

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

September, 2011

Break's over, time to get back to work. Actually, to having fun: bitch-slapping rabbis who ignore the law and bishops who flout decency for the dying; saving secularism from the politically correct; swapping Santa for What'sHisName; promoting pasta colanders as religious headgear; losing the patron saint of the lost; announcing an occasional new booby-prize for idiot politicians, and calling a Christian terrorist, well, a Christian terrorist. But first, some news that's no fun at all. – JR

HOW DO YOU KILL AN OCEAN?

John Rafferty

Not just *an* ocean, but *the* ocean, those 300 million trillions of gallons of water that cover three-quarters of the earth's surface, whose depths are greater than the world's tallest mountains, and which is the source of all life on the planet – *that* ocean.

How do you kill the ocean? We're finding ways – in fact, lots of ways. According to a June 20 report by an international panel of experts, *"the world's ocean is at high risk of entering a phase of extinction of marine species unprecedented in human history."*

The preliminary report by the International Programme on the State of the Ocean (IPSO) is based on the latest research across all areas of marine science – on the combined effects of pollution, acidification, ocean warming, overfishing and hypoxia (deoxygenation).

Excerpted from the June 20 IPSO press release:

"The combination of stressors on the ocean is creating the conditions associated with every previous major extinction of species in Earth's history.

"The speed and the rate of degeneration in the ocean are far faster than anyone has predicted.

"Many of the negative impacts previously identified are greater than the worst predictions.

"Although difficult to assess because of the unprecedented speed of change, the first steps to globally significant extinction may have begun with the rise in the extinction threat to marine species like reef-forming corals.

"Increasing hypoxia (low oxygen levels) and anoxia (absence of oxygen, known as ocean dead zones), combined with warming of the ocean and acidification, are the three factors which have been present in every mass extinction event in Earth's history. There is strong scientific evidence

that these three factors are combining in the ocean again, exacerbated by multiple severe stressors. For example:

"The rate at which carbon is being absorbed by the ocean is already far greater now than at the time of the last globally significant extinction of marine species, some 55 million years ago, when up to 50 percent of some groups of deep-sea animals were wiped out.

"A single mass coral bleaching event in 1998 killed 16 percent of all the world's tropical coral reefs.

"Overfishing has reduced some commercial fish stocks and populations of by-catch species more than 90 percent.

"New science also suggests that pollutants, including flame retardant chemicals and synthetic musks found in detergents, are being traced in the Polar Seas, and that these chemicals can be absorbed by tiny plastic particles in the ocean, which are in turn ingested by marine creatures.

"The experts agreed that adding these and other threats together means that the ocean and the ecosystems within it are unable to recover, being constantly bombarded with multiple attacks. The report sets out a series of recommendations and calls on states, regional bodies and the United Nations to enact measures to better conserve ocean ecosystems, and in particular demands the urgent adoption of better governance of the largely unprotected high seas that make up the majority of the world's ocean."

The co-author of the report says, "The world's leading experts on oceans are surprised by the rate and magnitude of changes we are seeing. The challenges for the future of the ocean are vast, but unlike previous generations we know what now needs to happen. The time to protect the blue heart of our planet is now, today, and urgent."

So, fellow humanists – and humans – what are our representatives doing about it? What should *we* do?

More info? Google IPSO Report – JR

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**BILL MAHER ON ANDERS BREIVIK:
“A CHRISTIAN TERRORIST”**

I'm sure the media would have no trouble calling the guy at Fort Hood a 'Muslim terrorist,' but they refuse to call Anders Breivik (the Norwegian murderer) a 'Christian terrorist.' But that's what he is, a Christian terrorist. He wanted to start a Christian onslaught against the Muslims.

“And it reminds me that this is not a problem with the Muslim religion – it's a problem with religion. And Christianity is perfectly capable of coming out of its dormant phase and once again becoming the violent, blood-lusty religion it was under the Crusades.”

**BILL O'REILLY ON ANDERS BREIVIK:
“NOT POSSIBLE HE'S A CHRISTIAN”**

Breivik is not a Christian. That's impossible. No one believing in Jesus commits mass murder. The man might have called himself a Christian on the 'net, but he is certainly not of that faith.

“We can find no evidence, none, that this killer practiced Christianity in any way. ... The West [he means the 'liberal media' in the West] wants you to believe that fundamentalist Christians are a threat just like crazy jihadists are. [This is] ... dishonest and insane.”

**ANDERS BREIVIK ON ANDERS BREIVIK:
“100 PERCENT CHRISTIAN”**

At the age of 15 I chose to be baptized and confirmed in the Norwegian State Church. I consider myself to be 100 percent Christian.”

In his diary before the attacks, Breivik said he intended to attend church in the Frogner neighborhood of Oslo in a final “Martyr's mass.” And ...

“I'm pretty sure I will pray to God as I'm rushing through my city, guns blazing ...”

**PLANNED PARENTHOOD FIREBOMBED,
RIGHT WING SILENT**

Alex Pareene

(Excerpted from salon.com, 7/31/2011)

Someone firebombed a Planned Parenthood clinic in McKinney, Texas, on July 26. Because it was so late, no one was hurt. The clinic doesn't provide abortions, but there had been protesters there earlier that day anyway. You might've read about the news on Twitter or on a liberal blog. Probably not in a newspaper or on a cable news channel. Definitely not at any right-wing blogs. Which is a bit odd, actually, considering how much attention terrorist attacks generally get in this country.

Oh, sorry, how much attention possible *Islamic* terrorist attacks get.

Planned Parenthood, in case you haven't been paying attention, has been the focus of a flood of political attacks – both rhetorical and legislative – since approximately the minute the Republicans who were elected in 2010 took office across the nation. James O'Keefe shopped around one

of his trademark shamelessly misleading video “stings.” Glenn Beck devoted an hour to falsely accusing Planned Parenthood of various heinous crimes. The major right-wing pundits have stepped up the hysterical anti-reproductive rights rhetoric as multiple states attempted to defund the organization. The right has even moved on to attacking contraception, as if it doesn't even want people to believe that its goal isn't to control women's bodies.

