

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

April, 2013

Spring, the calendar says, if not the thermometer, so let's parse the Easter fable and fool around, once again, with the first of the month. We give a no-stars review of the late Vatican Follies, revive a forgotten hero of American secularism, pose a presidential pop quiz, nominate two Dumbths, step (gingerly) across the political aisle for some corrective criticism of both the religious and scientific left, wonder at Humanistic Mormons (*really*), and find a new name for our way of life. — JR

SCI-PHI AS A WAY OF LIFE

Massimo Pigliucci

(Excerpted from *Answers for Aristotle*, the subject of our Book Club discussion in March, which Massimo led.)

"Sci-Phi", philosopher (and SHSNY member) Massimo Pigliucci says in his latest book, *Answers for Aristotle*, is "short for the wisdom (and practical advice!) that comes from contemplating the world and our lives using the two most powerful approaches to knowledge that human beings have devised so far: philosophy and science."

The book concludes ...

When I was living in Knoxville, Tennessee, a local preacher was very upset about my writings and lectures about evolution and wrote an angry letter to the editor of the local paper. In the letter, the frustrated preacher wondered out loud about why some people prefer the constant uncertainties of a science that keeps changing to the bed-rock certainties contained in the Bible. Good question, and we need to address it.

To begin with, of course the Bible—like any other religious text—needs to be interpreted, and the interpretation demonstrably changes with the cultural milieu. Contrary to the stated belief of some religious fundamentalists, there is no such thing as a literal reading of scriptures, as shown by the perennial disagreement among religious sects over what particular scriptural passages actually mean. Moreover, there are plenty of teachings in the Bible—for instance, the injunction to kill children who disrespect their parents (found, among other places, in both Exodus 21:17 and Matthew 15:4)—that are in plain sight for anyone to read about, but that most people simply ignore as a vestige of a more barbarous time.

We also need to consider that there is no rational reason to accept the authority of any religious text at all. Not

only can gods not possibly be the ultimate source of morality; not only is there a very good reason for any rational person to doubt the existence of the supernatural to begin with; but more importantly, any such authority would have to be mediated by human agents (priests, preachers, rabbis, imams, gurus, and the like), and such mediation seems to be hopelessly subjective and open to far more doubts than the reasonings of philosophers or the tentative conclusions of scientists.

At the least one can argue with the former on the basis of logic and question the latter on the grounds of empirical evidence.

But there is a more fundamental reason why sci-phi's tentativeness is not fatal: far from being a problem with that approach, it is in fact its primary virtue. We need to wrap our minds around the fact that as human beings we are inherently limited in our ability to reason and to discover things about the world. These limitations do not give us a license to arbitrarily "go beyond" reason and evidence into religion or mysticism. On the contrary, they are reminders that nobody has final answers and that the quest is open to all people who are willing to use their brain intelligently.

Our limitations also give us a reason to cut ourselves a bit of slack for not getting life exactly right, for failing here and there, as humans are bound to do. This is why the eudaimonic [*Ed: Aristotle's "flourishing"*] life is always an imperfect and incomplete project, all the way until the moment of our death. But it is by far the most important of our projects, and one for which sci-phi is far better equipped to help us along the way than simple common sense, political ideology, or religious mysticism. We are social and (somewhat) rational animals, and we can reflect on how to employ our rationality to improve our lives and our societies. Seems like the meaningful thing to do.

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**VALERIE HARPER:
DON'T GO TO THE FUNERAL JUST YET**

Valerie Harper, the actress who delighted millions as Noo Yawk-accented Rhoda Morgenstern on TV's "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" and "Rhoda" in the 1970s, is now 73 years old and dying of an incurable brain cancer.



She was raised a Catholic but at an early age, according to a biographer, "quit" the church. "I had a big click, and that was the end of the Catholic Church for me. I quit."

With a prognosis of as little as three months to live, she has gone public to discuss dying and how to face the inevitable. "Let's discuss it because we are all terminal," she told an interviewer. "We really are. We have a lot of fear around death and I thought maybe I can help somebody ... I want people to be less scared.

"Keep your chin up and don't go to the funeral, mine or yours or your loved ones, until the day of the funeral because then you miss the life that you have left."

Not a bad philosophy.

Death does not concern us, because as long as we exist, death is not here. And when it does come, we no longer exist. - *Epicurus*.

BENNIES FROM HEAVEN

Donna Marxer

Why is the Vatican "Habemus Papem!" show run like the Oscars? And why is it just as over-the-top dull? In the awards wars, the box-office smash in Rome is the easy winner of a "Bennie" (named for the previous pontiff, of course) for "Most Mediocre Performance in a Dying Show".

First, it's too retro. The Globe Theater is long gone, so it really is no longer necessary to hire only male actors, who look silly in skirts and pumps. Talk about gender discrimination in casting.

Retro, too, is the art direction. The architecture and props are stale, at least 500 years out of date. And costume design? Vulgar - too much bling, too much cross-dressing, too much of just too, too much.

And red. Red, red, red, red, everywhere you look - all those colorless old men disappear in a sea of crimson. Then they dress the winner all in white: a white-haired white guy in a floor-length white dress and beanie. Please, hasn't anybody ever heard of highlighting?

There's never any real surprise about the winner. Just as at the Oscars, we know no independent is going to get the top honors, and that the new Pope—a product of "the system"—will win the "Most Infallible" award. The Pope always wins, and so does the "big studio", the Church.

I always say I will never watch either show again, but I always do, hope always out-weighing experience.

JESUS EXPLAINS CHURCH STANDARDS TO MO
(*Transcribed from Jesusandmo.net, 2/27/2013*)

Jesus: Recently there has been a drop in standards within the church, the consequences of which can only be described as catastrophic. Revelations of abuse, corruption and hypocrisy have reached an unprecedented level - it is hard to see how it will ever recover.

Mohammed: But this drop in standards is hardly recent, is it? The church has always been a hive of abuse, corruption and hypocrisy.

Jesus: I know.

Mo: So what's changed?

Jesus: They used to be able to keep it secret.

**THE RESURRECTION IS HISTORY, ABSOLUTLEY.
IT'S RIGHT THERE, IN THE BOOK!**

(*Based on and excerpted from The Voice of Sanity, newsletter of the Piedmont Secular Humanists (SC), April, 2012*)

Ever wondered why you've been confused about the story of the Resurrection? Perhaps you haven't studied the New Testament carefully enough. Take the Easter Quiz to test your knowledge. Answers below.

