

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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September, 2012

Vacation's over, let's get back work: promoting religion's positives (really), while we parse atheist strategies, celebrate atheist scientists (and one comedian), lament atheist sex, and play atheist baseball. We consider sanity in Norway, stupidity in Texas, and blind idiocy in Israel. We nominate another Dumbth (Do you even have to ask who?) and deliver a new Decalogue. *And*, if you're ready for work, work is what's promised in our new Study Group, starting on page 4. – JR

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**BOOK NOW  
FOR THE 4TH ANNUAL  
SHSNY FREETHOUGHT DAY BRUNCH,  
OCTOBER 7 WITH  
DR. CHARLES DEBROVNER  
See Page 7**

**ATHEISM RISES,  
RELIGIOSITY DECLINES IN AMERICA  
Kimberly Winston**

*(From Religion News Service, 8/14/2012)*

**A** new international poll, called "The Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism", found that the number of Americans who say they are "religious" dropped from 73 percent in 2005 (the last time the poll was conducted) to 60 percent.

At the same time, the number of Americans who say they are atheists rose, from 1 percent to 5 percent.

The poll was conducted by WIN-Gallup International and is based on interviews with 50,000 people from 57 countries and five continents. Participants were asked, "Irrespective of whether you attend a place of worship or not, would you say you are a religious person, not a religious person, or a convinced atheist?"

The seven years between the polls is notable because 2005 saw the publication of *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris, the first in a wave of best-selling books on atheism by Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and other so-called "New Atheists".

"The obvious implication is that this is a manifestation of the New Atheism movement", said Ryan Cragun, a University of Tampa sociologist of religion who studies American and global atheism. Still, Cragun does not believe

the poll shows more people are becoming atheists, but rather that more people are willing to identify as atheists.

"For a very long time, religiosity has been a central characteristic of the American identity", he said. "But what this suggests is that this is changing and people are feeling less inclined to identify as religious to comply with what it means to be a good person in the U.S."

Another possible factor may be the number of atheists within organized efforts by American atheist groups to encourage those who do not believe in God to say so publicly. The Out Campaign, a project of the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, was launched in 2007 and has since been endorsed by several national atheist groups.

The current poll confirms a declining religiosity – both at home and abroad – that's been detected in other polls. The 2008 American Religious Identification Survey found that 15 percent of Americans said they have no religion -- different from being a "confirmed atheist", but nonetheless up from 8 percent in 1990.

Barry Kosmin, the principal investigator for the ARIS report, said he's skeptical of the new study.

"The U.S. trends are what we have found and would expect, but the actual numbers are peculiar to say the least", he said. "The drops in religiosity seem too sharp for the time period – people just don't change their beliefs that quickly. Most of the trend away from religion has demographic causes and demography moves 'glacially'."

Specifically, he points to the poll's finding that Vietnam, while showing a sharp 23 percent drop in religiosity since 2005, also shows no atheists. "Eight million Communist Party members but zero atheists?" he said. "That statistic makes me very doubtful of the accuracy of the survey overall and some of the international comparisons."

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SHSNY is an Affiliated Local Group of the Council for Secular Humanism, and a Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association.

Other findings from the poll include: Besides Vietnam, Ireland had the greatest change in religiosity, down from 69 percent to 47 percent.

China has the most “convinced atheists”, at 47 percent, followed by Japan (31 percent), Czech Republic (30 percent) and France (29 percent)

The most religious countries are in Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya), South America (Brazil, Peru), and Eastern Europe (Macedonia, Romania, Armenia).

Countries with the same percentage of atheists as the U.S. are Poland, Moldova and Saudi Arabia.

## ON ATHEIST STRATEGY

Bill Chapman

I feel that some of the strategies employed by some atheists, especially formally organized atheist groups, leaves a bit to be desired.

**Lawsuits Over Nothing:** A private restaurant in Pennsylvania offered discounts on Sundays for anyone who brought in a religious bulletin. John Wolff, a local atheist, is suing them for discrimination. Several churches made it clear that anyone was welcome to enter into their church lobbies and pick up a bulletin for free, and the restaurant says they are setting no requirement that anyone believe anything or actually attend services. That’s not good enough for John.

Is this the way to make ourselves liked? Can we sue our way to popularity? Can we expect the rest of society to react positively to being confronted by yet another god-damned militant, touchy minority that exudes a sense of entitlement and a victim mentality?

We seem to be faced with an ever-expanding circle of groups about whom honest opinions cannot be expressed, who must be treated with kid gloves no matter how harmful their actions. It’s gone further in Europe; in Germany it’s illegal to call a convicted murderer a murderer once he’s served his time.

There are some things that shouldn’t, and can’t, be just given as a gift, that have to be earned. Admiration is one of them, and liking is another. If we want people to like us, we should do good deeds, not file annoying lawsuits.

**The War on Christmas:** The American Atheists have been choosing Christmas as a good time to run billboard campaigns against religion. Is that the best time to be complaining?

It’s like, if you’re trying to discourage kids from going to the doctor, you make your pitch when he’s giving them a shot, not when he’s giving them a lollipop at the end of the visit. Good luck turning kids off lollipops. For Christians, whether they believe or not, Christmas is a fun time. It’s the lollipop! It’s when they visit their families and exchange gifts. There are much better times to complain.

Such as when the American head of state started a trillion-dollar war in Iraq because he thought God told him to. When clergy who make unhealthy, sexually confused vows wind up molesting children. When Israelis spend U.S. tax dollars harassing and killing people to assert their claim

to the West Bank, a claim which makes no sense unless you believe in their religion. When governments of poor, overpopulated countries like the Philippines refrain from providing birth control because the main church in their country doesn’t want them to.

And, of course, when we read things in religious scripture that make us want to vomit.

David Silverman, the president of American Atheists, went on Fox News to discuss his billboards protesting Christmas, and one of the Fox correspondents had a field day telling him to “seek professional help” for his issues about the holiday. It was not a good day for atheism.