National Review's The Corner has run multiple posts on some pro-life “study” accusing Planned Parenthood of “systemic, organization-wide fraud and abuse” and even human trafficking “at this federally funded billion-dollar abortion business.” One of them said, “Where is the Media?” and bemoaned the fact that the mainstream press was supposedly “ignoring” the report, which got a major press conference with multiple members of Congress and coverage in Politico and The Hill.

But, weirdly, this Planned Parenthood news has not been mentioned at *National Review*.

It's easy to imagine that if the target of the attack had been associated with the right – Marcus Bachmann's clinic, maybe? – this would be a major national story, even if no one was hurt and the attacker's identity was still unknown. It's even easier to imagine that if anyone had any reason to suspect that a Muslim did this, that it'd be not just a major national story but also the subject of congressional inquiries and maybe eventually an air war. (Even failed Islamic terrorists are treated as if they've succeeded by politicians, these days.)

We obviously don't know yet, but this attack seems more likely to be the work of a politically motivated person with conservative beliefs than a random act of vandalism. In other words, domestic terrorism. Someone threw a Molotov cocktail at a women's health clinic. It's insane that only a couple of Internet feminists actually seem to care.

**THE HAM-HANDED (YOU SHOULD EXCUSE THE
EXPRESSION) POWER OF BLOC VOTING**

Dennis Middlebrooks

The New York Post of July 31 had a fascinating article by writer Michael Leshner called “Their Brothers' Keepers: New York Should Stop Funding Separate Private Police Forces for Orthodox Jews,” which provides shocking details as to how our city, which is confronting huge budget shortfalls, provides taxpayer dollars for a variety of Orthodox Jewish vigilante groups in Brooklyn, even though these groups are under orders from the Orthodox rabbis *not* to report crimes committed by Jews to the police unless the rabbis give permission first.

Leshner pointed out that there is a burgeoning sex abuse scandal erupting in the Orthodox community, as many Jews are now stepping forth with accusations against rabbis and community leaders despite fierce opposition on the part of most of the Orthodox community. Indeed, Rabbi Schmuel Kamenetsky, a leading religious figure, has emphasized that child abuse allegedly committed by a Jew

must be referred to a rabbi, who will then decide if the police should be notified – in direct violation of New York’s mandatory statute regarding child abuse.

Indeed, several years ago, dozens of rabbis signed death threats in a New York Yiddish language newspaper against anyone who “informs” on a fellow Jew to secular authorities. Any threat to discourage a citizen from going to the police would violate federal civil rights statutes, but there were no condemnations in the mainstream press over the death threats. Imagine the reaction if atheist leaders issued death threats against atheists who report crimes committed by fellow atheists to the police.

(No imagination needed. Just remember the outcry a couple of years ago when some black rappers started a “no snitchin’” campaign. – JR)

The Leshner article contains a photo of the founder of a local vigilante group next to a \$250,000 “mobile security command center” paid for in part by the City Council, even though safety is the NYPD’s responsibility.

In a sidebar article, “Kosher Pork: Jewish Groups Rake It In,” we learn that NYC gave \$4.3 million to various Jewish community groups, more than all other religious groups combined (Catholics received \$517,000 and Muslim groups \$19,000). The Metropolitan Council On Jewish Poverty was the largest beneficiary, taking in \$1.4 million. Another group collects \$35,000 to help Orthodox Jews locked out of their cars or homes! The New York Board of Rabbis and a rabbinical seminary rake in \$51,000, which would pay for a laid-off police officer or teacher. The latter funding is most likely in direct violation of the New York and U.S. Constitutions. Do not expect any repercussions.

Such are the benefits of bloc voting in “progressive” New York City. Perhaps outrages such as these should evoke more anger among atheist groups than purely symbolic affronts such as street signs, creches and crosses on public property. Maybe we should demand a piece of the pie. Guess what the reaction would be.

Editor: Most likely we’d get the pie in our face. – JR

REAL CHOICES AT LIFE’S END

Barbara Coombs Lee

(Reprinted from FIG Leaves, July 2011. Ms. Lee is President of Compassion & Choices.)

A year ago, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops quietly issued a health care directive that could dramatically impact the 30 percent of American families, Catholic or not, who reside in or receive healthcare from Catholic institutions.

A set of rules called Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services governs all institutions having a Catholic charter: hospitals, nursing homes, etc. Those rules lay out how health services must conform to Catholic doctrine, as promulgated by the Holy See and enforced by its Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly known as the Holy Office of the Inquisition).

The latest change to directive #58 states that individuals

who need a feeding tube to stay alive trigger an obligation to have one surgically implanted and kept in place indefinitely. This includes everyone in a permanent coma from stroke or trauma, in a persistent vegetative state, or with advanced dementia – thus unable to eat. The directive applies regardless of the patient’s religious faith, their stated wishes, written advance directives, or the instructions of their families. The rule does not, as stated, apply to patients who are actively dying. (Those are not the usual recipients of feeding tubes, anyway.) Rest assured, it applies in all situations where we most cherish our own authority to make healthcare decisions.

The bishops have put Catholic health centers in a real bind. After the Pope articulated this rule during the Terri Schiavo uproar in Florida, hospital spokespeople balanced a rationale allowing them to honor a person’s stated wishes in these matters. Now the bishops have pointedly dismissed the “untenable positions” of “some Catholic ethicists” and made Benedict’s rule strict, official, and binding. The Directive’s former “presumption” for feeding tubes is now an “obligation.” Local Catholic authorities may no longer allow hospital administrators or doctors who wish to honor a patient’s advance directives and the decisions of grieving families to do so. We may see enormous variation in Catholic institutions across the nation, depending on where a local bishop falls on the conservative-to-liberal continuum.

The bishops of the Catholic conference consider this edict a small price to pay to maintain “the distinctive Catholic identity of the church’s healthcare ministry.” Integral to that ministry is the application of the churches “moral teaching” to all patients.