Who first came to the tomb on Sunday morning?

- a. one woman (John 20:1);
- b. two women (Matt 28:1)
- c. three women (Mark 16:1);
- d. more than three women (Luke 23:55-56; 24:1,10)

She (they) came

- a. while it was still dark (Matt. 28:1; John 20:1)
- b. after the sun had risen (Mark 16:2)

The first visitor(s) was/were greeted by

- a. an angel (Matt. 28:2-5)
- b. a young man (Mark 16:5)
- c. two men (Luke 24:4)
- d. no one (John 20:1-2)

After finding the tomb empty, the woman/women

a. ran to tell the disciples (Matt. 28:7-8; Mark 16:10; Luke 24:9; John 20:2)

- b. ran away and said nothing to anyone (Mark 16:8)

The risen Jesus first appeared to

- a. Mary Magdalene alone (John 20:14; Mark 16:9)
- b. Cleopas and another disciple (Luke 24: 13, 15, 18)
- c. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (Matt. 28:1,9)
- d. Cephas (Peter) alone (1 Cor. 15:4-5; Luke 24:34)

Jesus first appeared

- a. somewhere between the tomb and Jerusalem (Matt. 28:8-9)
- b. just outside the tomb (John 20: 11-14)
- c. in Galilee, some 80 miles north of Jerusalem (Mark 16:6-7)
- d. on the road to Emmaus, about 7 miles west of Jerusalem (Luke 24:13-15)

Answers: All the choices are correct. And contradictory. Or wrong. Yeah, that one.

MARTYRS OF THE “RELIGIOUS LEFT”

Paleolibrarian

(Reprinted from “Experiences with the Religious Left” on the Paleolibrarian blog, 3/2/2013)

For a brief time in my life, I had the good fortune to come to know many kind individuals who consider themselves leftist radicals but who also claim devotion to the essentials of theology and remain devout Catholics. What I always found so interesting and admirable about their political and religious self-declaration was that their beliefs appeared to make them minorities within their church. However, upon reflection, they may not be so out of step with the Church after all.

What I also found fascinating and for me somewhat troubling, was that each deeply sincere person (especially the younger ones), whether they were lay activists or clergy, were all awash in some level of the martyr syndrome. My assumption is that the need to be a martyr was learned while in the process of religious indoctrination both at home and in religious school

In the field of psychology, the martyr syndrome is typically defined as an enhancement of one’s own feelings of victimhood based on perceived moral or philosophical superiority. Additionally, one can become a martyr by filling this psychological need through aligning oneself with those who the martyr declares are also victims. Certainly and in some cases this internal motivation does help the poor and the disenfranchised. But in many more situations such feelings of detachment and disenfranchisement come to nothing more than guilty white people with education and money joining others in self-congratulatory “action-fests” to protest an issue of the month with outdated slogans, filled with unconscious hate mongering under the guise of god, love and social justice.

Feeding a person who is hungry and giving a homeless person a place to rest are certainly moral goods. But such action really doesn’t require love of god for us to take on such work. Nor does it take mirroring the alleged trials of a supposed savior to be against the use of nuclear weapons, stop racism, fight for human rights, and support the ending of a host of other civil and environmental abuses.

Even the Catholic Church recognized that love for humanity does not require religious faith. According to them, it just means the good work you do without being saved will place you in hell when you die. However, as atheists, we know that taking action to help those in need does not require one gaining points to go to an imaginary heaven rather than an imaginary hell. Death is everyone’s common end and all faith is fiction.

As a point of debate, I’d say that the intolerance of the religious left is equal to that of those on the religious right. Both believe they’re taking their orders directly from their God based on their community’s reading of the bible and the teaching of authority figures within their faith. And this is precisely why, when it comes to religious motivation for social justice, we will never have peace or social justice. It is very difficult to change your beliefs related to any issue

when you think the belief is divinely motivated and inspired. It’s always the other person who is wrong and who has to change.

Combining the martyr syndrome with a huge dose of cognitive dissonance helps to describe a religious subgroup whose population and philosophical hallmarks regarding their actions, ideas and beliefs are threaded with 19th Century politico-economic ideology and Bronze Age spirituality as to how humans should live in this world.

But without cognitive dissonance, how could one consider themselves a “radical catholic” when one accepts or at least ignores the Vatican abuses? If you don’t raise your voice or “occupy” for fear of excommunication and loss of soul, then you are part of the problem. Silence in the face of imperialism is still silence.

Additionally, if at one’s psychological core you accept the same line of religious dogma and unsubstantiated claims that another one billion people believe (that’s 1,000,000,000 other individuals), are you really a martyr or are you really just falling in as an outlier on a spectrum? In the end you’re not breaking any new ground.

As secular humanists and atheists, we have to remember things that those who are religious conveniently like to ignore or forget. That a great deal of violence and hatred comes from some spiritual belief whose outcome will deny individual rights and lead to hatred. ... The church denies access to contraception in Africa and this helps spread AIDS throughout the continent and internationally causing untold death and personal stories of horror. Politically many faiths work to void laws giving woman a right to choose when to end their pregnancy. Violence against women in terms of how they dress, act or are allowed to pray is defined by male attitudes from thousands of years ago. Organized faith fights against secular and LGBT rights while they ignore and then defend child sex abusers. Those with religious power will deny the complexity of science to save doctrine and also work to stop democratic free speech.

If you can’t or won’t protest, or at least acknowledge openly, these religious injustices then you are abdicating not only the teachings of your faith but are nothing more than an accommodationist. But I will grant you that it is much easier to pick your battles when you ignore or wish to placate your god and the apex of organized faith. So protesting Gitmo and Wall Street are easy targets to claim your moral indignation. But deflect from coming to the aid of those injured internationally by faith-based imperialism in whole or in part by a company worth 50 billion dollars and whose main offices are in Rome isn’t a problem?

While not “fighting the power” may seem disingenuous and hypocritical, I’d never deny anyone the right to choose their battles or silence anyone’s right to free speech. Perhaps the least one can say is that the politically inclined religious left is misguided. But then, on some occasions, and especially when they partner with the secular, they’re probably going to change the world for the better.