When religions change, people find ways to keep the old holidays. Many of the traditions of Christmas and Easter were inherited from pre-Christian European pagan festivities. In the atheist former Soviet Union, they had a “Father New Year” in a red suit giving presents to children.

Even if the atheist movement is successful beyond our wildest ambitions, Americans will keep celebrating Christmas, one way or another, and we should resign ourselves to that.

Comments on my blog are welcome at <http://tinyurl.com/bljcl49>

**Comment:** *I’m sure the above will inspire a few comments, on Bill’s blog and right here in these pages. Let’s start immediately below, with the opinion of an eminent philosopher. – JR*

## ON THE OTHER HAND ...

It’s time to refuse to tiptoe around people who claim respect, consideration, special treatment on the grounds that they have a religious faith, as if having faith were a privilege-endowing virtue, as if it were noble to believe in unsupported claims and ancient superstitions.

– A.C. Grayling

## AND THE TIMES, THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’

In fact, according to *Humanist Network News*, the AHA newsletter, Gallup first asked Americans in 1958 if they would vote for an atheist for president. Only 18% said they would. In 1978 the number was 40%. In 1999 it was up to 49%. Now, for the first time, 54% of Americans say they would vote for an atheist president.

## SEXUAL ATHEISM

*(Transcribed from New York City Atheists’ Facebook site)*

Q.: What is your sexual orientation?

A.: I’m a sexual atheist.

Q.: What does that mean?

A.: I don’t believe I’ll ever get laid.

The difference between faith and insanity is that faith is the ability to hold firmly to a conclusion that is incompatible with the evidence, whereas insanity is the ability to hold firmly to a conclusion that is incompatible with the evidence. – *Dictionary of Contemporary Mythology.*

## EIGHT ATHEIST AND AGNOSTIC SCIENTISTS WHO CHANGED THE WORLD – Part 1

Greta Christina

(Excerpted from *Alternet.org*, 8/17/2012)

It's common knowledge—or it should be—that atheists are among the most reviled and mistrusted groups in America. We consistently come in at the bottom of polls about who Americans would vote for, who they would trust, who they want to marry into their families, who they think shares their view of how the world should be.

But it's also the case that non-believers—not atheists as a group, but certain individual atheists and other non-believers—are among our most respected and beloved heroes. Not everyone knows that these people aren't religious, of course, but they're not. And scientists are among the most admired of those heroes. Maybe it's because scientists are more likely to be non-believers than the general population, and the more advanced in their field they are, the more true that becomes. Or maybe it's because great scientists—American or not—embody the old-fashioned American values of exploration and curiosity, the willingness to question and the passion for truth, persistence in pursuing dreams, and courage in the face of adversity. (These values aren't uniquely American, of course—but when people gas on about the American character, these ideals do tend to turn up in the conversation.)

So here are eight non-believing or agnostic scientists, whose work and lives and stories can inspire anyone -- atheist, religious, or other.

### 1) Stephen Hawking

What can I say? Dude can think. Dude is revising the entire way we think of the universe. Dude is on the cutting edge of explaining why the universe even exists. And dude doesn't believe in a personal God. He has written an entire book, *The Grand Design*, explaining that God isn't necessary to explain the origins of the universe.

*"Because there is a law such as gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing. Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God to light the blue touch paper and set the universe going."*

He has described the most important point of his book as being "that science can explain the universe, and that we don't need God to explain why there is something rather than nothing or why the laws of nature are what they are". And, "The scientific account is complete. Theology is unnecessary." And he can be quite passionate on the subject: he's said that belief in Heaven or an afterlife "is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark". And no, he's not inspiring because he's disabled and disabled people are here on Earth to overcome adversity and be courageous and give inspiration to the rest of us. ... Yes, of course, overcoming adversity is awesome. But Hawking would be inspiring if he came up with his ideas while doing one-

handed push-ups.

### 2) Alan Turing

He's been called the founder of computer science, and the founder of artificial intelligence. The fact that you're reading these words on a computer—the fact that you can send e-mail, text your loved ones in an emergency, do your banking in seconds instead of hours, use your phone to look up weird facts at bars, and have access to every other way that computers have radically shaped and improved our lives—is something you owe, in large part, to Alan Turing. But even more inspiring is the work he did cracking German codes during World War II. The cryptanalysis of the Enigma machines used by the Axis was "decisive to the Allied victory" — those are the words of Dwight D. Eisenhower. And Turing was one of the most brilliant and most central people responsible for it.

Turing's story is actually pretty sad. Despite the years of devoted work he did for his country — work that arguably saved his country — Turing was prosecuted for homosexuality (a crime at the time in England). He was given a choice between prison and chemical castration; chose the latter and committed (probable) suicide two years later. The way he was treated by his country was despicable and tragic. But his story is also inspiring. And it gives the lie to the ridiculous notion that, without belief in God, people would have no meaning to their lives, no basis for ethics, and no reason to care about anyone other than themselves. Turing was an atheist — he let go of his religion as a teenager, when a close friend died of tuberculosis and he decided materialism made more sense than religion — and he devoted years of his life to his country, and to halting the spread of fascism.

### 3) Rosalind Franklin

Rosalind Franklin's story is also a bit sad. A researcher in biophysics, her work was crucial in Watson and Crick's discovery of the DNA double helix structure. In fact, according to Francis Crick, her data was "the data we actually used" to formulate their hypothesis about the structure of DNA. But her data was obtained under less than ideal circumstances, by Watson and Crick without her knowledge, and she died without ever being properly credited for the work she did. But she's an inspiration as well. I mean, DNA, come on! It's one of the most fundamental ways we have of understanding ourselves and our place in the world. She made understanding it possible. And she did this at a time when it was exceedingly difficult for women to even get into science, much less do groundbreaking, earth-shaking, brain-rearranging work in it.

And yes, big old non-believer. From one of her letters:

*"I agree that faith is essential to success in life ... but I do not accept your definition of faith, i.e., belief in life after death. In my view, all that is necessary for faith is the belief that by doing our best we shall come nearer to success and that success in our aims (the improvement of the lot of mankind, present and future) is worth attaining ... I maintain that faith in this world is perfectly possible without faith in another world."*

Part 2 of Ms. Christina's essay will appear next month.