The sanctimonious audacity of these bishops takes my breath away.

THE IDIOTS WE VOTE FOR:

#1 – LORI KLEIN

(From a RawStory.com article by David Edwards, 7/11/11)

Freshman Arizona State Senator Lori Klein made news in January by insisting on carrying a loaded handgun onto the Senate floor just two days after the shooting in Tucson that killed six people and wounded 13, including Rep. Gabrielle Giffords. Such is the cloud-cuckoo-land culture of Arizona that the Senate’s security guards could not legally stop her.



Now Klein has one-upped herself. In July, while being interviewed about the gun by Richard Ruelas, a reporter for *The Arizona Republic*, she took her raspberry-pink .380 Ruger out of her purse and pointed it at Ruelas.

“Oh, it’s so cute,” Klein said.

The loaded pistol has no safety and the laser pointer was centered on the reporter’s chest, but Klein explained that there was no need to worry.

“I just didn’t have my hand on the trigger.”

WHY “RELIGION IS USEFUL” IS A TERRIBLE ARGUMENT FOR RELIGION

Part 1

Greta Christina

(Excerpted from *Alternet.com*, July 29, 2011)

“But religion is useful. It makes people happy. It comforts people in hard times. It makes people better-behaved. So what difference does it make if it isn’t true? Shouldn’t we be perpetuating it anyway? Why do you want to persuade people out of it?”

Atheists hear this a lot. The argument from utility—the defense of religion, not because it’s true, but because it’s psychologically or socially useful—is freakishly common. If you spend any time reading debates in atheist blogs or forums, you’re bound to see it come up.

Now, when atheists hear this “But religion is so useful” argument, our most common response is to say, “Is not.” We eagerly point out that countries with high rates of atheism are also countries with high rates of happiness, ethics, and social functioning. (This doesn’t prove that atheism causes high social functioning, of course—in fact, it’s probably the other way around—but it does show that high social functioning doesn’t need religion.) We’ll point out the many, many examples of religious believers who cheat, steal, murder, and generally behave very badly indeed, entirely undercutting the notion that religion provides an unshakable foundation for good moral behavior.

And we’ll point to ourselves, and to other atheists we know—people who clearly don’t need religion, who are living happy, ethical lives without religion, who in some cases are even happier and better without religion—as the most obvious counter-arguments we can think of to this argument.

These are all fair points. I’ve made them myself, many times, and I will no doubt make them again. But there’s a basic problem with all these wonderful fair points. They make the argument from utility seem valid. And I don’t want to do that. I think the argument from utility is absurd on the face of it. I think the entire idea of deciding what we think is true based on what we want to be true is laughable. Or it would be, if it weren’t so appalling. I’ve seen this argument advanced many, many times, and it still shocks me to see otherwise intelligent, thoughtful adults making it. It is preposterous.

So today, I want to dismantle the entire premise of the argument from utility. I want to dismantle the entire premise that it’s reasonable, and even a positive good, to believe in something you have no good reason to think is true, simply because it makes you happy.

The Santa Delusion

Let’s draw an analogy. Let’s look at another dearly treasured, deeply held belief about how the world works.

Let’s look at Santa Claus. Millions of children are made very happy by their belief in Santa. They have fun imagining the presents he’s going to bring them. They like visiting him

in the department store. They enjoy hearing stories about him, singing songs about him, drawing pictures of him. They get a thrill from putting cookies and cocoa out for him by the fireplace (or the gas heater, or whatever), and seeing them gone the next day. They get more and more excited as Christmas gets closer and the day of his visitation approaches.

What’s more, millions of children probably behave better because they believe in Santa. The desire for really great presents, the fear of getting coal in their stockings instead of presents – this has almost certainly made many children behave better. It’s probably resulted in thousands of cleaned rooms, thousands of finished homework assignments, thousands of un-punched siblings. At least during the month of December.

And millions of children get upset when they discover that Santa isn’t real. Letting go of Santa can be a distressing experience, one that people remember well into adulthood. (This isn’t universally true. I was actually excited to discover that Santa wasn’t real, since I figured it out on my own and it made me feel clever and grown-up to have outwitted the grownups, but it’s certainly not uncommon.)

Would you therefore argue that we ought to believe in Santa? Would you argue that, because belief in Santa makes children happy and better-behaved, we therefore ought to perpetuate it? Would you argue that, because relinquishing that belief can be upsetting, we ought to go to great lengths to protect children from discovering that Santa isn’t real, not only during their childhoods, but throughout their adult lives? Would you attend Churches and Temples of Santa, and leave cookies and cocoa on their red-and-white-plush altars? Would you pity people who don’t believe in Santa as being joyless and imprisoned in rationality, and would you chastise these a-Santa-ists as intolerant, bigoted proselytizers when they tried to persuade others that Santa isn’t real?

Or would you, instead, think that people ought to grow up? Would you think that letting go of the belief in Santa (for those who grew up believing) is an essential part of becoming an adult? Would you think that we need to understand reality so we know how to behave in it? Would you think that, in order to make good decisions and function effectively in the world, we need to have the most truthful understanding of it that we can muster, and that if the best evidence suggests that Santa isn’t real, we ought to accept that conclusion? Would you look at this idea that it’s okay to decide what’s true about the world based on what we want to be true, and call it preposterous, laughable, appalling, absurd on the face of it?

And if you wouldn’t argue that belief in Santa is valid because it’s useful, why would you argue it about God?

(Part 2 of Ms. Christina’s essay will appear in October. – JR)

BRAD PITT – ATHEIST

(Actor Brad Pitt, quoted in The Guardian (UK), 7/1/2011)

I see religion more as a truck stop on your way to figuring out who you are.”

OF MORAL LEADERS, POLITICS AND PENGUINS

Connie Schultz, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*

(Excerpted from and based on *alternet.org*, 7/5/2011)

In July, Ohio Republican Robert Mecklenborg — a self-described “Catholic boy from the west side of Cincinnati” — stood on the Ohio House floor to champion the most radical anti-abortion legislation in the country.