Comment: The only dispute I have with this is the estimate of the Church’s worth. \$50 billion? Vatican chump change. – JR

THAT OLD-TIME IRRELIGION
A Review of *The Great Agnostic*,
by Susan Jacoby

Jennifer Michael Hecht

(Reprinted from The New York Times, 3/8/2013)

Susan Jacoby, whose previous books include *Freethinkers* and *The Age of American Unreason* begins *The Great Agnostic* by asking why some people famous in their own time become part of our national memory and others fade into oblivion. A case in point is the orator Robert Green Ingersoll: a celebrity in his heyday at the end of the 19th century, he is almost utterly unknown today, even by those who would admire him if they knew more.

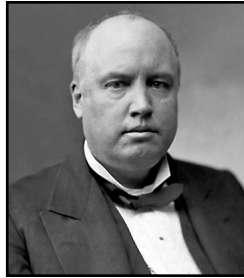
The first reason for his obscurity is the same reason many actors who were well known before the age of film have been forgotten: Ingersoll's greatest fame came from his public speeches, and while the texts of these have been published, it was his performance of them that made him so beloved. In 19th-century America, speeches were a major form of entertainment. As a result, people were real connoisseurs of the craft, and a wide range of listeners thought Ingersoll was an extraordinary orator. In an age when flowery language and effusive emotion were commonly used to keep audiences rapt, Ingersoll was comparatively calm and plain-spoken, yet he was said to be riveting, drawing both tears and peals of laughter.

The second reason he isn't remembered has to do with what was in those speeches, many of which denounced religion. He called himself agnostic, but whenever he was asked, he replied that for him there was no difference between agnosticism and atheism. He wrote and spoke about a number of topics — Shakespeare was a favorite — but his agnosticism was what most set him apart, attracting devoted followers and fervent detractors. There have been atheists and religious doubters throughout history, but the ones who remain famous after their deaths tend to have been equally famous for something else as well; otherwise, people most notable for their bravery in the face of religious conservatism have to be celebrated by a population equally brave, and that is often too much to ask. For Jacoby, prejudice against those who question religion is the "real reason" for his eclipse, far outweighing the ephemeral nature of oratorical fame.

To these explanations, Jacoby adds her suspicion that Ingersoll might have fared better had a rise in secularism, which he helped bring about, proved to be permanent. But it is wrong, she notes, to allow his stature to diminish as a result of the resurgence of religion that occurred after his death. "Intellectual history is a relay race, not a 100-yard dash", Jacoby writes, in a nice turn of phrase. Reporting on the irreligion of many of the country's founding figures, Ingersoll kept the ideals of secularism alive during his own era and passed them on to us. In particular, he championed the memory of Thomas Paine, whose rejection of religion had led to his being forgotten in Ingersoll's time, despite the

considerable role Paine played in turning the American colonies toward revolution. It may be hoped that Jacoby's book does as much for Ingersoll as Ingersoll did for Paine.

Jacoby shows how Ingersoll's fight against religion connected to his vision of a good society. During his time, religious writers commonly supported a harsh "biblical" approach to disciplining children. Ingersoll told his audiences that he had seen people who acted as though when Jesus said, "'Suffer the little children to come unto me, for such is the kingdom of heaven', he had a rawhide under his mantle and made that remark simply to get the children within striking distance." He favored quips like this, and newspapers reported them with the bracketed commentary of "[Laughter]" and "[Great Laughter]".



Employing similar indictments, Ingersoll campaigned passionately for women's rights, against racism and the death penalty. When science ran afoul of humanitarian ideals, he fought against it too. In an appendix, Jacoby includes vivid speech of Ingersoll's against vivisection, which he likened to "the Inquisition — the hell — of science".

Jacoby's understanding of irreligion in American history is a bit idiosyncratic. She several times states that there are two branches of American secularism: one extending from the humanism and egalitarianism of Paine and the other from the cutthroat individualism of the social Darwinists and Ayn Rand. Jacoby does not lay out a case for this claim, and readers may protest that Rand and her kind aren't much more than outliers among atheists. Furthermore, Jacoby writes, in today's "new atheism", people who identify as "skeptics" are often libertarian conservatives. She doesn't make a case for this either, and in my experience (in person, in print and online), self-proclaimed skeptics come together when questioning paranormal and pseudoscientific claims — there's little political consensus, and what consensus there is leans more to the liberal left.

It is also worth noting that Jacoby writes entirely from the side of the freethought community, which believers may dislike. This is her right — I prefer a biography with a distinct point of view — but she tells us almost nothing negative about Ingersoll, other than hinting that "no one, of course, is ever completely free of contemporary received opinion".

These issues aside, Jacoby's goal of elucidating the life and work of Robert Ingersoll is admirably accomplished. She offers a host of well-chosen quotations from his work, and she deftly displays the effect he had on others. For instance: after a young Eugene V. Debs heard Ingersoll talk, Debs accompanied him to the train station and then — just so he could continue the conversation — bought himself a ticket and rode all the way from Terre Haute to Cincinnati. Readers today may well find Ingersoll's company equally entrancing.

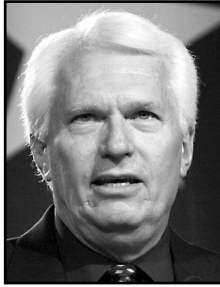
(Editor: Massimo Pigliucci interviews Susan Jacoby on The Great Agnostic April 24, 7:00 p.m. at New York Society for Ethical Culture — see page 7 for details.)

**DRILLING, DIGGING, FRACKING?
SORT OF LIKE FINDING DECORATED EGGS AT
EASTER, SAYS OUR NEW DUMBTH CANDIDATE**
(Thanks to Free Inquiry Group's March 2013 Fig Leaves)

When he was six years old, Bryan Fisher told a birthday-gift donor that he didn't like his gift. "And it just crushed that person," Bryan says.

Now all grown up and the Issues Director of the Christian fundamentalist American Family Association, Mr. Fisher recently told his radio audience that God's feelings will be similarly hurt if America stops using fossil fuels for energy.

"God," he reported, "has buried those treasures there because he loves to see us find them."