**SAY IT “AIN’T” SO.  
A NIGHT OF “UNBELIEVABLE” FUN  
Kimberly Winston**

*(Excerpted from “St. Paul Saints baseball team to become ‘Mr. Paul Aints’ on Atheist Night”, from Religious News Service, 7/10/2012)*

For one hot August night, the St. Paul Saints, a Minnesota minor league baseball team, will become the “Mr. Paul Aints” in a game sponsored by a local atheist group.

Dubbed “A Night of Unbelievable Fun”, the August 10 game against the Amarillo Sox will include an auction of players’ special “Aints” jerseys, fireworks and a ceremonial first pitch by David Silverman, president of American Atheists. The letter “S” in all Saints signs and logos around the stadium will be covered, and there are planned references to Big Foot, UFOs and other targets of the skeptical community, team officials said.

“We want to show that atheists can have fun,” said August Berkshire, president of Minnesota Atheists, which is sponsoring the event with American Atheists a day before its regional conference in downtown St. Paul.

“We picked the name not as a political statement, but just as something that was fun,” Berkshire said. “We thought everybody ain’t got a belief in something so it was a word everybody could relate to. Obviously, we ain’t got a belief in God.”

One atheist blogger wondered if the seventh inning stretch would include the singing of “Dog Bless America”.

The team, which is partly owned by actor Bill Murray, has a history of unusual promotions and events. The team’s mascots are two pigs named Kim Lardashian and Kris Hamphries that carry baseballs to the umpires.

Nor is this the Saints’ first dip into the religion and science debate. In 2010, the team gave away a rotating Cro-Magnon/Charles Darwin bobblehead doll to salute the 150th anniversary of the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*.

*Comment: Obviously, the above is history, but I can’t find any news reports of the August 10 game or evening. Help? – JR*

**PHYLLIS DILLER, HAPPY ATHEIST  
1917-2012**

According to [philosophia.org](http://philosophia.org) (Thanks, Warren Allen Smith), in 2003 the female stand-up comic said:

*“I believe in nature. I’m a thinker, a scientist. I can’t buy all the religious stuff, so I’m an atheist. Plus, I’m also disturbed that most wars are about religion – including the current one. I don’t want to have anything to do with that. When you die, it’s over.”*

Her son, Perry, who found his 95-year-old mother dead, said that he “found her with a smile on her face”.

Jesus promised an end to wicked people. Odin promised an end to frost giants.

I don’t see any frost giants. – *Brendan Rafferty*

**Announcing HUMANISM 101  
A Study-Group Program to Broaden Knowledge  
of the History, and Philosophy of Humanism  
John Rafferty**

In August, 2010, I began a three-year course of study in the Humanist Institute’s Leadership Training Program – three extended seminar weekends each year (two in New York, one in Washington) – focused on a small mountain of books that were/are the springboards for 14-hour days of discussion, argument, and Socratic dialog among five students led by two brilliant HI mentors: Jeff Tate and Gretchen Robinson.

When I told the SHSNY Board of my intention and asked for funding of my tuition costs (your membership dues at work!), I promised that I would put my training to work for the entire SHSNY membership.

Humanism 101 is the fulfillment of that promise.

**A Study Group**

The purpose of Humanism 101 is to offer a humanist education program for the membership and friends of SHSNY, for our friends at the Community Church of New York (CCNY), and for the larger New York City freethought community. It is open to all who are interested in studying humanist history, philosophy, ethics, ideas, and ideals.

We will meet the last Monday of each month, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m., over six months (maybe eight – see *Course of Study*), beginning October 29, at CCNY, 28 East 35 Street. Because of the holidays, we’ll skip December.

The program will be a course of study, led (not lectured) by me in what I hope will be stimulating Socratic dialog based on readings done *by you* prior to each session.

Humanism 101 is not a book club or a social gathering (although I hope we will socialize and enjoy each other’s company); it is a study group. While each session will be open (and free) to anyone, discussions will be limited to those who have read the materials assigned (see *Course of Study*). If you haven’t done the reading, you may audit the evening – and then, I hope, do the reading for next month.

Each meeting will focus on one book-length assigned text (perhaps a second for the motivated), and on short online materials in preparation for the discussions. As we proceed, of course, you may suggest additional reading.

A Humanism 101 website – perhaps a Google Group – will be established for between-meetings discussions.

**What’s in it for me?**

Aside from the personal satisfaction of having fulfilled my promise to the Board, I am, frankly, looking for the next generation of leaders of the Secular Humanist Society of New York. Board membership – as always – is open to all who are willing to do a little work to help the Society grow and flourish. If Humanism 101 will get a few more people excited enough to get more actively involved – and introduce SHSNY to some prospective new members – it will be work well and profitably done.

I hope to see you October 29. Just show up at CCNY, books and/or notes in hand, ready to go to work. – *JR*

## The Humanism 101 Course of Study

Some of these reading lists may look formidable, but you need read just one text per month, plus the online materials, which are short and can be read, carefully, in an hour or so, total. What's more, you will be responsible only for selections in a few of the long-form books.

Suggestions by any and all active participants for further reading are encouraged.

The online addresses given below are accurate as of this writing, but you can find all the materials on your own at the websites of the American Humanist Association ([americanhumanist.org](http://americanhumanist.org)) and the Council for Secular Humanism ([secularhumanism.org](http://secularhumanism.org)). I urge you to browse both sites and explore the ideas thereon.