“We marvel, don’t we?” he said, before voting for the “heartbeat” bill, which would effectively limit abortions to the first couple of weeks of pregnancy, when many women don’t even know they’re pregnant. “We marvel at the march of the penguins as they go to propagate their species. We marvel at the leaping salmon as they return to their ancestral homes.” He also marveled over the mating habits of loggerhead turtles.

You’re not alone if you don’t quite see the parallel of wildlife to women’s lives. But speaking of wildlife ...

In April—in the wee hours of the morning after Good Friday, the most solemn day on the Catholic calendar—an Indiana state trooper pulled over Mecklenborg. The officer stopped Mecklenborg for a burned-out headlight, but then suspected he was intoxicated after he smelled alcohol and noticed the state rep’s “glossy, bloodshot eyes.”

Mecklenborg refused a chemical test, and then failed three field sobriety tests. After a blood test, he was charged with drunken driving. The 59-year-old married father of three also tested positive for Viagra.

Mecklenborg was not alone that evening. His passenger was a 26-year-old woman who is neither his wife nor one of his children. In his incident report, the officer noted that Mecklenborg’s inebriated state “endangered a person.”

By “person,” we can assume he means a human life.

WHY “MORAL LEADERS” ARE ANNOYING

Josh Goldman

(Excerpted from *boston.com/2011-08-11/bostonglobe/*)

Moral leadership is challenging for an obvious reason — you have to know what’s right and wrong. But it’s also difficult because, on the whole, people are ambivalent about moral crusaders. Now there’s a name for that strange mixture of admiration, guilt, and defensive dismissiveness you feel when you encounter someone better than you: it’s called “anticipated reproach.”

[In other words, we’re seething while waiting for the self-satisfied SOB to judge us. — JR]

Benoît Monin, a psychologist at Stanford, has studied anticipated reproach in a number of fascinating experiments. His essential finding: The more we feel as though good people might be judging us, the lower they tend to fall in our regard.

As he explains in a recent paper, “overtly moral behavior can elicit annoyance and ridicule rather than admiration and respect” when we feel threatened by someone else’s high ethical standards.

[I think we can safely assume that the “ridicule” reaction will kick in automatically in any story (see above) including politicians, penguins and Viagra. — JR]

BARBARA OAKLEY ANNOYS FIFTY OF US, AND VICE VERSA

Reported by John Rafferty

During the last week in July I received an email from Barbara Oakley, who said she would be in the city in mid-August on a tour promoting her newest book, and would SHSNY be interested in having her speak? Great, I thought, as did several others I contacted who remembered her hilarious talk of three years ago promoting her book, *Evil Genes: Why Rome Fell, Hitler Rose, Enron Failed, and My Sister Stole My Mother’s Boyfriend*.

So on August 11 we gathered 50 people at the Community Church of New York, our new digs for Book Club and other events, to hear all about *Pathological Altruism* and Oakley’s other new book, *Cold-Blooded Kindness*.

Another fun evening?

Hardly. Within minutes after SHSNY Book Club Editor Elaine Lynn, depending on Oakley’s promotional materials, introduced her as a scientist who would discuss the need for increased scientific rigor in the social sciences, the mood

in the room turned confrontational as Oakley veered off on a not-so-scientifically-rigorous tangent.

After a long and often referred-to narrative about a woman who murdered her husband, then claimed “battered wife syndrome,” Oakley said flatly that such claims should have no place in our courts. “Not scientifically proven,” she argued. Why? Because there have never been “control groups” to prove that such a syndrome exists.

How would that work? We just sit by and observe beaten women for a few years to see how many of them die? How many are maimed? How many of them kill?

Ignoring the growing body of scientific evidence that altruism is one of the keys to our evolutionary success—See *Natalie Angier’s essay on page 9*—Oakley propounded her theme that altruism, which she identifies with political liberalism, can, like liberalism, be a very bad thing, indeed.

Which message—along with other examples of “failed altruism”—of course stirred the juices of our audience of New York humanists and liberals.

The next morning I received an e-mail from Oakley, thanking me for the opportunity to speak, but announcing that we were the worst group she had ever spoken to, “smugly self-satisfied and close-minded,” interested only in “liberal talking points” and mired in “liberal groupthink.”

It obviously does not occur to Professor Oakley that she may be spouting a party line. She certainly ignores the fact that those (mostly) liberals were in the room for her, and they were listening to her, closely enough to challenge her assumptions — which, of course, she insisted were facts.

Was the evening a failure? I don’t think so. It wasn’t what we expected, but it was lively, even fun, and a fitting “baptism of fire” for our terrific new space.



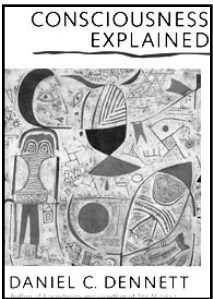
SHSNY CALENDAR: SEPTEMBER - NOVEMBER 2011

SHSNY BOOK CLUB meets

THURSDAY, SEPT. 1, 6:30 pm
Muhlenberg Branch Library
209 West 23 St. (at 7th Av.)

to discuss

CONSCIOUSNESS EXPLAINED
by **Daniel C. Dennett**



The national best-seller chosen by *The New York Times Book Review* as a “ten best book” is now available in paperback. Dennett replaces our traditional vision

of consciousness with a new model based on a wealth of fact and theory from the latest scientific research.

Consciousness is notoriously difficult to explain. On one hand, there are facts about conscious experience – the way clarinets sound, the way lemonade tastes – that we know subjectively, from the inside. On the other hand, such facts are not readily accommodated in the objective world described by science. How, after all, could the reediness of clarinets or the tartness of lemonade be predicted in advance?

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*

Join us even if you haven't finished reading.

The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!

The October Book Club will meet at our new Book Club venue:

The Gallery of
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

28 East 35 St. (Park-Mad)

This Unitarian Universalist church, a New York institution since 1825, has a long and distinguished history as a progressive force for social and racial justice, and SHSNY is delighted to be associated with CCNY.

