, which has caused a runaway greenhouse effect. Venus’ surface temperature is about 482° C (900° F), hotter than Mercury’s, hot enough to melt lead.

5. Fossil fuel producers are increasing their outputs to meet surging demands. There is a frenzy to find more petroleum, natural gas and coal to aid the quest for “energy independence.” All that carbon is destined for our atmosphere. Those producers and their political allies, using storms of bullshit to discredit concerns about climate change, have been hugely successful. They have won the argument. Most Americans now suspect that global warming is fiction or that, if real, is of little concern.

But extinction is a process, not an argument, and they are accelerating the process.

Those who *are* concerned assume that “alternative energy,” with minor economic and lifestyle disruptions, i.e., conservation, can solve the problem. But current attitudes

preclude any meaningful change. Wind, solar, efficiency, sequestration, even if developed to the maximum, could satisfy only a small fraction of current, let alone anticipated, energy needs. Nuclear could replace much more, but hundreds of additional generators would be required – soon. Most people are oblivious to the impending devastation and its temporal proximity. The power of greed and stupidity to overwhelm ingenuity, reason, and foresight, assures that even the current measly goals for reducing emissions will not be realized.

In 2009 Dr. James Hansen (head of NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies, and a preeminent authority on climate change) published his book, *Storms of My Grandchildren: The Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity*. In it he detailed the causes and consequences of global warming and expressed consternation at the fancifully inadequate schemes to mitigate it. This warning had no more effect than a zephyr in a cyclone. A similar warning by Dr. Jared Diamond in his 2005 book, *Collapse*, also had little effect. Meanwhile, we have the following trends, as predicted by Dr. Hansen.

Tornados, world-wide yearly averages (though most occur in the US): From 1980 to 1989, 820 tornados per year; from 1990 to 1997, 1172 per year, a 43 percent increase; from 1998 to 2010, 1309 per year, a further 12 percent increase; in 2011, 875 tornados in the U.S. through May 24.

Major floods, world-wide, due to rain: From 1979 to 2005, one flood per year, on average; in 2006, 8 floods; in 2007, 12; in 2008, 14; 2009, 16; 2010, 32; in 2011, 10 floods through May 24. And hurricane season has just begun.

What else? Increasing average temperatures worldwide, increasing numbers of droughts, dwindling polar and glacier ice, bleaching coral reefs, vanishing potable water, burning of desiccated forest and chaparrals – all have been observed for at least two decades. There is now so much evidence that, for anyone paying attention, disbelief is possible only by willful ignorance and/or psychopathic denial. More is coming.

Floods and storms will continue to increase in frequency, size, power and destructiveness. Recent devastation is like nothing compared to what’s in the offing. Around mid-century, deserts will cover much of what is now forest, farm or pasture; many islands and coastal areas will submerge. Famine will be rife.

Also around mid-century, most glaciers in temperate and tropical regions will be gone or much depleted in east Asia, India, western North and South America, and much of Europe, where billions of people depend on glacier melt for steady water supply. Nations in those areas will not have enough to sustain their populations year round. Precipitation may continue or increase in these places, but rather than flowing rivers, it will be more like regional toilet flushes: floods and landslides followed by nearly dry river beds.

Viewing the ongoing environmental wreckage and considering that the damage rate is increasing, the prognosis for the next hundred years is dire indeed.

THE COROLLARY:

Habitat destruction and species extinctions, due to planetary heating and other causes, will be virtually complete early next century. One of the terminated species will be *Homo sapiens* – dancing on the lip of the void.

THE EARTH IS FULL Thomas L. Friedman

(Excerpted from *The New York Times*, June 7, 2011)

You really do have to wonder whether a few years from now we'll look back at the first decade of the 21st century – when food prices spiked, energy prices soared, world population surged, tornados plowed through cities, floods and droughts set records, populations were displaced and governments were threatened by the confluence of it all – and ask ourselves: What were we thinking? How did we not panic when the evidence was so obvious that we'd crossed some growth/climate/natural resource/population redlines all at once?