All meetings will be held from 6:30-8:30 p.m. at  
Community Church of New York  
28 East 35 Street (red door)  
in the 1st floor rear Lounge

### Meeting #1: October 29, 2012 The History of Freethought

Online at [www.americanhumanist.org/Humanism](http://www.americanhumanist.org/Humanism)  
Fred Edwords: *The Saga of Freethought and Its Pioneers*  
Fred Edwords: *What is Humanism?*

#### Book(s)

Julian Huxley: *Religion without Revelation*  
and/or

Susan Jacoby: *Freethinkers*

### Meeting #2: November 26, 2012 The Philosophies of Humanism

Online at [www.americanhumanist.org/humanism](http://www.americanhumanist.org/humanism)  
Fred Edwords: *The Humanist Philosophy in Perspective*  
Plus

*Humanist Manifestos I, II and III*

and

*IHEU Minimum Statement on Humanism*

(All above can be found on the AHA site, or Google them)

#### Book(s)

Paul Kurtz (Ed.): *The Humanist Alternative* (Scan it and select three or four essays that most interest you)

and/or

Louise Antony (Ed.): *Philosophers without Gods* (Essays 1 and 17 particularly; scan and skim the rest, focusing on what interests you)

### Meeting #3: January 28, 2013

#### Humanist Ethics, Values, Morals

Online at [www.americanhumanist.org/humanism](http://www.americanhumanist.org/humanism)  
Fred Edwords: *The Human Basis of Laws and Ethics*

Online Google: *The Affirmations of Humanism*

#### Book(s)

Paul Kurtz (Ed.): *The Humanist Alternative* (Scan it and select three or four more essays that interest you)

and/or

Greg Epstein: *Good Without God*

### Meeting #4: February 25, 2013

#### Critical Thinking

Online –Rebecca Newberger Goldstein: *36 Arguments for the Existence of God* (Not the whole novel—which is certainly worth reading—just the “36 Arguments” from the Appendix that will be copied and posted on the Humanism 101 and SHSNY websites)

Online at [www.freeinquiry.com](http://www.freeinquiry.com)

Steven Schafersman: *An Introduction to Science: Scientific Thinking and the Scientific Method*

#### Book(s)

Massimo Pigliucci: *Nonsense on Stilts*

and/or

Richard L. Epstein: *The Pocket Guide to Critical Thinking*

### Meeting #5: March 25, 2013

#### Science and Anti-Science

Online at [www.americanhumanist.org/Humanism](http://www.americanhumanist.org/Humanism)

Norman and Lucia Hall: *Is the War Between Science and Religion Over?*

and

Fred Edwords: *Dealing with “Scientific” Creationism*

#### Book(s)

Stephen Hawking: *The Grand Design*

and/or

Jerry Coyne: *Why Evolution is True*

### Meeting #6: April 29, 2013

#### Peace, Justice, and a Better Society

Online Google: 1961 President Eisenhower Military-Industrial Complex Speech

Online at [www.americanhumanist.org/Humanism](http://www.americanhumanist.org/Humanism)

Tony Hileman: *Living on the Creative Edge of Our Culture*

#### Book(s)

Rachel Maddow: *Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power*

and/or

Barry Lynn: *Piety and Politics: The Right-Wing Assault on Religious Freedom*

### Meeting #7 and #8 - possibly

If the program generates enthusiasm, the students may wish to extend it for another session or two, with themes to be determined.

And, if the program is successful, we may consider repeating it—with variations, and perhaps one or two of you as discussion leaders—in 2013-14.

So, just to get you started thinking about thinking, remember our 15-second *What is Secular Humanism?* “elevator speech”?

*Secular humanism is an ethical philosophy based on reason and science. It is a way of life for modern humans who want to live ethical, meaningful and happy lives without superstition, religious dogma, or guilt.*

*Sound good to you?*

# SHSNY CALENDAR: SEPTEMBER - NOVEMBER 2012

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

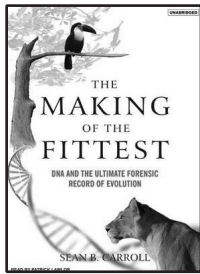
THURSDAY, SEP. 6, 6:30 pm  
in the front room of  
**THE COMMUNITY CHURCH  
OF NEW YORK**

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

We'll discuss

**THE MAKING OF THE FITTEST:  
DNA and the Ultimate  
Forensic Record of Evolution**  
by Sean Carroll

Very recently, an important new aspect of DNA has been revealed – it contains a detailed record of evolution. That is, DNA is a living chronicle of how the marvelous creatures



that inhabit our planet have adapted to its many environments, from the freezing waters of the Antarctic to the lush canopy of the rain forest.

In the pages of this highly readable narrative, and picking up where other evolutionary biologists like Richard Dawkins have left off, Prof. Carroll guides us on an eye-opening tour of the massive DNA record (immortal genes, fossil genes!) of three billion years of evolution to see how the fittest are made.

*Paperback and Kindle available.*

## SAVE THE DATE!

Thursday, Oct 18, 7-10 pm  
Cellar 58

58 Second Avenue

**Launch Party & Signing for  
Massimo Pigliucci's new book,  
Answers for Aristotle: How Science  
and Philosophy Can Lead  
Us to a More Meaningful Life**

*"... a remarkable guide to discovering  
what really matters and why."*

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURSDAY, OCT 4. 6:30 pm  
at Community Church of NY  
28 East 35 Street (Park-Mad)  
**THE RATIONAL OPTIMIST:**

**How Prosperity Evolves**  
by Matt Ridley

For two hundred years the pessimists have dominated public discourse, insisting that things are going to get worse. But in fact, life is getting better – and at an accelerating rate. Food availability, income, and life span are up; disease, child mortality, and violence are down all across the globe. Africa is following Asia out of poverty; the Internet, the mobile phone, and container shipping are enriching people's lives as never before. Bestselling author Matt Ridley explains why.

*Paperback and Kindle available.*

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURSDAY, NOV. 1, 6:30 pm  
at Community Church of NY  
28 East 35 Street (Park-Mad)

**AMERICAN GRACE:  
How Religion Divides  
and Unites Us**

by Robert D. Putnam  
and David E. Campbell

Yes, polarization is growing between religious conservatives and secular liberals today, but personal interfaith ties are strengthening. Interfaith marriage has increased, and religious identities have become more fluid.

More people than ever are friendly with someone of a different faith or no faith at all. Putnam and Campbell show how this denser web of personal ties brings greater tolerance, despite the so-called culture wars.