SHSNY BOOK CLUB meets

THURSDAY, OCT. 6, 6:30 pm
in the Gallery room of
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

28 East 35 St. (Park-Mad)
(3 doors West of the church - red door)

to discuss

**SELF COMES TO MIND:
Constructing the
Conscious Mind**
by **Antonio Damasio**

From one of the most significant neuroscientists at work today, *Self Comes to Mind* is a pathbreaking investigation of a question that has confounded philosophers and neuroscientists for centuries: How is consciousness created?

Damasio introduces an evolutionary perspective that entails a radical change in the way the history of conscious minds is viewed and told. He 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.

Paperback and Kindle editions.

SHSNY BOOK CLUB meets

THURSDAY, NOV. 3, 6:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

in the Gallery room,
28 East 35 St. (Park-Mad)

to discuss

**IS THE INTERNET CHANGING
THE WAY YOU THINK?**
*The Net's Impact on Our
Minds and Future*
by **John Brockman**

Brockman, publisher of Edge.org, posed the question to more than 150 of the world’s most influential minds, including Dawkins, Dennett and Harris, of course, but also the likes of Brian Eno, Helen Fisher, Martin Rees and Alan Alda.

“Brilliant, farsighted, and fascinating, *Is the Internet Changing the Way You Think?* is an essential guide to the Net-based world.”

Paperback and Kindle editions.

BRUNCH!

SUNDAY, SEPT. 18, 12 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.

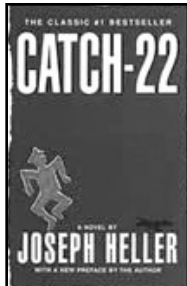
Bring friends!

October brunch: 10/16.

SHSNY CALENDAR: JULY - OCTOBER 2011

MONDAY, SEPT. 12, 7:00 pm
SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)
"CATCH-22"

Yossarian (Alan Arkin) tries to convince Doc Daneeka that Orr, a bomber pilot, is too crazy to fly any more combat missions, and asks: "Can you ground him?"



"I sure can. But first he has to ask me to. That's part of the rule."
 "And then you can ground him?"
 "No. Then I can't ground him."
 "You mean there's a catch?"
 "Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat isn't really crazy."
 "That's some catch, that Catch-22."
 "It's the best there is."

Mike Nichols' 1970 "scathing black comedy" adaptation of Joseph Heller's blockbuster novel captures the surrealist insanity of WW2 army life. With Richard Benjamin, Art Garfunkel, Paula Prentiss, Buck Henry, Charles Grodin, Bob Newhart, Martin Sheen, and Orson Welles.

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

PLANNING AHEAD

Holidays and disasters aside, the usual monthly schedule of SHSNY events is:

- Book Club: First Thursday** at the Community Church of NY.
 - Movie Night: Second Monday** at Stone Creek Lounge.
 - Brunch: Third Sunday** at BXL East Bistro.
 - Great Lectures: Fourth Tuesday** at Stone Creek Lounge.
- More info: www.shsny.org

GREAT LECTURES
TUESDAY, SEPT. 27, 7:00 pm
"DOES GOD EXIST?"

Part 2
A debate between
Christopher Hitchens
& William Lane Craig
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

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A "POST-SECULAR WORLD"? NOT SO FAST

Alastair Bonnett

(Reprinted from *timeshighereducation.co.uk* 7/28/2011)

Some words seem to be made for each other: "strawberries" and "cream"; "spending" and "cuts." Should we add "secular" and "elite" to the list? A new wave of academic critics is working hard to shackle them together.

The Indian social scientist Ashis Nandy was one of the first. In *An Anti-Secularist Manifesto*, published in 1985, he accused secularism of being "ethnocidal," "authoritarian" and "middle class." Nandy's argument is that secularism is the creature of an uprooted elite who have abandoned the instinctively religious cultural world of the masses. It is a provocative distinction. After all, secularism is usually defined as the idea that governance should be separate from religion. It is a divorce that is commonly understood to create the conditions for religious plurality and tolerance.

Yet anti-secularism is gaining traction. Indeed, Zaheer Baber, professor of sociology at the University of Toronto, suggests that it is "fast emerging as the new opium of some intellectuals." At the heart of this growth lies an empirical assumption: that most people are religious and that secularism reflects the anti-religious bias of an arrogant minority. Thus anti-secularism is given the inexorable weight of the majority world. And not being religious is made to seem like something irredeemably Western and middle class. Indeed, Francis Campbell, the former British Ambassador to the Holy See, claims that secularism is "Eurocentric." The big question, Campbell suggests, is "why is Europe exceptional?" when "the greater part of the world, both developed and developing, is as furiously religious as ever."

But this agenda goes well beyond pondering papal ambassadors or, indeed, fuming fundamentalist Protestants (such as the Evangelical Alliance, which has denounced the BBC as run by a "metropolitan liberal and secular elite"). Klaus Eder, professor of sociology at the Institute of Social Sciences, Humboldt University of Berlin, is one of a growing number of social scientists who cast secularists as an unrepresentative clique who have marginalized the religious views of the majority. He argues that "secularization is nothing more than a phenomenon that has hushed up religion." His depiction aligns secularism with the "seizure of land" and "censorship in schools."

In his 2007 book, *Secularism or Democracy?*, Veit Bader takes a comparable view. For Bader, secularism is no longer sustainable in a multicultural Europe. It cannot accommodate difference, hence it is undemocratic. Like other critics, Bader thinks the "monolithic" secular state should be replaced, or supplemented, by a plurality of faith-based institutions.

If these perspectives appear to have a slightly softer edge than Nandy's accusatory interventions, it is largely because they adopt the language not of anti-secularism but rather the more cuddly post-secularism. This presents secularism as

something that has been absorbed and moved on from. The general stance of post-secularism is not confrontation but historical condescension. The casual assertion that we have entered a "post-secular age" is typical. It is a phrase widely sprinkled across a range of recent conferences and books: in *The American University in a Postsecular Age* (2008), for example, Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen announce that higher education may once have been "a secular enterprise, but that approach no longer suffices. The culture has shifted."