**YET ANOTHER DUMBTH CANDIDATE:
LET'S TAX HEALTHY BREATHING**

(Thanks to Anton Spivak for this from moonbattery.com)

The Washington state Senate recently produced a \$10 billion transportation package which supports a raise on gas taxes, car tabs, and even a \$25 tax on bicycles that cost more than \$500.

In an email to Dale Carlson, owner of Bike Tech in Tacoma, Washington Rep. Ed Orcutt (R), a member of the State Transportation Committee, defended the idea of a bike tax by saying, "Sorry, but I do think that bicyclists need to start paying for the roads they ride on rather than make motorists pay."

Okay, that's a little pro-car/anti-bike strange, but Orcutt gets his dumbth nomination for his belief that riding a bicycle is worse than driving a car for the environment.

"A cyclists [*sic*] has an increased heart rate and respiration," he said. "That means that the act of riding a bike results in greater emissions of carbon dioxide from the rider. Since CO2 is deemed to be a greenhouse gas and a pollutant, bicyclists are actually polluting when they ride."

WASH, RINSE, TUMBLE-DRY, PRAY
John Rafferty

We should have known better. Pat Robertson, SHSNY's Lifetime-Achievement-in-Dumbth honoree, dumbfounded us all last November by educating a caller to his 700 Club TV show that the Earth is, in fact, billions of years old, not a few thousand. The Reverend Pat, referencing science, really?

But we should never have doubted our guy; in February he was back in true screwball form.

Viewer "Carrie" worried in an email that the second-hand clothes she bought at Goodwill might have "demons"

attached to them that wouldn't wash out, and asked Pat if she should pray over them.

Of course she should, advised Pat, telling a story about a girl who had "all hell break loose" when she bought a ring that had been prayed over by a witch.

And Carrie's new/used clothes?

"It ain't going to hurt anything to rebuke any spirits that happened to attach themselves to those clothes."

So, why no dumbth nomination? Because we gave him a Lifetime Achievement award five years ago just so that he wouldn't win every year.

The same reason we don't allow nominations of Congress.

Religion is like a blind man looking in a black room for a black cat that isn't there, and finding it. - *Oscar Wilde*

FOR THE LOVE OF GOD
Al Henick

If you were walking along the edge of a lake, and before your eyes a little 2-year old child fell into the water, screaming with an outstretched hand to be rescued, your natural reaction would be to grasp the little hand and pull the child to safety. All of us would react the same way. But if one individual, the only one around, just stood motionless and let the poor child drown, he would not be guilty of murder, legally, but morally guilty of a sadistic crime as close to murder as you can get. Yet this sort of tragedy happens thousands of times every day all over the world in floods, earthquakes, diseases, starvation, accidents, murders, and all other forms of life-ending events, and the indifferent bystander is the almighty and omnipotent loving God who is worshipped by so many.

I am kinder to God than those who believe He is capable of such cruelty; I believe He isn't there.

**WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE PRESIDENT?
TELL PIQUE WHY IN 100 WORDS OR LESS.**

Here's an interesting intellectual-cum-political exercise originally dreamt up for SHSNY's FaceBook page by John Wagner: Which President of the U.S. is most esteemed (or "Liked" in FaceBook parlance) by humanists?

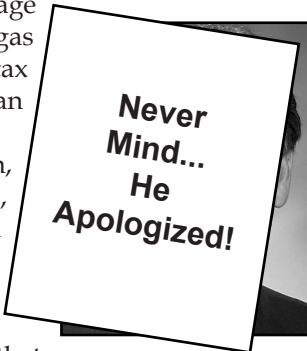
So ... who's *your* favorite? And why?

And to make it all more interesting, we're not counting the obvious-winners Big Three up on Rushmore: Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln (*pace*, environmentalists, I'm leaving Teddy Roosevelt in).

We've had great reader-participation success with this kind of thing in the past, i.e.: Your Five Books for a Desert Isle (2007); Life Lessons Learned in Six Words (2008); and Lunch and Conversation in the Afterlife (2012), so I'm hoping you all will make composing May PIQUE easy by sending in lots and lots of entries.

Email your short essay to editor@shsn.org, or snail-mail to the PO box on page 1.

I know who my favorite is - tell you next month. - JR



SHSNY CALENDAR: APRIL - JUNE 2013

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURSDAY, APRIL 4, 6:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

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

We'll discuss

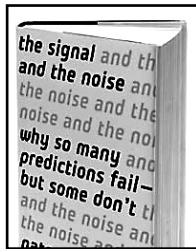
**THE SIGNAL & THE NOISE:
Why So Many Predictions Fail
– and Some Don't**

Nate Silver

Nate Silver predicted the 2008 election within a hair's breadth, and became a national sensation as a blogger – all by the time he was 30

– then called the 2012 election correctly in all 50 states. *The New York Times* now publishes FiveThirtyEight.com, where Silver is one of America's most influential political forecasters. Most predictions fail, he says, because most of us have a poor understanding of probability and uncertainty, and mistake more confident predictions for more accurate ones. – *Kindle available*

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



PLANNING AHEAD

The usual schedule is ...

Book Club: First Thursday
at the Community Church of NY

Movie Night: Second Monday
at Stone Creek Lounge.

Brunch: Third Sunday
at Brabant Belgian Brasserie.

Great Lectures: 4th Wednesday
at Stone Creek Lounge.

Humanism 101: Last Monday
at the Community Church of NY

More info: www.shsny.org,
at.humanism.meetup.com/515,
and 212-308-2165

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURSDAY, MAY 2, 6:30 pm
at Community Church of NY
28 East 35 Street (Park-Mad)

**THE 10,000 YEAR EXPLOSION:
How Civilization Accelerated
Human Evolution**

By **Gregory Cochran and
Henry Harpending**

Scientists have long believed that the “great leap forward” that occurred some 40,000 to 50,000 years ago in Europe marked end of significant biological evolution in humans. In this stunningly original account of our evolutionary history, scholars Cochran and Harpending reject the conventional wisdom and reveal that the human species has undergone a storm of genetic change much more recently. Human evolution in fact accelerated after civilization arose, they contend, and these ongoing changes have played a pivotal role in human history. – *Paperback & Kindle*

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURSDAY, JUNE 6, 6:30 p.m.
at Community Church of NY
**THIS EXPLAINS EVERYTHING
Deep, Beautiful, and Elegant
Theories of How the World
Works**

Ed: John Brockman

Why do we recognize patterns? Is there such a thing as positive stress? Are we genetically programmed to be in conflict with each other? These are just some of the 150 questions that the world's best scientific minds, including Jared Diamond, Richard Dawkins, Nassim Taleb, Brian Eno, Steven Pinker answer with elegant simplicity. Complex concepts discussed in fun, uncomplicated terms. – *Paperback & Kindle*

BRUNCH & DISCUSSION:

SUNDAY, APRIL 21, 12 NOON

John Rafferty will ask:

“Why should we care about a new Pope?”