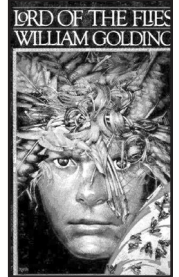
*Paperback and Kindle available.*

MONDAY, SEP. 10, 7:00 pm

SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge  
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)  
"LORD OF THE FLIES"

How thin is our veneer of civilization? Are we really altruistic, moral or, without societal constraints can we quickly degenerate into savages?



Adapted from Nobel Prize-winner William Golding's great novel, this 1963 Peter Brook-directed original film (the 1990 version is crap) has all amateur actors playing the group of British schoolboys stranded on a remote island who gradually turn feral.

BTW, watch fear of the night and the unknown become religion.

*SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.*

Check out the menu and prices at  
[www.stonecreeknyc.com](http://www.stonecreeknyc.com)

## BRUNCH!

SUNDAY, SEP. 16, 12 NOON

Gather for our  
**MONTHLY CASUAL BRUNCH  
GET-TOGETHER**

at BXL East, 210 East 51 St.

We'll meet at Noon just east of 3rd Avenue for outstanding Belgian fare, with dishes ranging from waffles and crepes to big burgers, cheese-y onion soup, and pots of lots of mussels – \$7 to \$16, plus a prix-fixe Sunday Brunch (including a drink) for \$18.

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 is welcome.

*Bring friends!*

*October brunch: 10/21*



# SHSNY CALENDAR: SEPTEMBER - NOVEMBER 2012

## GREAT LECTURES

WED, SEP. 26, 7:00 pm  
"36 ARGUMENTS FOR  
THE EXISTENCE OF GOD"

*Rebecca N. Goldstein*

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

In this Skeptics Society Caltech  
Lecture and reading of her compel-

ling novel,  
AHA Hu-  
manist of the  
Year Rebecca  
Newberger  
Goldstein



shows that the tension between  
belief and skepticism cannot be  
understood through rational  
argument alone. It must also be  
explored from the point of view  
of individual people caught in the  
raptures and torments of religious  
experience in all their variety. *36  
Arguments for the Existence of God*  
plunges into the clash between  
faith and reason. On intellectual  
grounds the skeptics would seem  
to have everything on their side.  
Yet people refuse to accept their  
seemingly irrefutable arguments  
and continue to embrace faith in  
God as their source of meaning,  
purpose and comfort. Why?

*Great Lectures Night is FREE*

## PLANNING AHEAD

The *usual* SHSNY schedule is:

**Book Club: First Thursday**  
at the Community Church of NY.

**Movie Night: Second Monday**  
at Stone Creek Lounge.

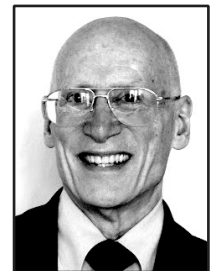
**Brunch: Third Sunday**  
at BXL East Bistro.

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*NY Society for Ethical Culture*

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Fri., Sep 7, 7 pm - *Ethics in Film:  
"Paths of Glory"*. Snacks & Bevs \$5

Tuesdays, 6 pm - *Socrates Cafe*

*CFI-NYC*. Mon, Sep 10, 10 pm.  
Googie's Lounge (Upstairs at the  
Living Room), 154 Ludlow St.  
*"Skeptics on the Mic Karaoke"*

*New York Philosophy*. Tue, Sep 18,  
6-10 pm, Irish Rogue, 356 W. 44 St.  
discussing *"Beauty"*

*Drinking With Atheists*: Every Fri-  
day, fun and conversation. Details  
[www.meetup.com/RichiesList/](http://www.meetup.com/RichiesList/)

## RELIGION'S ROLE: SOCIAL COHESION – PART 2 Walter Balcerak

(Part I of Mr. Balcerak's essay-cum-review of *The Righteous Mind* appeared in July PIQUE.)

As a secular humanist, I believe religions are mainly harmful delusions and that all human beings, in Thomas Jefferson's inspired words, are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That's why I have long scorned religious fundamentalists and political conservatives, both of whom, to my mind, block efforts to achieve a more humane world.

These views are challenged by a recent book, *The Righteous Mind*, written by Jonathan Haidt, a professor of psychology. He believes religion and conservatives play an essential role in societies, thus raising issues that secular humanists need to consider.

The author argues that morality "is a feature of our evolutionary design". He believes that human genes and culture "co-evolved for righteous minds that believed in gods". The main function of morality and religion, he contends, is to enhance social cohesion.

"To understand religion," Haidt writes, "don't look at beliefs. Look at how it creates community." He cites a definition of religion by Emile Durkheim, a founder of sociology: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which *unite into one single moral community* called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (italics added).

According to Haidt, religion does more than unite people. He says studies indicate that religiously observant Americans "are more generous with their time and money, especially in helping the needy, and they are more active in community life".

Research on 19th century communes demonstrates the cohesiveness of religious groups, he asserts, because they were much more likely to survive than secular ones. Of the 400 communes studied, 20 years after their founding only 6 percent of secular groups had survived, compared to 39 percent of religious groups. Also, the more sacrifice a religious commune called for, the longer it lasted. This was not true of secular groups.

The main challenge that Haidt presents to secular humanists is this: "*the very ritual practices that the New Atheists dismiss as costly, inefficient, and irrational turn out to be a solution to one of the hardest problems humans face: cooperation without kinship*" (author's italics).

He issues a warning based on Darwinian natural selection: "Societies that forgo the exoskeleton of religion should reflect carefully on what will happen to them over several generations. We don't really know, because the first atheistic societies have only emerged in Europe in the last few decades. They are the least efficient societies ever known at turning resources (of which they have a lot) into offspring (of which they have few)."

True. But as a secular humanist, I think all people in this overpopulated world deserve to live in successful

societies, where birth rates generally decline. After all, citizens of the secular societies in Europe live in vibrant democracies, enjoy cradle-to-grave security, and are some of the happiest people in the world. Thomas Jefferson would have approved.