"The only answer can be denial," argues Paul Gilding, the veteran Australian environmentalist-entrepreneur, who described this moment in a new book called *The Great Disruption: Why the Climate Crisis Will Bring On the End of Shopping and the Birth of a New World*. "When you are surrounded by something so big that requires you to change everything about the way you think and see the world, then denial is the natural response. But the longer we wait, the bigger the response required."

Gilding cites the work of the Global Footprint Network, an alliance of scientists, which calculates how many "planet Earths" we need to sustain our current growth rates. G.F.N. measures how much land and water area we need to produce the resources we consume and absorb our waste, using prevailing technology. On the whole, says G.F.N., we are currently growing at a rate that is using up the Earth's resources far faster than they can be sustainably replenished, so we are eating into the future. Right now, global growth is using about 1.5 Earths. "Having only one planet makes this a rather significant problem," says Gilding.

This is not science fiction. This is what happens when our system of growth and the system of nature hit the wall at once. While in Yemen last year, I saw a tanker truck delivering water in the capital, Sana. Why? Because Sana could be the first big city in the world to run out of water, within a decade. That is what happens when one generation in one country lives at 150 percent of sustainable capacity.

"If you cut down more trees than you grow, you run out of trees," writes Gilding. "If you put additional nitrogen [fertilizers] into a water system, you change the type and quantity of life that water can support. If you thicken the Earth's CO2 blanket, the Earth gets warmer. ... This is not speculation; this is high school science."

It is also current affairs. "In China's thousands of years of civilization, the conflict between humankind and nature has never been as serious as it is today," China's environment minister, Zhou Shengxian, said recently. "The depletion, deterioration and exhaustion of resources and the

worsening ecological environment have become bottlenecks and grave impediments to the nation's economic and social development." What China's minister is telling us, says Gilding, is that "the Earth is full. We are now using so many resources and putting out so much waste into the Earth that we have reached some kind of limit, given current technologies. The economy is going to have to get smaller in terms of physical impact."

We will not change systems, though, without a crisis. But don't worry, we're getting there. We're currently caught in two loops: One is that more population growth and more global warming together are pushing up food prices; rising food prices cause political instability in the Middle East, which leads to higher oil prices, which leads to higher food prices, which leads to more instability. At the same time, improved productivity means fewer people are needed in every factory. So if we want to have more jobs, we need more factories. More factories making more stuff make more global warming, and that is where the two loops meet.

But Gilding is actually an eco-optimist. ... We will realize, he predicts, that the consumer-driven growth model is broken and we have to move to a more happiness-driven growth model, based on people working less and owning less. "How many people," Gilding asks, "lie on their death bed and say, 'I wish I had worked harder or built more shareholder value,' and how many say, 'I wish I had gone to more ballgames, read more books to my kids, taken more walks'?" To do that, you need a growth model based on giving people more time to enjoy life, but with less stuff." Sounds utopian? Gilding insists he is a realist.

"We are heading for a crisis-driven choice," he says. "We either allow collapse to overtake us or develop a new sustainable economic model. We will choose the latter. We may be slow, but we're not stupid."

CLIMATE CHANGE? OBVIOUSLY, GOD IS QUITE IRATE

On May 25, one Marie Henry, of Flushing, wrote to the *Daily News Voice of the People*:

"When are we going to stop invading God's universe? Every time we invade space, our weather takes a turn for the worse. Let God's universe alone, and maybe there won't be the floods, tornados, fires, hurricanes, etc. God has the right to fight back!"

OUR OWN DENNIS MIDDLEBROOKS REPLIED:

"You should be more concerned about the void between your ears than the void of outer space."

AND OUR OWN JOHN ARENTS REBUTS:

While I respect Dennis Middlebrooks, I must dissent from his implication that religious belief, or the mere use of religious language, is a mark of hopeless stupidity. Intelligent people have often expressed themselves in religious language, e.g., A. Einstein: "When God created the universe, did he have any choice?" "The Lord God is subtle, but He is not malicious." "My God is the God of Spinoza, not the God who takes an interest in individual human beings."