This might sound uncontroversial. But post-secularism hints at more than mere cultural transformation. It suggests that institutional and legal structures that were once based on rational and common principles should be replaced by a mosaic of religious practices and jurisdictions.

Indeed, post-secularism implies the privatization of power on a massive scale, allowing voluntary groups that are able to convince others that they represent a religious viewpoint to claim control of any of, if not all, the services that were once regarded as being within the state's purview.

The academic debate on post-secularism is replete with references to diversity, difference and choice. But it draws its inspiration from the more prosaic argument that God has the numbers – and that secularists do not. Whether it is Dinesh D'Souza proclaiming "the global triumph of Christianity" or John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge announcing that *God Is Back* (2009), there is no shortage of authors eager to tell us that the masses are very religious and getting more so.

But in fact, survey evidence suggests that a majority of people, whether religious or not, are pro-secular. The World Values Survey has shown clearly that, even in most of the most religious countries of Asia and Africa, a significant majority of people agree with the statement that "Religious leaders should not influence politics." Secularism has vast popular support, not just in "secular Europe" but across the world. If you don't fancy the idea of the legal, education or political system divvied up among clerics, you are not alone.

So it seems that although a majority of the world's population categorize themselves by one faith or another, most people support secularism. But we can go further. For the contention that, beyond the blinkered world of middle-class white liberals, most folks are "furiously religious" just isn't true.

What is the least religious ethnic group in Britain? Census evidence shows that it isn't "whites" but the Chinese. And that is going some, because Britain is a very non-religious place. Only 10 per cent of people, according to Christian charity Tearfund's poll from 2007, turn out every Sunday to go to church. Even the much-banded figure that 70 per cent of Britons believe in God turns out to be questionable. According to a Eurobarometer survey from 2005, the percentage of people in the UK who "believe in a god" is 38 per cent.

The least religious people in the world are the Swedish (where 85 per cent are unbelievers or agnostics). However,

the second least religious country in the world is Vietnam. China comes close behind. Religiosity is relatively rare in many East Asian cultures. A century ago, the deeply conservative Chinese philosopher Gu Hongming was moved to compare his own nation's rationalism with the West's credulous superstitions.

"When the modern West once gets itself free from Medievalism," he argued, "it will have the same civilization as China, a civilization of rationalism and science."

It is not secularism that is Eurocentric but rather the idea that rationalism is uniquely Western. Communicating ordinary Chinese people's lack of faith to Americans who, by comparison, are steeped in religion, is a real challenge. Trying to explain the tradition of returning home at Chinese New Year, the journalist Zhang Xi feels that she has to translate it into "our terms." "The Chinese are tied together with family affection rather than any specific religions or ideology. Our civilization is based on family affection, so that we think of the Spring Festival homecoming as a kind of ritual. Home is our Holy Land."

Zhang knows that the West is still feeling its way towards the kind of non-religious common culture that most Chinese have taken for granted for centuries. Through her work on an English-language website, she hopes to help us along.

When we tot it all up, taking in the non-believers and agnostics in Europe (including Russia) and East Asia, and assuming that everyone else in the world is religious, we arrive at a figure of about 20 per cent of the world's population being non-religious. But this is likely to be a considerable underestimate. The World Values Survey has shown that, even in many Muslim countries, the percentage of people who do not consider themselves religious is often significant. Today the Arab Spring has confounded many of the basic assumptions of post-secularism.

Even in the world's most religious nations, secularism is a mass phenomenon. Many millions of ordinary people want to close the book on sectarianism (or should we call it post-secularism?) and look forward to a fairer future. They have learned from bitter experience that modernity without secularism is a recipe for repression and conflict.

Nandy's Anti-Secularist Manifesto is today being echoed in myriad little manifestos that try to frame secularism as a middle-class European hang-up and religiosity as the default condition of authentic humanity. But the idea that we can cleave the world between the secular West and the religious rest just doesn't wash. Secularism is relied upon—or fondly hoped for—across the world to deliver pluralism, equality and tolerance. Its critics have yet to grasp its diversity, its popularity or its necessity. Thankfully, we have not quite entered "the post-secular age."

For me religion is something like golf; a comfort and joy to many people across the world but a baffling irrelevance which, without appreciable effort to ignore it on my part, has made absolutely no impact on my life."

— Tim Hayward, *The Guardian* (UK)

ALTRUISM: IS IT IN OUR GENES?

Natalie Angier

(Excerpted from "Thirst for Fairness May Have Helped Us Survive," in *The New York Times*, 7/4/2011)

Among the Ache hunter-gatherers in eastern Paraguay, healthy adults with no dependent offspring are expected to donate as much as 70 to 90 percent of the food they forage to the needier members of the group. And as those strapping suppliers themselves fall ill, give birth or grow old, they know they can count on the tribe to provide.

Among the !Kung bushmen of the Kalahari in Africa, a successful hunter who may be inclined to swagger is kept in check by his compatriots through a ritualized game called "insulting the meat." You asked us out here to help you carry that pitiful carcass? What is it, some kind of rabbit?

Among the Hadza foragers of northern Tanzania, people confronted by a stingy food sharer do not simply accept what's offered. They hold out their hand, according to Frank Marlowe, an anthropologist at Durham University in England, "encouraging the giver to keep giving until the giver finally draws the line."

Among America's top executives today, according to a study commissioned by *The New York Times*, the average annual salary is about \$10 million and rising some 12 percent a year. At the same time, the rest of the tribe of the United States of America struggles with miserably high unemployment, stagnant wages and the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Now, maybe the wealth gap is a temporary problem, and shiny new quarters will soon rain down on us all. But if you're feeling tetchy and surly about the lavished haves when you have not a job, if you're tempted to go out and insult a piece of corporate meat, researchers who study the nature and evolution of human social organization say they are hardly surprised.