## SIX REASONS WE CAN'T CHANGE THE FUTURE WITHOUT PROGRESSIVE RELIGION

Sara Robinson

(Reprinted from *Alternet*, 7/8/2012)

One of the great historical strengths of the progressive movement has been its resolute commitment to the separation of church and state. As progressives, we don't want our government influenced by anybody's religious laws. Instead of superstition and mob id, we prefer to have real science, based in real data and real evidence, guiding public policy. Instead of holy wars, othering, and social repression—the inevitable by-products of theocracy — we think that drawing from the widest possible range of philosophical traditions makes America smarter, stronger, and more durable over time.

That said: while we all want a government free of religion, there are good reasons that we may not want our own progressive movement to be shorn of every last spiritual impulse. In fact, the history of the progressive movement has shown us, over and over, that there are things that the spiritual community brings to political movements that are essential for success, and can't easily be replaced with anything else.

Religion has been central to the formation of human communities—and to how we approach the future — for as long as homo sapiens has been around. Apart from God-belief (which varies widely between religions), all successful religions thrive and endure because they offer their adherents a variety of effective community-building, social activism, and change management tools that, taken together, make religion quite possibly the most powerful social change technology humans have ever developed.

What does religion offer that progressives need to make our movement work?

First: there's nothing like it if you want to bond a bunch of very diverse people into a tight community of shared meaning and value. A religious congregation brings together people of all ages, backgrounds, educational levels, professional rank, and life circumstances, and melds them into an enduring tribe that's centered around a shared commitment to mutual trust and care, and (most importantly) has a clear and vivid shared vision of the future they're trying to create.

There is simply no other organizational form that encourages people to share their time, energy, and resources so quickly, completely, or enduringly; or aligns so much conviction toward the same goal. (This is why the leaders of corporations, the marketers of sports teams, and the military all study religious cultures, and try to appropriate their tribe-building techniques for their own purposes.) The



resulting tribes can last for many centuries – and acquire a resounding moral voice that can reverberate throughout their larger communities, and well beyond. If you want to change the world, this is the kind of group – deeply bound by faith, trust, love, history, and a commitment to each other and to the world they envision that transcends life and death – that’s most likely to get it done. Religion is the best way going to get people to consecrate themselves, body and soul, to a larger cause; and to take on the kind of all-or-nothing risks that are often required to really change the world.

Second, religious narratives center people in the long arc of history, telling them where they came from, who they are, what they are capable of, and what kind of future is possible. History does this, too; but religion does it at a deeper, mythic level that gives these stories extra emotional and cognitive resonance. For most of human history, in fact, the task of imagining a different future and giving people the inspiration and courage to reach for it has been the primary role of religious prophets. (So has the job of warning the people that they’re wandering into grave error or betraying their own values, and must change their ways or face disaster.) Religion is the native home of the prophetic voice – the voice that calls people to transformative change. Throughout America’s history, our most evocative political prophets – both Roosevelts, all the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, Van Jones, Barack Obama – have invariably been people who spent a lot of time in the pews, learning to speak the kind of language that calls us to a better place.

Third, over the course of American history, liberal religious faiths have been the primary promoter of progressive values throughout the culture – and also the leading institution when it came time to inculcate our progressive sensibilities into the next generation. Many, if not most, progressives in America are progressive specifically because they believe that this is what their faith demands of them. They’re raising their kids in churches and temples because they believe, as the Bible says, that “If you train up a child in the way that he should go, when he is old, he will not depart from it.”

Liberal congregations have etched our values onto the young souls of tens of millions of American progressives, over three centuries and dozens of generations. Do we really want to try to do without them now?

Fourth, progressive religion has always been America’s most credible and aggressive front-line defender of non-market-based values against the onslaught of capitalism and greed. In recent years, as the “free-market” fetishists took over (and gulled American Evangelicals into shilling for their hellish utilitarianism), our liberal faith communities – mainline Protestants and liberal Catholics, Jews and Quakers, Unitarian Universalists and the rising wave of reformist Muslims – are the strongest remaining cultural forces left with the moral authority to insist that we have a duty to the poor, that democracy cannot survive without a commitment to justice, and that compassion is always a

better survival strategy than competition.

The market says: Everything and everybody has a price, and is for sale. Faith says: The most valuable things in our lives – good health, safe food, strong families, a clean environment, a just economy, meaningful work, access to opportunity – are beyond price, and should by right be available to us all. Our faith communities (especially, but not always exclusively, the progressive ones) have always held this light up within our culture, and it’s never been needed more than it’s needed right now.

Fifth, in a nation where over 90 percent of everybody has some kind of God-belief – and the overwhelming majority of them ground their political decisions in that belief – abandoning the entire landscape of faith to the right wing amounts to political malpractice. For most Americans, our religious worldviews are the epistemological soil in which every other decision we make is rooted – the basic model of reality that we use to navigate the world. When we stopped engaging people’s basic model of moral order, we effectively ceded the entire moral landscape of the nation to our enemies. It was, in retrospect, perhaps the most self-destructive error we’ve made over the past 40 years (and that’s saying something).

To our credit, a lot of our best organizers and activists are starting to realize the magnitude of this mistake. We’re paying a lot more attention these days to learning to clearly articulate progressive values, to express ourselves in explicitly moral language, and to put forward more strongly progressive frames, narratives, and future visions to counter the bankrupt conservative worldview that’s brought us to this sorry place in history.

But while we’re working toward some new understandings here, let’s also remember that the right wing’s success on taking this field was rooted directly in their ability to mobilize conservative churches to carry the moral banner forward into the culture for them. If we’re going to overwrite their brutal and anti-democratic story of how the world works, the most important step we can take is to tap into the vast reach and deep moral authority of our remaining progressive faith communities, and amplify their voices every way we can. Churches and temples have always been the first and most natural places Americans turn to when it’s time to have serious cultural conversations about value and meaning and the future they desire. If we’re serious about changing the national story and bending the future in our preferred direction, then that’s where we need to be.