THE CHURCH MAKES IT OFFICIAL: BLAME WOODSTOCK

Sarah Seltzer

(Excerpted from *AlterNet.org*, May 18, 2011)

Disappointing, but not shocking. In its official report on priest abuse, the American Catholic Church has blamed the spate of priest abuse cases on “Woodstock” rather than anything inherent in the church’s structure or teaching. *The New York Times* reports:

A five-year study commissioned by the nation’s Roman Catholic bishops to provide a definitive answer to what caused the church’s sexual abuse crisis has concluded that neither the all-male celibate priesthood nor homosexuality were to blame.

Instead, the report says, the abuse occurred because priests who were poorly prepared and monitored, and were under stress, landed amid the social and sexual turmoil of the 1960s and ’70s.

Known occurrences of sexual abuse of minors by priests rose sharply during those decades, the report found, and the problem grew worse when the church’s hierarchy responded by showing more care for the perpetrators than the victims.

The “blame Woodstock” explanation has been floated by bishops since the church was engulfed by scandal in the United States in 2002 and by Pope Benedict XVI after it erupted in Europe in 2010.

Those poor, stressed-out priests. That’s why they were so viciously abusive, and the fact that the authorities had their back and would protect them gave them no sense of entitlement whatsoever.

The comments at the *Times*’ article provide excellent rebuttals to this study, pointing out the backwards logic of this report, and that the cultural opening of the 60s may have led to people being more open about confronting abuse in authority, not the abuses themselves.

AND THE CHURCH GIVES NEW MEANING TO “SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN”

Hemant Mehta, *The Friendly Atheist*

(Excerpted from *Humanist Network News*, June 2, 2011)

Illinois now allows civil unions. It’s not gay marriage, but that’s a different debate. Still, Catholic Charities of Rockford is so afraid that it’ll now have to place foster children in the homes of gay couples that it’s going to shut down its state-funded adoption services altogether.

In Rockford, the decision could displace about 350 foster children served by Catholic Charities, and put 58 employees out of work. But, said Frank Vonch, of the Diocese of Rockford “... we can no longer contract with the state of Illinois whose laws would force us to participate in activity offensive to the moral teachings of the church – teachings which compel us to do this work in the first place.”

Yeah, that makes sense. The same people who stood idly by as priests raped little boys for decades are claiming the moral high ground.

SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND SCHOOL IN NEW YORK CITY

Katherine Stewart

(Excerpted from *The New York Times*, June 11, 2011)

We had just moved to the Upper East Side of Manhattan from California, and had chosen the neighborhood for its school. On the second Sunday after classes started, happy and hectic, I glanced out the window and saw a large group of people gathered in front of the schoolhouse door. They had a table, brochures, a tray of lollipops and a four-foot-tall sign. It turned out that they were part of an evangelical ministry and that our school was their church. I decided to attend the service.

“Notice the names of the children on pieces of paper,” the pastor advised his flock. I looked around and saw the posters the kids had made, with their charming snapshots from summer holidays and rambling lists of likes and dislikes. “Pray for them!” the pastor continued. “Pray that the families of this school will come to know Jesus and say, ‘This is a House of God!’ ”

The pastor’s daughter, a lively 8-year-old who attends a private Christian school, took me on a brief tour through parts of the school I had not yet seen. “This is my dad’s church!” she enthused.

After the service, I chatted with the pastor and asked how much it cost to rent the school. “Oh no,” he said. “We don’t pay rent! New York is way too expensive! We just pay the custodians’ fee.” I learned that the church was using the school not just on Sunday mornings and evenings, but also on some Wednesday and Friday nights, and that it paid a pittance for the privilege – far less than the nearly \$100,000 that the P.T.A. spent last year to renovate the restrooms the church members were using.