Darwinian-minded analysts argue that *Homo sapiens* have an innate distaste for hierarchical extremes, the legacy of our long nomadic prehistory as tightly knit bands living by veldt-ready team-building rules: the belief in fairness and reciprocity, a capacity for empathy and impulse control, and a willingness to work cooperatively in ways that even our smartest primate kin cannot match. As Michael Tomasello of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology has pointed out, you will never see two chimpanzees carrying a log together. The advent of agriculture and settled life may have thrown a few feudal monkeys and monarchs into the mix, but evolutionary theorists say our basic egalitarian leanings remain.

Studies have found that the thirst for fairness runs deep. As Ernst Fehr of the University of Zurich and his colleagues reported in the journal *Nature*, by the age of 6 or 7, children are zealously devoted to the equitable partitioning of goods, and they will choose to punish those who try to grab more than their arithmetically proper share of Smarties and jelly beans even when that means the punishers must sacrifice their own portion of treats.

In follow-up research with older children and

adolescents that has yet to be published, Dr. Fehr and his colleagues have found a more nuanced understanding of fairness, an acknowledgment that some degree of inequality can make sense: The kid who studies every night deserves a better grade than the slacker. Nevertheless, said Dr. Fehr, there are limits to teenage tolerance. “‘One for me, two for you’ may not be too bad,” Dr. Fehr said. “But ‘one for me, five for you’ would not be accepted.”

A sense of fairness is both cerebral and visceral, cortical and limbic. In the journal *PLoS Biology*, Katarina Gospic of the Karolinska Institute’s Osher Center in Stockholm and her colleagues analyzed brain scans of 35 subjects as they played the famed Ultimatum game, in which participants bargain over how to divide up a fixed sum of money. Immediately upon hearing an opponent propose a split of 80 percent me, 20 percent you, scanned subjects showed a burst of activity in the amygdala, the ancient seat of outrage and aggression, followed by the arousal of higher cortical domains associated with introspection, conflict resolution and upholding rules; and 40 percent of the time they angrily rejected the deal as unfair.

That first swift limbic kick proved key. When given a mild anti-anxiety drug that suppressed the amygdala response, subjects still said they viewed an 80-20 split as unjust, but their willingness to reject it outright dropped in half. “This indicates that the act of treating people fairly and implementing justice in society has evolutionary roots,” Dr. Gospic said. “It increases our survival.”

David Sloan Wilson, an evolutionary theorist at the State University of New York at Binghamton, sees the onset of humanity’s cooperative, fair-and-square spirit as one of the major transitions in the history of life on earth, moments when individual organisms or selection units band together and stake their future fitness on each other. A larger bacterial cell engulfs a smaller bacterial cell to form the first complex eukaryotic cell. Single cells merge into multicellular organisms of specialized parts. Ants and bees become hive-minded superorganisms and push all other insects aside.

“A major transition occurs when you have mechanisms for suppressing fitness differences and establishing equality within groups, so that it is no longer possible to succeed at the expense of your group,” Dr. Wilson said. “It’s a rare event, and it’s hard to get started, but when it does you can quickly dominate the earth.” Human evolution, he said, “clearly falls into this paradigm.”

Our rise to global dominance began, paradoxically enough, when we set rigid dominance hierarchies aside. “In a typical primate group, the toughest individuals can have their way and dominate everybody else in the group,” said Dr. Wilson. “Chimps are very smart, but their intelligence is predicated on distrust.”

Our ancestors had to learn to trust their neighbors, and the seeds of our mutuality can be seen in our simplest gestures, like the willingness to point out a hidden object to another, as even toddlers will do. Early humans also needed ways to control would-be bullies, and our exceptional pitching skills – which researchers speculate originally

arose to help us ward off predators – probably helped. “We can throw much better than any other primate,” Dr. Wilson said, “and once we could throw things at a distance, all of a sudden the alpha male is vulnerable to being dispatched with stones. Stoning might have been one of our first adaptations.”

Low hierarchy does not mean no hierarchy. Through ethnographic and cross-cultural studies, researchers have concluded that the basic template for human social groups is moderately but not unerringly egalitarian. They have found gradients of wealth and power among even the most nomadic groups, but such gradients tend to be mild. In a recent analysis of five hunter-gatherer populations, Eric Aiden Smith of the University of Washington and his colleagues found the average degree of income inequality to be roughly half that seen in the United States, and close to the wealth distribution of Denmark.

Interestingly, another recent study found that when Americans were given the chance to construct their version of the optimal wealth gradient for America, both Republicans and Democrats came up with a chart that looked like Sweden. No need to insult the meat in the land of lutefisk.

DOONESBURY TEACHES ALTERNATIVES TO EVOLUTION IN LOUISIANA

(Transcribed from the “Doonesbury” comic strip, 7/10/2011) Science teacher in front of class:

So all the evidence massively supports a theory of evolution that knits together everything we know about biology.

However, as high school science students in the state of Louisiana, you are entitled to learn an alternative theory supported by no scientific evidence whatsoever.

It goes like this. 5,700 years ago, a male deity created earth and all life on it in six days. Unfortunately, he didn’t like his own handiwork, so God created genocide and drowned everyone on earth except the family of Noah, a 600-year-old man who was charged with saving animals ...

Student: Mr. Stiller?

Teacher: Yes?

Student: Please stop. I’d like to get into a good college.

Teacher: Almost done. So Noah took two of everything, including microbes, but forgot the dinosaurs ...

EVOLUTION: THE REALLY LONG VIEW Martin Rees

I’d like to widen people’s awareness of the tremendous timespan lying ahead – for our planet, and for life itself. Most educated people are aware that we’re the outcome of nearly four billion years of Darwinian selection, but many tend to think that humans are somehow the culmination. Our sun, however, is less than halfway through its lifespan. Six billion years from now, it will not be humans who watch the sun’s demise. Any creatures that then exist will be as different from us as we are from bacteria or amoebae.

AUSTRIA SORT-OF RECOGNIZES PASTAFARIANISM

Is this a victory for our side? An Austrian atheist has won the right to be shown on his driving-license photo wearing a pasta strainer as “religious headgear.”