Sixth: Progressive faiths, across the board, promote the essential belief that human communities are, in themselves, inherently and intrinsically sacred. In fact, progressive atheists may be surprised to learn that among their more religious brothers and sisters, there’s very little agreement about the nature of God – but a very strong consensus that the act of radical community-making is the most intensely holy and essential work that they do.

If there is a God (and progressives of faith debate that question endlessly), then we might most reliably see the

face of that divinity in that permanent circle of friends with whom we celebrate life's passages and joys, and wrestle with its hardest challenges -- the people whom we trust to stand with us no matter what comes, and who will work with us tirelessly toward our shared vision of a better world. It's this deep faith in the dream of the beloved community that also feeds our faith in the potential of good government, and our confidence in the unleashed potential of the American people. (And furthermore: I don't think I've ever met a progressive atheist who would disagree on this point.)

Across all the long centuries of the American progressive movement, we've never launched a successful change wave that didn't draw most of its leadership, its base, and its moral grounding from the country's deep liberal religious tradition.

Our churches and temples have been the fountain, the rock, the mother source of our movement from the very beginning. Progressives of faith have always played a central role in our political victories in the past. It's time to stop imagining that somehow we're going to take the country back without them now.

*Solicitation: Okay, readers, now that you're outraged, send your rebuttals – approvals? – to editor@shsny.org*

### “LEGITIMATE RAPE” IDIOTCY EARNS REP. TODD AKIN A DUMBTH NOMINATION

Rep. Todd Akin (R-Mo.) has a long anti-choice and even anti-woman history in Congress: no abortions, not ever. Not if a woman has been raped, not if she's a child victim of incest, not even if the pregnancy will kill her. And the morning-after pill, of course, is abortion. But on a Sunday morning talk show on August 19 the congressman, the Missouri GOP nominee for U.S. Senate – and believe it or not a member of the House Science committee – outdid even himself in terms of mean-spirited stupidity.

When a KTVI-TV interviewer again asked him if he would allow abortion for rape victims, Akin claimed that victims of “legitimate rape” rarely get pregnant.

*“From what I understand from doctors, that's really rare”, Akin said of pregnancy caused by rape. “If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down.”*

If that “legitimate rape” term is new to you, you're not alone. But the crazies of the Religious Right in Congress want to legalize a distinction between violent, knife-point rape by a stranger (that's “legitimate” or “real” rape) and statutory rape, date rape and the like. So if Bubba just kinda goes further than girlfriend Betty Sue wants to in the bed of the pickup, or if Uncle Don gently seduces his 11-year-old niece, or if – and it seems the Religious Right has discovered an epidemic of this – a wife claims marital rape to get a better divorce settlement, well, that's not “legitimate”. And



if the woman's – or the little girl's – body doesn't “shut down the whole thing”, well, you can't punish the “unborn”, can you? Isn't punishment and guilt what women are for?

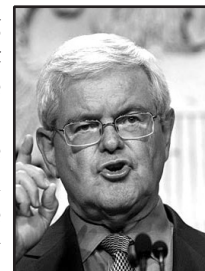
So Rep. Akin has earned pride of place on our slate of candidates for the SHSNY 2012 Dumbth Award. Who will carry home the horse's-ass trophy from our Darwin Day Dinner next February?

#### Also in Contention



Will it be North Carolina Pastor Charles Worley, who wants to “get rid of all the lesbians and queers” by quarantining them behind an electrified fence so that “in a few years they'll die out” because “they can't reproduce!”?

Or will our returning champion, Newt Gingrich, win the prize with his wizard plan to find some 11 million illegal immigrants he says the federal government can't find: “Send a Fedex package to everyone who's here illegally and when it's delivered, we know where they are.”



Nominations for Dumbth-of-the-Year are open until December 15, with online voting through January, 2013. Nominate your own least-favorite public-figure jerk at editor@shsany.org.

### TAKING TONE-DEAF, ETHICS-BLIND HUBRIS TO A WHOLE NEW LEVEL

Former U.S. senator (and sponsor of much anti-gay legislation) Larry “Wide Stance” Craig (R-Idaho) has refused to return campaign funds he spent on legal fees associated with his 2007 arrest for soliciting sex from a man in an airport washroom.

“Senate rules,” says his lawyer, “sanction reimbursement for any cost relating to a senator's use of a bathroom.”

### AND A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM ... TO NORWAY

*(Transcribed from the cartoon russelsteapot.com, and forwarded by Gretchen Robinson.)*

**Teacher** (concluding lecture to little kids): ... and that, children, is why the secularization of America is directly responsible for the majority of our societal problems. We've turned our back on God, and now we're paying for it.

**Little Kid:** What about Norway?

**Teacher:** What?

**Kid:** Well, it's a little confusing, because according to their latest census, over 70 percent of the Norwegian population is atheist. However, the Global Peace Index rates Norway as the most peaceful nation in the world. They have the second highest GDP per capita in the world, an unemployment rate below 2 percent, and average hourly wages among the world's highest. Also, Norway is ranked first in the world

in life expectancy, literacy, education, and standard of living. All the while by being arguably the most atheist nation on the planet.

*Teacher:* Well, thank you for the information, Russell. I hope they speak Norwegian in Hell.

### MO EXPLAINS INFALLIBILITY TO JESUS

*(Transcribed from [jesusandmo.net/2012/08/15/rely/](http://jesusandmo.net/2012/08/15/rely/))*

*Mohammed:* You cannot rely on the word of man because all men are corrupt and fallible. *(Holding up the Holy Koran)* Only through the perfect, revealed word of God can we know the truth.

*Jesus:* How do we know it really is the perfect, revealed word of God?

*Mo:* I give you my word.

### NO THINKING IN TEXAS

The Republican Party of Texas published its 2012 Platform in June. It has all the anti-choice, anti-immigrant, anti-gay, anti-history, anti-science, anti-sex ed, and anti-government planks you might expect, but one, in the Educating Our Children section, is simply breathtaking in its promotion of state-sponsored stupidity:

*Knowledge-Based Education – We oppose the teaching of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) (values clarification), critical thinking skills and similar programs that are simply a relabeling of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) (mastery learning) which focus on behavior modification and have the purpose of challenging the student’s fixed beliefs and undermining parental authority.*

In other words, no thinking in Texas. Ever. Period.