Brabant Belgian Brasserie
316 East 53 Street

We'll meet at Noon just east of 2nd Avenue for outstanding Belgian fare, from salads to shrimp rolls, Grand Fromage Onion Soup, waffles and burgers, pots of lots of mussels, \$6 to \$18, plus a prix-fixe brunch (10 choices, plus 5 omelettes, including a drink) for \$17.

And let's start a new format: a *5-minute Sunday Sermon* (see headline subject above), to kick off table-wide (or long) discussion.

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!

MONDAY, APRIL 8, 7:00 pm

SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
“NORA'S WILL”

Mexico's Best Picture of the Year, 2010, this is a black comedy like no other. Ailing Nora has carefully planned her suicide for just before Passover. Ex-husband José is forced to stay with her body until she can be properly put to rest, and soon realizes he is part of Nora's plan to bring her fractured family back together for one last seder. As Jose battles with unsympathetic cemeteries and a fractious rabbi, he realizes how deeply he still loved Nora.



SHSNY CALENDAR: APRIL - MAY 2013

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
WED, APRIL 17, 7 p.m.

ELAINE PAGELS:
**“REVELATIONS, VISIONS,
PROPHECY & POLITICS IN
THE BOOK OF REVELATION”**
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

Religious scholar Pagels tackles the most controversial book of the bible, Revelation, the surreal apocalyptic vision of the end of the world. ... or is it?



Pagels returns the Book to its historical origin and its author, John of Patmos, who took aim at the Roman Empire after the “Jewish War” in 66 CE. Then a new sect known as “Christians” seized on John’s text as a weapon against heresy and infidels – Jews, even Christians who dissented from their increasingly rigid doctrines.

Great Lectures Night is FREE.

HUMANISM 101
MON, APRIL 29, 6:30-8:30
Community Church of New York
28 East 35 Street (red door)
Meeting/Discussion #5
Science and Anti-Science

Suggested Reading:

Online:

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

Fred Edwords: *Dealing with “Scientific” Creationism*

At [americanhumanist.org/HumanismBook\(s\)](http://americanhumanist.org/HumanismBook(s))

Stephen Hawking: *The Grand Design ... and/or*

Jerry Coyne: *Why Evolution is True*

Note: You can do the online reading in an hour or so, and choose just one of the books. All are welcome!

Reserve the date ... and your place now!

5TH ANNUAL DAY OF REASON CELEBRATION!
BRUNCH, PRESENTATION & DISCUSSION
SUNDAY, MAY 5, at 12 Noon, at
PETE’S TAVERN, 129 East 18 Street (at Irving Place)
with guest speaker

SHEILA REYNERTSON
Advocacy Coordinator, the MergerWatch Program
**“PROTECTING WOMEN’S HEALTHCARE
RIGHTS AND ACCESS”**



Ms. Reynertson coordinates advocacy campaigns in communities facing loss of vital services due to the introduction of health restrictions based on religious doctrine in hospitals, clinics, health plans and pharmacies. Her presentation will open with a new 14-minute documentary that explains how real patients and their physicians are negatively affected by proposed mergers of secular and religiously-sponsored hospitals in which the secular institution takes on religious restrictions. The film offers examples of workable “creative solutions” that MergerWatch (www.mergerwatch.org) helped to bring about to save access to health care, and also demonstrates how a community can defeat a religious/ secular merger. Spirited (we’re sure) discussion to follow.

Brunch is \$25

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

PRE-PAYMENT IS STRONGLY ADVISED!

The room only holds 50, and this event will be a sellout!

Pre-pay now at www.shsny.org

Use your credit card, or your PayPal account.

Or mail your check, made out to “SHSNY”, to:

SHSNY, PO Box 7661, FDR Station, New York, NY 10150-7661.

Questions? Call 212-308-2165, and leave a call-back number.

WED. APRIL 24, 7pm

MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI interviews SUSAN JACOBY
on *The Great Agnostic*
NY Soc. for Ethical Culture, 2 West 64 Street

Philosopher, author (*Answers for Aristotle*), and SHSNY member Pigliucci will interview Jacoby – best-selling author of *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* – on her new provocative biography of Robert Green Ingersoll, “the Great Agnostic” of the title, and the most famous orator of America’s Gilded Age, who raised his voice on behalf of Enlightenment reason, secularism, and the separation of church and state.

Wine reception at 6:30pm; \$5 NYSEC members & students, \$10 general public

PEEK

Newsletter of the Sexual Humorist Society of New York

April 1, 2013

In keeping with an ancient tradition (2007), on this date we put aside weightier considerations to consider the Supreme's next step in sanctifying life, the on-and-off relations between two psychopaths and Satan, and to say goodbye to a man who quit the job God chose him for. – JR

Joe Ratzinger bids us Farewell:

**BEING POPE WAS GREAT,
BUT YOU CAN'T PLAY MAKE-BELIEVE FOREVER
Benedict XVI**

(Excerpted from TheOnion.com, 2/28/2013)

For the past eight years, it has been my distinct pleasure to serve as head of the Roman Catholic Church. Spreading the message of the Bible around the world and sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ is an experience I wouldn't trade for anything. Honestly, I had a ball. But at some point, you just have to face the facts and realize that you can't play make-believe forever.

Hey, everyone has to grow up eventually—it's just a part of life. I decided it was time for me to finally move on and put all this pretend, fantasy stuff behind me.

Don't get me wrong, serving as pope was loads of fun. For starters, as pontiff you're always treated very well, you get to live in a palace, and millions of adoring people gather to hear you tell all sorts of silly old stories about a super-powerful being and other made-up nonsense about everlasting life in paradise. It's enjoyable, it's not particularly difficult, and you can say whatever you want. It really is a fun gig. You basically get to come into work and act like a little kid playing pretend. ...