Ours is just one of at least 60 New York City schools that have doubled as rent-free houses of worship – the vast majority of them evangelical Christian churches – in their off-hours. Many have little connection with the school communities. It’s hard to imagine, for example, that the Village Church at Public School 3 in the West Village – a church that runs a Gender Affirming Ministry Endeavor associated with the movement to “cure” gay men and lesbians – is representative of the neighborhood.

A number of the new churches are the work of national “church-planting” organizations attracted to New York by the combination of cheap space and the opportunity to save the city from its apparent godlessness. Some are closely associated with national groups known for their hostility to “government education.” The church that meets at my daughter’s school is associated with a movement that instructs its members to pray for a Christian “reformation” of American education and for the election of like-minded political leaders.

In some communities, parents and school administrators have complained that representatives of the churches have made use of their proximity to students to approach children for religious purposes. A friend in TriBeCa told me

he was taken aback when his daughter asked him, "Daddy, is the church part of our school?"

The situation originated in a 2001 decision, *Good News Club vs. Milford Central School*, in which the United States Supreme Court appeared to suggest that keeping religious groups out of schools after hours amounted to discrimination against their religious views.

Subsequent federal rulings effectively forced the city to open school doors to nearly any religious group that asked for the privilege. But since school facilities are often available only on Sundays (when sports teams and extracurricular clubs are less likely to need space), Jews and Muslims, for example, were mostly shut out.

On June 2, the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit ruled that the city could restrict religious congregations from conducting worship services in schools. To exclude an activity from a school because it is religious in nature, Judge Pierre N. Leval wrote, is not to discriminate against it on account of its religious viewpoint.

Indeed, the school system does not give access to partisan groups, and no one supposes that they are losing their freedom of speech just because they can't get free space. Using the school system to subsidize houses of worship, on the other hand, risks violating the Constitutional ban on the establishment of religion.

In light of this ruling, the city should enforce its original policy and exclude the use of school facilities for worship services. A near-term problem — and an example of precisely why this kind of entanglement should be avoided in the first place — is that many churches have come to depend on the schools for their survival. The city should seek a way to gradually end these relationships.

BET YOU DIDN'T KNOW: JESUS HATES YOGA

(Excerpted from Alternet.org, May 12, 2011)

Marsha West of the American Family Association, best known for its jihad against LGBT people, has a new enemy and a warning for all Christians looking for a stress-reducing way to get limber: "Yoga, even if it's labeled Christian, is diametrically opposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. ... Yoga is not 'just exercising.' Participants are being swept into a counterfeit religion. According to God's Word, pagan religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, are evil. The Bible clearly says that God's people are to have nothing to do with wicked customs (Deut 18:9-14)."

INTIMATIONS OF MORTALITY IN JUNE PIQUE PROVOKED READER RESPONSE

To the Editor: Re: "Leaving Life and Religion Behind," and "Mortality for Beginners" (both PIQUE, June), I think, in reality, that the aggressive medical choices to fight death in the last days of life have generally been made by the family and not by the patient. Considering that might modify some of the material of the two articles. Beyond that, those who are constantly exposed to practical end-of-life issues, especially doctors, make the ultimate decisions, though this

fact is generally unacknowledged. I learned this all from some years of close proximity when I was married to a medical student and had close physician friends.

This has been changing because society in recent decades has considered the subject explicitly and tried to develop formal procedures that would make it easier on patients, their friends and families, and—again unacknowledged—the doctors and lawyers whose interests generally get primacy. For the patients and families, these are unique crises, but much of the power in practice is in the hands of the professionals who deal with it regularly.

— Elaine Lynn

To the Editor: In June PIQUE, Richard Dawkins ("We're the Lucky Ones") says that all the people who have never been born are unlucky. Well, people who have never been born are nothing but concepts, like the zephyr that didn't waft through my closed window last night. It's absurd to attribute circumstances, like luck, to mere concepts; that's how ghosts and gods are made.