*Update:* After the above was picked up by bloggers and late-night comics, the Chairman of the Texas Republican Party called the demonizing of critical thinking an “editing” lapse and “unfortunate”. But also unfortunately, nothing can be done about it until the party platform committee meets again in 2014. So it’s still no thinking in Texas – at least on the right side of the aisle – for two more years, anyway.

### ISRAEL’S ULTRA-ORTHODOX GOING BLIND OVER SEX. NO, NOT THAT.

**John Rafferty**

You’ve undoubtedly already read, including in these pages [“A Modest Proposal: A Three-State Solution”, PIQUE, February], about the extreme ultra-Orthodox Jewish men in Israel—*haredim*—who demand total segregation of the sexes, who post billboards exhorting women to wear closed-necked, long-sleeved blouses and long skirts, and who accost, even spit on women and 8-year-old girls whom they consider improperly dressed; you know, naked elbows, unclothed ankles.

Not enough, *not enough!* Those G-d-fearing men can still see those daughters of Eve, those vessels of iniquity.

Which makes for a marketing opportunity.

Now, the community’s unofficial “modesty patrols”

are selling eyeglasses to their female-affrighted brethren with special blur-inducing stickers on their lenses for the modest (pun intended) price of just \$6. As the AP reports,

*“The glasses provide clear vision for up to a few meters so as not to impede movement, but anything beyond that gets blurry – including women. For men forced to venture outside their insular communities, hoods and shields to block peripheral vision are also offered.”*

You really, really can’t make this stuff up.

### DEFENDING “RELIGIOUS LIBERTY”, OUTRAGING DECENCY

**Dennis Middlebrooks**

As per the July 24 *Daily News*, Ultra-Orthodox Jews have spoken out against a NYC Board of Health proposal to require written parental consent for “direct oral suction” during infant circumcision, a practice that has been linked to the deaths of several boys who contracted herpes from this abominable practice, which by rights should be outlawed. A total of at least eleven babies have contracted herpes from *metzitzah b’peh*, in which a *mohel* (the circumciser) used his mouth to suck the blood from the infant’s penis.

Rabbis claimed the proposal was an infringement of their “religious liberty” and hoped the Department of Health would “stand up to what verges on hysteria – and not focus on intruding on our religious rites”. The rabbis dismissed the scientific evidence against the practice and asserted that the babies contracted herpes elsewhere.

Perhaps the infants had unprotected sex with *shiksas*.

### PRECIOUS, BEAUTIFUL, PRICELESS: US

**Philip Appleman**

Most of us need to be much tougher-minded than we are, more resolute in rejecting the bribes of the afterlife. Once definitely done with our adolescent longing for the Absolute, we would find this world valuable after all, and poignantly valuable precisely because it is not eternal. Doomed to extinction, our loves, our work, our friendships, our tastes are all painfully precious. We look about us, on the streets and in the subways, and discover that we are beautiful because we are mortal, priceless because we are so rare in the universe and so fleeting. Whatever we are, whatever we make of ourselves: that is all we will ever have – and that, in its profound simplicity, is the meaning of life.

### THE RIVER OF OUR LIVES

**Bertrand Russell**

An individual human existence should be like a river: small at first, narrowly contained within its banks, and rushing passionately past rocks and over waterfalls. Gradually the river grows wider, the banks recede, the waters flow more quietly, and in the end, without any visible break, they become merged in the sea, and painlessly lose their individual being.



## READERS RESPOND TO JULY PIQUE

*To the Editor:* July is another winner. — *Walter Balcerak*

*To the Editor:* Thanks for another impressive PIQUE! I'll need to ponder further your editorial ("It's Time to Legalize Pot", July PIQUE) on moving past just decriminalizing pot (which, of course, I used for some years). It hasn't been a priority issue and I have reservations, but it deserves more thought. — *Mike Weiss*

*To the Editor:* Another excellent thinking person's issue of PIQUE. I do wonder whether the article on Mary Jane was appropriate; I don't agree it's a "humanist" issue. As one of the 1 percent who never smoked, I don't have any opinion either of its joys or its evils. I do agree that it should be decriminalized. Criminalization has caused serious injustice and encouraged criminal enterprise. There is no evidence that removing its prohibition will lead to reduced social problems, and no long-term serious illnesses.

As individuals we should be allowed our choice of high, but we should also be mindful of the effects of this choice on society. The drive to reduce smoking is driven by the social consideration to prevent cancer and its heavy health costs. For me, this larger social question trumps individual choice. — *Remo Cosentino*

**W**e exist in a bizarre combination of Stone Age emotions, medieval beliefs, and god-like technology. That, in a nutshell, is how we have lurched into the early twenty-first century. — *E.O. Wilson*

## A LIBERAL DECALOGUE

**Bertrand Russell**

1. Do not feel absolutely certain of anything.
2. Do not think it worthwhile to proceed by concealing evidence, for the evidence is sure to come to light.
3. Never try to discourage thinking for you are sure to succeed.
4. When you meet with opposition, even if it should be from your husband or your children, endeavor to overcome it by argument and not by authority, for a victory dependent upon authority is unreal and illusory.
5. Have no respect for the authority of others, for there are always contrary authorities to be found.
6. Do not use power to suppress opinions you think pernicious, for if you do the opinions will suppress you.
7. Do not fear to be eccentric in opinion, for every opinion now accepted was once eccentric.
8. Find more pleasure in intelligent dissent than in passive agreement, for, if you value intelligence as you should, the former implies a deeper agreement than the latter.
9. Be scrupulously truthful, even if the truth is inconvenient, for it is more inconvenient when you try to conceal it.
10. Do not feel envious of the happiness of those who live in a fool's paradise; only a fool will think that it is happiness.

### THIS MONTH'S BIBLE STUDY LESSON

"Blessed is he who takes your [Babylon's] babes and dashes them against the rock." — *Psalms 137:9*

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