When I sit down and actually think about the things I did all the time as pope, it's kind of embarrassing. The sad thing is that some people cling to this candyland their whole lives. John Paul II, for instance, actually believed in Easter to the very end. Christ, talk about a Peter Pan complex. The guy refused to grow up. It's pretty pathetic, when you think about it.

And that's why I'm stepping down. As much as I love all the silly stuff I got to do—and it definitely was a ton of fun—the time has definitely come for me to put all that religion mumbo-jumbo behind me and embrace reality like an actual grown-up.

Farewell, brothers and sisters. And God bless you—oh, whoops, sorry. Force of habit.



SATAN DESERTS LIMBAUGH

(Excerpted from The Borowitz Report)

Embattled radio host Rush Limbaugh suffered another major desertion today as he lost the support of one of his longtime sponsors, Satan.

"Due to remarks of his that we consider unacceptable, we are terminating our relationship with Rush Limbaugh", Satan said in a tersely worded statement.

Advertisers continued abandoning Mr. Limbaugh's program, including companies that had sponsored it for years, like the online dating site NaziMingle.com™.

And in other news from the Afterlife, Satan confirmed today that, following Saddam Hussein's continuing complaints that "there are too many Jews in Heaven", he is granting the former Iraqi dictator's request for transfer to Hell.

**SUPREME COURT TO OVERTURN
ROE v. CANCER**

(Excerpted from Daily Mash (UK) 3/28/12)

U.S. Supreme Court justices are set to overturn the landmark ruling in Roe versus Cancer. Conservative members of America's highest court have argued that President Obama's healthcare legislation denies cancer its constitutional rights. ...

Justice Samuel Alito said: "Every tumor, no matter how small deserves the right to grow to its full potential. It is not for private individuals to play God and decide which tumor lives and which one dies. The Bill of Rights is, at its heart, an affirmation of the American tumor."

Justice Clarence Thomas added: "From the moment the first cell mutates that tumor is as much a part of humanity as you or me. It is unconstitutional to use the apparatus of government to destroy innocent, metastasizing life."

Helen Archer, a pro-tumor activist from Colorado Springs, said: "I had a tumor removed when I was a young woman and it is the biggest mistake I ever made. I had my whole life ahead of me. I wanted a career, I wanted to have fun and I thought a tumor would just get in the way.

"I often wonder what that tumor would look like today, all grown up."

“HUMANISTIC MORMONS” YOU’RE KIDDING ME, RIGHT?

John Rafferty

When I saw the teaser in the March 13 Humanist Network News that the issue would contain an interview with the “Assistant President of the Society for Humanistic Mormonism”, my first thought was: “Isn’t this a little early for April Fool?”

But, nope, the article was for real, and so is the Society. Really. Some excerpts from its website:

Humanistic Mormonism is a movement of Freethinkers, Liberal Mormons, Cultural Mormons, Reform Mormons, Post-Mormons, Humanist, Transhumanist, Atheist, Agnostic, Secular Mormons, Disfellowshipped, Resigned, Excommunicated and/or Independents related to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and all other Latter Day Saint groups that have some connection with Mormon culture, identity, and/or history, but do not demand belief in a supernatural god, or the historicity of the Bible or the Book of Mormon. It is based on Humanism ...

No God? Wait, it gets better.

A Humanistic Mormon is someone who identifies with the history, culture, and future of the Mormon people; Mormonism is the historic culture of the Mormon people, and religion is only one part of that culture; People possess the power and responsibility to shape their own lives independent of supernatural authority; Ethics and morality should serve human needs, and choices should be based upon consideration of the consequences of actions rather than pre-ordained rules or commandments;

The Bible, Book of Mormon or other religious texts are purely human and natural phenomena. Biblical and other traditional texts are the products of human activity and are best understood by scientific analysis.

“Scientific analysis”?

I’m having a hard time getting my head around this new oxymoronic world in which words like “humanism”, “scientific analysis”, and “natural phenomena” can appear in the same paragraph with “Mormon” and not cause some kind of spontaneous detonation.

Even more important, do we have to allow these guys into the cabal? Are they now to be admitted to the full-moon meetings in the Brooklyn basement where we plot the secular overthrow of the world order? Do we have to share our breakfasts of Christian babies with them?

And ... does Mitt Romney know about this?

THE PROGRESSIVE WAR ON SCIENCE

A review of Science Left Behind

by Alex Berezow and Hank Campbell

Kenneth W. Krause

(Reprinted from eSkeptical magazine, 3/13/2013)

Let’s settle this thing once and for all—right here, right now. Who are more anti-scientific—Republicans or Democrats, conservatives or progressives? Conventional wisdom would have us believe—or at least so says science writer Chris Mooney—that Republicans have waged an unparalleled and all-out war on science.

Indeed, certain big business interests continue to see basic climate science as an entirely too inconvenient truth. And, yes, some religious leaders will likely always deny the facts of human evolution, abortion, homosexuality, and stem cell procurement and therapeutic cloning. Responsible journalists have documented and exposed these affronts to reason quite thoroughly with appropriate vigor.

But are progressives really so different? Not according to Alex Berezow and Hank Campbell. In *Science Left Behind*, the authors contend that American media have long bestowed a “free pass” on the political Left (primarily progressives), who are just as likely to “misinterpret, misrepresent, and abuse” science to advance their ideological agendas. In fact, the authors say, progressives are currently waging an “undeclared war on scientific excellence itself”.

They accuse progressives of propagating a number of socially destructive myths, among them the assumptions that everything “natural” is good and everything “unnatural” is bad. Accordingly, homeopathy is just as good as or better than traditional medicine, vaccines actually harm children, and nuclear energy promises unprecedented sickness and loss of life.

And despite studies showing conventional crops to be equally nutritional and both personally and environmentally safe (never mind vastly less expensive), “organic” foods—whatever that means in a shamefully unregulated industry—are somehow superior products. Ditto for raw, unpasteurized dairy products and juices left untreated for foodborne illnesses.

Meanwhile, genetically modified foods are decried as both personal and environmental menaces. Never mind that years of testing has yielded no evidence of risk. Forget about the potential of drought-resistant wheat and wilt-resistant bananas to feed starving Africans. And, please, don’t be fooled by researchers’ allegedly noble intentions to use GMOs to combat disease, reduce the use of pesticides, increase agricultural efficiency, and feed starving millions who would otherwise go hungry.