He also says that we who have been born are lucky, presumably because we are alive. If he means readers of his book or of PIQUE I have no quibble. But if he means all living humans I have a big WTF? Can he be unaware that for a large and growing portion of humanity life is a cesspool of unending misery? Are they lucky?

More: he says that because the "spotlight of time" (the here and now) never shone on us, we're "probably" dead.

Considering all that Richard Dawkins has done to promote reason, I say he is absolutely entitled to a bit of tomfoolery. My admiration for him remains undimmed.

Joseph Campbell ("Living Without Myth") laments that biography, history and science kill the "poetry of myth" and leave no "hiding place for the gods." I think that's something a secular humanist would cheer about, so, without editorial comment, I would have expected such a piece to appear in PIQUE's April Fool pages.

Or maybe I'm missing something.* — Giddian Beer
*Yep.

JESUS AND MO HAVE THE LAST WORD ON END-OF-LIFE

(Transcribed from jesuandmo.net, 6/14/2011)

Barmaid: Take the euthanasia question. If you think it is wrong to take your own life, or to have another person assist you in doing so — that's fair enough. Don't do it. You are entitled to your beliefs, and willing to accept the consequences of them — even if that means accepting a slow, undignified death.

Jesus: Correct.

Barmaid: So why won't you extend that same courtesy to others who do not share your beliefs — and allow them to make their own choice?

Jesus: Because it's not enough that we are willing to suffer for our beliefs, barmaid.

Mohammed: We must ensure that everyone else suffers for them, too.

FROM ATHEISM TO RELIGION AND BACK AGAIN IN TWO GENERATIONS: ANOTHER EPIPHANY

Bill Carter

I was raised a Catholic by my mother and first step-father in a primarily Italian working class neighborhood on 21st Street between Third and Fourth avenues. My parents would send us—my step-sister Barbara, step-brothers Robert and Albert and my brother Dwight—to St. Joseph’s Church almost every Sunday, but usually did not come with us. I suspect that they stayed home to obey God’s first commandment, about being fruitful and multiplying. As a result, I have my brother Phillip and my sister Wendy.

I went to P.S. 124 on 14th Street. Across the schoolyard was Holy Family Catholic School and church. At that time, 1956, a citywide program called “released time” meant that every Wednesday between one and three, with parental permission, public school kids could be released to go to the Catholic school for “Religious Instruction.” We would be “instructed” by the nuns in the doctrine and dogma of the Catholic Church, important stuff like “When you sin it is like sticking needles into baby Jesus.” I was baptized, made my First Communion and Confirmation, sacraments of the church. I remember that when I made my Confirmation my mother took me to a Chinese restaurant and then to see the movie, “The Ten Commandments.”

I can’t say that I was a believer; I went to church because I was told to go to church. But then I read the entire Bible, and became a confirmed non-believer.

I only recently found out that my mother was raised as an atheist. When I asked her why she sent us to church

she explained that she grew up on the lower East Side near Mott Street. She and her atheist brothers and sisters used to get harassed and into fights with the Catholic children in the neighborhood. She sent us to church to avoid what she and her brothers and sisters went through.

I did become involved with the Church of Scientology in my early 20s. I was a “believer” in the beginning, but eventually came to my senses. I have read about and studied a wide variety of religions. They are interesting to me, but never convincing.

DANIEL DENNETT ON “SECULAR SPIRITUALITY”

(Transcribed from *bigthink.com*)

Of course I have spiritual moments. In a bland sense of that word, I suppose, but I think the right sense. I have times when I am just transported with with awe, and joy and a sense of peace and wonder at, oh, whether its music or art or just a child playing or some other wonderful thing off of my sailboat, being amazed at the beauty of the ocean.

I think that people make a mistake in thinking that spirituality in that sense has anything to do with either religious doctrines or with immateriality or the supernatural. The world is a stunningly interesting and glorious place at every scale, and the awe that one can experience because one understands something about how the parts are put together is, I think, far greater than the sort of awe of incomprehension. The universe is much more wonderful the more you know about how it’s put together.

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