Niko Alm first applied for the license three years ago after reading that headgear was allowed in official pictures only for confessional reasons. He said the sieve is a requirement of his religion, pastafarianism. The license took three years to come through because Austrian authorities required him to obtain a doctor’s certificate that he was “psychologically fit” to drive.

But Mr. Alm got his license [*Sorry, Googled pix of the license photo are too dark to read – JR*] and the next step, he told the Austrian news agency APA, is to apply to the Austrian authorities for pastafarianism to become an officially recognized faith.

Here in America ... in response to attempts to teach “intelligent design” as an alternative to natural selection in Kansas schools, the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster has asked the state’s school board for the pastafarian version of creation (whatever that is) to be taught to schoolchildren, as an alternative to the Christian theory.

52% APPROVE OF GOD’S JOB PERFORMANCE John Blake, CNN

(Excerpted from *ccc Belief Blog*, 7/27/2011, and forwarded by John O’Brien)

(No, this is not satire from *The Onion* – it’s real. – JR)

If you think voters are in cranky mood over politics, a new poll suggests that some of the dissatisfaction may run deeper. God’s job performance has trouble measuring up to many Americans’ expectations, according to a poll by Public Policy Polling, a Democratic firm based in North Carolina. Only 52 percent of Americans approve of God’s job performance, the survey found, though just 9 percent disapprove.

The polling question that prompted this curious response was, “If God exists, do you approve or disapprove of its [sic] performance?”

“When asked to evaluate God on some of the issues it is responsible for, voters give God its best rating on creating the universe, 71-5,” the polling report said. “They also approve of its handling of the animal kingdom, 56-11, and even its handling of natural disasters 50-13.”

On the bright side for the Almighty’s re-election chances, God is still more popular than House Speaker John Boehner and both Republicans and Democrats in Congress, all of whom polled at 33 percent in the same poll.

PRAY TO SAINT ANTHONY TO FIND SAINT ANTHONY

Rev. Joseph Magaña of Saint Anthony’s Roman Catholic Church in Long Beach, California thought he had a good idea for “people here who have lost a lot in this economy.”

At mass on Sunday, June 14, he unveiled a 780-year-old relic of Saint Anthony of Padua, the patron saint of lost objects. St. Anthony, he told his parishioners, could do more than help them find their lost car keys and wallet. “He can restore your faith in God, your trust in the system, in yourself.”

When he finished, hundreds of worshipers lined up to pray before the relic, which was housed in an ornate gold reliquary, about 16 inches high, with angel-shaped handles. Father Magaña reminded them that they could not touch it.

But someone did, and stole it.

The patron saint of lost objects is still lost.

AMERICANS REACT TO TEXAS GOV. PERRY’S “THE RESPONSE” PRAYER MEETING

(Based on *TheOnion.com*, 8/7/2011)

While several freethought groups, including the Texas ACLU, voiced opposition to Texas governor Rick Perry’s participation in an August 6 day of Christian prayer and fasting, *The Onion Weekly* polled ordinary Americans for their opinions. Some reactions:

“Well, the Constitution does bar the establishment of a state religion, but it also guarantees an individual’s right to the free exercise of superstition, so it’s a tricky case.”

Marvin Blair, Systems Analyst

“As long as it was Christian prayer, I don’t think it violated the separation of church and state.”

Clarice Bernier, Glaze Handler

“Why’s everybody getting so worked up? All he’s going to do is pray for stuff; it’s not like anything is actually going to happen.”

Jerry Schuster, Rafter

TWO SIGNS SEEN AT SUMMER TEA PARTY MEETS THAT WE HOPE WERE ALSO AT RICK PERRY’S “THE RESPONSE” PRAY-IN

Real hand-lettered sign:

**OBAMA IS NOT A BROWN-SKINNED
ANTI-WAR SOCIALIST WHO GIVES
AWAY FREE HEALTHCARE.
YOU’RE THINKING OF JESUS.**

And our favorite photo of the summer just past ...



WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK TIMES FOUR

Ohio: What could possibly go wrong?

Ohio Governor John Kasich has signed into law “a bill that allows gun owners in the state to carry concealed weapons into bars and other places where alcohol is served.”

I know what you’re thinking: Because of its inhibition-lowering properties, alcohol use results in lots of bar fights and other alcohol-related violence already, so it seems like a really bad idea to throw guns into the mix.

That’s why the law “prohibits gun owners from consuming alcohol or being under the influence of alcohol or drugs when they carry their weapons in bars.”

Alcohol + Guns + Honor System = Great Idea!

Tennessee: Don’t ever say “gay”!

The State Senate Judiciary Committee has approved a revolutionary plan to fight the “homosexual agenda”: don’t tell students gay people exist until they get to high school.

The measure (SB49), the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, which is sponsored by Sen. Stacey Campfield, R-Knoxville, who unsuccessfully pushed the same idea for six years as a member of the state House before he was elected to the Senate, will make it illegal to discuss any sexual behavior other than heterosexuality before the ninth grade.

Arkansas: Who needs a Constitution?

The City Council of Gould, population 850, has outlawed congregating or even talking about the City in a group setting. Not only in public groups, but even at a resident’s kitchen table.

Though Mayor Earnest Nash vetoed the bill, it can be

re-introduced, and could become law without his approval. “They can take me to court,” said Nash. “This is still part of America, and in America, you can’t just vote to violate peoples’ First Amendment constitutional rights.”

That’s even what Gould’s city attorney told the council. So, they tried to fire him.

“That’s why you have a higher court,” said council member Sonja Farley, “to keep order when people can’t keep order. That’s why you have a council!”

Montana: The library only needs one book.

The school board in Republic voted 4-0 to delete the Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., novel, *Slaughterhouse Five*, a modern literary classic, from the school curriculum and remove it from the library, because it “teaches ideas contrary to the Bible.”

I WILL MARRY YOU

John Rafferty

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How do you kill an ocean?
Page 1
Is Anders Breivik a
Christian Terrorist?
Page 2
Of politics, penguins, and
mutual annoyances
Page 5
Is secularism passé?
Page 8

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