Ideologues also continue to berate scientists for considering cultured, or *in vitro* meat. Technophobic and anti-corporate, say Berezow and Campbell, progressives claim that laboratory amino acid production will always be more expensive and resource intensive than the obviously foul and unsophisticated system we use on farms today. They have even threatened legal action and years of red tape to discourage the research itself.

But the facts of “slow-grown” meat are compelling, to say the least. Gorging themselves on 40 percent of the planet’s cereal grain, livestock also use and despoil about 30 percent of the earth’s surface, 70 percent of its arable land, and eight percent of its water supply. The world’s 1.5 billion livestock are responsible for between 15 and 24 percent of all anthropogenic greenhouse gasses, and beef ranching accounts for 80 percent of Amazon deforestation. Cattle dump 64 million tons of sewage in the United States alone, and pigs, of course, are no less prolific.

The antibiotics we use on farm animals contribute

mightily to the emergence of multi-drug resistant strains of bacteria. And what are the most common causes of food-borne diseases in the U.S., EU, and Canada? That's right—contaminated meats and animal products. In rather stark contrast, meat grown in culture doesn't poop, burp, fart, eat, overgraze, drink, bleed, or scream in agony—and it's a great deal less likely to poison or infect us.

Unsurprisingly, progressives have corrupted the social sciences too, perhaps to the point of permanent reputational taint among both the general public and the scientific community. Recall, for example, the oppressive and un scholarly manner in which Harvard president Lawrence Summers was vilified in 2005 for merely suggesting that, one, men and women might have distinguishable natural abilities related to math and science, and, two, that personal preference rather than discrimination might account for female "underrepresentation" in high-end STEM careers.

"Summers learned the hard way", the authors say, "that the feel-good fallacies of progressive thought are stronger than the values of free inquiry and the primacy of the scientific method." Indeed, where was the intellectual debate before Summers' resignation in 2006? Is it really so improbable that different genders evolved or learned different talents? Or is it more likely, perhaps, that academics have been bullied into the "gender equality" camp with threats of being branded as sexist?

Berezow and Campbell refer to a "mountain of scientific data" that refutes the unlikely notion of biological gender equality. First, controlling for body size, men's brains are 100 grams heavier than women's brains, which results in a 3.6-point intelligence difference. Second, although women have more white matter, men possess more gray matter, which is related to information processing. The jury is still out on the issue of aptitude, the authors admit, but progressives seem to want to "cut science out" of the deliberations altogether.

And the problem appears to reemerge when the question centers more specifically on careers in science. Though progressives continue to "blame sexist men or an oppressive society" for female "underrepresentation" in the high-end STEM fields, say the authors, it has become "increasingly clear" that biology strongly influences our personal preferences.

Cornell University researchers Stephen Ceci and Wendy Williams recently published a hard-hitting and no doubt divisive paper addressing this very issue. After reviewing 20 years of data, Ceci and Williams—married with three daughters of their own—decided that the evidence of discrimination against women in math-intensive fields is "aberrant, of small magnitude" and "superseded by larger, more sophisticated analyses showing no bias, or occasionally, bias in favor of women".

In agreement with their previous analyses, Ceci and Williams surmised instead that the gender gap results primarily from women's career preferences and fertility and lifestyle choices. In other words, adolescent girls tend to gravitate toward careers focusing on people as opposed to

things, and female Ph.D.s interested in childrearing are less likely to apply for or maintain tenure track positions. Incidentally, as a secondary explanation, the duo pointed to evidence for upper tail disparities in cognitive ability.

Richard Lippa, a psychologist at California State University, Fullerton, has recently observed that "[c]ontemporary gender researchers, particularly those who adopt social constructionist and feminist ideologies, often reject the notion that biologic factors directly cause gender differences". Feminist beliefs are so contrary to mainstream biology, Berezow and Campbell concur, "it is fair to compare their anti-science rhetoric to that of evolution-denying creationists".

So let's return to our question—who are more anti-science, conservatives or progressives? Frankly, Berezow and Campbell go too far in their criticisms and provide too little evidence for their claim that all Lefties are "social authoritarians" bent on an everlasting "culture war".

The fact is that all ideologues are impediments to science, whether libertarians, religious zealots, and free-market fundamentalists on the one hand, or environmentalists, feminists, and social engineers on the other. Science—indeed, truth generally—is served mostly by those who conceive of themselves as individuals first and group members second (if at all). But seldom if ever are its ends advanced by committed disciples to any idea or cause.

The authors are entirely correct, however, in illuminating a salient distinction between politics and science. The former consists of "gotcha" moments and scoring points against the other team. The latter is about proceeding openly and vigorously wherever the data lead, and allowing others the same courtesy.

AND WHILE WE'RE AT THE ABOVE, LET'S FIX THIS KIND OF IDIocy

John Wagner

(Posted by John on the SHSNY FaceBook page)

"We oppose the teaching of higher order thinking skills, critical thinking, and similar programs." – Texas Republican Party platform.

Secular humanists can be Republicans or Democrats or Independents or Greens or any other party or no party at all, but we are all freethinkers, all rationalists, all dedicated to reason and science. Remember ...

"Wherever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government." – Thomas Jefferson.

THE NEXT BIG CIVIL RIGHTS BATTLE: OURS Paleolibrarian

(Excerpted – with emendations by the Editor – from "Non-Belief is a Civil and Human Right", on Paleolibrarian.com, 2/26/2013)

Although the United States was founded as a secular nation, more than two centuries after the ratification of the Constitution the nation finds itself stuck at the dysfunctional cross roads of rationality and freedom

versus faith-based imperialism and injustice. While the “nones” are growing and individual disconnection with organized faith widens in America, those who choose to live without superstition remain discriminated against in many states for their lack of religious belief.

Non-believers as a class—that is atheists and other secularists—still suffer at the hands of religious ignorance and religious political violence. Eight states have in their constitutions legal prohibitions which disallow atheists from holding public office. Essentially, these legislative prerogatives stop full citizen participation in one’s own pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. Yet they remain on the books and legal within each state where the laws are codified.

Arkansas: “No person who denies the being of a God shall hold any office in the civil departments of this State, nor be competent to testify as a witness in any Court.”

Maryland: “That no religious test ought ever to be required as a qualification for any office of profit or trust in this State, other than a declaration of belief in the existence of God; nor shall the Legislature prescribe any other oath of office than the oath prescribed by this Constitution.”

Mississippi: “No person who denies the existence of a Supreme Being shall hold any office in this state.”

North Carolina: “The following persons shall be disqualified for office: First, any person who shall deny the being of Almighty God.”

South Carolina: “No person who denies the existence of a Supreme Being shall hold any office under this Constitution.”

Tennessee: “No person who denies the being of God, or a future state of rewards and punishments, shall hold any office in the civil department of this state.”

Texas: “No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office, or public trust, in this State; nor shall anyone be excluded from holding office on account of his religious sentiments, provided he acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being.”

Pennsylvania: “No person who acknowledges the being of a God and a future state of rewards and punishments shall, on account of his religious sentiments, be disqualified to hold any office or place of trust or profit under this Commonwealth.”

Replace the word “atheist” or its pseudonym in any of those examples with the label of any protected class and you’ll see their injustice.

And illegality. To wit:

“... no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” — Article VI of the U.S. Constitution.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion ...” — Amendment I to the Constitution.

“No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States ...” — Amendment XIV, Section 1.

The only direction legally the secular movement can go in the above states is up. But it will take collective action and awareness. The United States stands for individual

freedom and fairness. I believe in that national vision and I’m proud of my country. But belief is only one part of the equation. We must collectively take action in America and wherever else non-believers are harassed to truly make the world a safer, kinder and richer planet.

ELIZABETH WARREN SAID SHE’D FIGHT THE BILLIONAIRE FAT CATS. WE BELIEVED HER. WE ELECTED HER. WE WERE RIGHT.

(At a hearing March 7, Senator Warren (D-MA) hammered Treasury Department officials who had fined money-laundering HSBC bank – rather than indicting the bankers – with a simple question: What does it take to put rich criminals in prison?)

“If you’re caught with an ounce of cocaine, chances are good that you’re going to jail. If it happens repeatedly you may go to jail for the rest of your life.

“But evidently, if you launder nearly a billion dollars for drug cartels and violate our international sanctions, your company pays a fine and you go home and sleep in your own bed at night – every single individual associated with this. And I think that’s just fundamentally wrong.”



READERS RESPOND TO PIQUE

To the Editor: Enjoyable reading [March], as always. And the pieces on the Second Amendment were welcome. Unfortunately, Americans are as blind to the historical and rational meaning of the Founders intent as they are to the theory of evolution. If the rationalist – so-he-thinks – Antonin Scalia doesn’t understand the intended and historical meaning, how can a nation of bigoted anarchists see it? – Remo Cosentino

To the Editor: Thank you for printing “The Second Amendment: The Real History”, people down here need to see it! – Tom Bentley, Piedmont (South Carolina) Humanists

To the Editor: The March issue is great! By the way, I’ve been meaning to thank you for turning me on to Book Antiqua [this body font in which PIQUE is set – JR]. I love it! I’ve attached a letter that responds to Giddian Beer’s article in the current issue.

Is morality in our genes? Is it therefore always good? These are two thoughtful questions raised by Mr. Beer in an interesting article in the March issue. His questions were provoked by my recent comments in PIQUE about the book *The Righteous Mind*, by Jonathan Haidt. The book’s central assertions are that morality is part of our genetic heritage and that its main function is to foster group cohesion.

I agree with much of what Mr. Beer wrote. For instance, he says that a lot of morality is “very good”, but some is not. He gives several examples, such as the fact that “[t]orture and the immolation of ‘witches’ and heretics were once considered ‘moral’ in Medieval Europe”. He is absolutely right. However, neither Prof. Haidt nor I asserted otherwise. The

point is that morality, whether good or bad, cements social cohesion, and our ability to live together in societies has great survival value for our species.

I disagree, however, with Mr. Beer's contention that "[a]ny behavior that must be learned is not instinctive, not inherent, certainly not in the genes". Instincts often are mediated by learning; the most obvious example for us humans is language. We are all born with the innate capability to speak, but in order to do so we must learn a language. – *Walter Balcerak*

To the Editor: Philip Kitcher's talk at the Darwin Day dinner was interesting, but while he nailed the problems with the authoritarian approach to morality, I felt that he skirted the big issue with defining an alternative. He said (in response to my question, the first) that he accepts that there are core values held almost universally along with culturally variable values, but he didn't explain how this distinction comes into being.

In response to later questions (especially the immediately following one), he used the adjective "objective" and the adverb "objectively" several times, for example claiming that lying to protect a fugitive from the Gestapo is moral because the fugitive's concerns are "objectively" more moral than the Gestapo officer's.

This ignores an obvious problem: if, as he maintains, morality arises from agreement among humans, how can any of it be considered "objective"? Personally, I think we're going to have to describe morality as a blend of relativistic rules based on some form of Utilitarianism with objective rules based on evolution. – *Harvey Wachtel*

To the Editor: The new PIQUE is terrific, as always, but perhaps even pithier and pricklier than usual. Thanks for keeping those cards and letters comin' in! – *Phil Appleman*

EDITH AMSTER 1932-2013

An active, helpful, voluble, and often funny but definitely opinionated member of the Secular Humanist Society of New York for a decade, Edith (*née* Klein) died March 16 at home in Manhattan.

Her good friend and regular brunch and movie-night companion, Wally Berliner, informs us that Edith was a native of Connecticut and a 1958 graduate of Southern Connecticut State College before moving to New York to become a teacher, business owner, and active humanist.

She will be missed.

WHO DO YOU THINK WE ARE?

To register SHSNY with Google for NonProfits in March, I had to submit a short "mission statement". Here's what I wrote:

The Secular Humanist Society of New York is the leading freethought organization in the NYC area, promoting the principles of reason and science, and an ethical lifestance centered upon the supreme value of the individual human.

Agree? No? Make it better? Your suggestions are solicited, via editor@shsny.org. – *JR*

Page 10
Battle: Ours
The Next Big Civil-Rights

Page 5
Your Favorite President?

Page 1
Sci-Phi as a Way of Life

Page 7
Pete's Tavern, Sun, May 5
Day of Reason Brunch,

5th Annual SHSNY
Reserve now!

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