

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

July, 2004

We have three interesting evenings to report on this month: one on how life probably began, one on how it can get royally screwed up, and one evening that was certainly the best SHSNY Book Club meeting yet. We give you ample notice of our Fall reading list, look at the pictures from Abu Ghraib from two different perspectives, examine one of “alternative” medicine’s latest (and oldest) idiocies, lament the danger of thinking, and rejoice in the triumph of true love in our own ranks.

Special note: Your comments on the upcoming presidential election, both reasoned and ranting, are solicited for September, October and November PIQUE.

HOW LIFE STARTED ON EARTH

Ezra Kulko, D.D.S.

**Explainer, American Museum of Natural History
and Rose Center for Space and Earth**

Reported by John Arents

On March 18, we had the pleasant and elevating experience of a lecture by Dr. Ezra Kulko. When he spoke to us two years ago, he covered the whole history of the universe from the Big Bang. This time his goal was more modest: to tackle one of the greatest mysteries remaining in science, the origin of life.

Dr. Kulko listed four great unknowns: the nature and causation of the Big Bang, the nature of dark matter, the nature of dark energy, and how life began. The Big Bang, as far as we understand it, was a sudden expansion of space-time, starting with a fluctuation in what is referred to as “quantum foam.” About 380,000 years later, the universe had cooled to a balmy 3,000°C. This was cool enough for the nuclei (nearly all hydrogen and helium) and electrons to combine into atoms. This combination of oppositely charged particles had a profound effect. When the universe consisted of nuclei and electrons moving independently, it was an excellent conductor of electricity. Light (electromagnetic radiation of any wavelength) cannot pass through a conductor, even a thin metal foil like a candy wrapper. As soon as the charged particles were replaced by neutral atoms, light could pass through, as it passes through air. The universe became transparent.

The gas was attracted by its own gravitation into stars. They were so much heated by compression that nuclear fusion—the combination of hydrogen and helium nuclei into larger nuclei, which then combined, and so on—released enormous amounts of energy. Stars began to glow, lighting up the universe. When stars eventually exhausted their nuclear fuel, they suddenly collapsed in vast “supernova” explosions that ejected the heavy elements—they had been forming all those millions of years—into the interstellar gas (“heavy” means anything heavier than helium, like carbon, oxygen, and iron). Now, when new stars formed, they had a built-in supply of heavy elements.

Our Sun is a third-generation star of modest size. It was formed from dust and gas that had already been enriched by two generations of exploding stars. Very large stars live fast, short lives, millions rather than billions of years. Only 7% of stars are like the

Sun in long life and heavy-element content. With an ample supply of the elements needed for life and plenty of time for evolution to work on them, it is the sort of star that might have life nearby.

The gas and dust left over from the formation of a star, and still revolving around it, also exerts gravitational forces on itself. It aggregates into planets and their satellites. It now seems likely that most stars have planets. The only ones that can be detected (thus far) are very large planets close to the star, as if Jupiter were in Mercury's position. The hot star is always boiling off gas, the "solar wind," which pushes gases away faster than dust. Not surprisingly, the more distant planets are gaseous and the nearer ones are rocky. Some of the atoms incorporated into the planets are radioactive. They keep the interior of a rocky planet like the Earth molten for a long time. The denser elements, especially iron, settle to the core. The rotation of the iron core produces a magnetic field, which is important because it shields the Earth from the energetic charged particles that are always coursing through space and would obliterate life if they had a chance.

Atoms in outer space can combine into molecules. Merely bumping into each other is not sufficient. The energy given out by their combination would drive them apart. A grain of dust is a convenient place for them to dispose of their excess energy. Molecules become more reactive, readier to combine, when they are excited or even ionized by starlight. More than 120 molecules have been detected in space. No fewer than 74 of them are amino acids, the principal building blocks of life. These molecules and their dusty vehicles must have rained down on the primitive Earth, providing the raw material for life.

An appealing feature of the Sun is that it provides a constant source of energy for billions of years. Not all stars are so kind. The Earth is at the right distance from the Sun for water to exist as a liquid without all freezing or boiling away. Water is undoubtedly necessary for life. It is a unique molecule, strongly attracting itself and countless other ions and molecules, making it the nearest thing to a universal solvent. Another necessity for life is carbon, the only element capable of forming large, complex molecules. Most atoms prefer to bond to unlike atoms, forming networks or chains with their own kind only when nothing else is available.

Jupiter also plays a supporting role: it is so massive that it deflects flying objects that would otherwise collide with the Earth. It has missed some, with disastrous results for the dinosaurs and the residents, happily nonexistent, of Tunguska. But, then, extinction is part of evolution. The demise of the dinosaurs opened the way for our ancestors.

It has been discovered in recent years that life can exist under much more extreme conditions—both hot and cold—than had ever been suspected. Hot-water vents in the seafloor support flourishing colonies of strange organisms with no sunlight at all. This environment now seems to be the most likely birthplace of life. The vent-dwellers were probably there before the earth had an atmosphere. Their descendants would later have adapted to sunlight, evolved photosynthesis, and adapted to the oxygen-rich atmosphere that photosynthesis generated.

Why has the human species been so successful? Dr. Kulko's theory is that the greatest achievement is the control and use of energy: clubs, spears, fire, domestic animals, wind, water power, and—the greatest advance of all—the steam engine, which made energy available whenever and wherever it was needed. Then came the internal-

combustion engine, electricity, and eventually, we hope, fusion power, harnessing the same energy source that makes the Sun shine.

There was a long, vigorous, even pugnacious discussion on questions like whether we really know that life cannot exist without carbon and water, and whether the anthropic principle—that the universe was designed to make human life possible—is merely an exercise in wishful thinking and human vanity. There is no reason to suppose that human beings are the end point of evolution, on Earth or wherever else life may have appeared. However, Dr. Kulko thinks we should all be proud of our species' achievements, both intellectual and practical. (More pugnacious discussion.) He called attention to the many great courses offered at the Museum of Natural History.

All were grateful for an evening of enlightening entertainment and/or entertaining enlightenment.

PRAYER SCAM

John Rafferty

Remember the Columbia University study of October, 2001, the “Prayer-Power Miracle” study which “proved” that infertile women undergoing in vitro fertilization who were prayed for were twice as likely to conceive and have a successful pregnancy as those who were not? It was headline news in the tabloid media the month after 9/11, and the bible-thumpers bellowed that it was a sure sign from God that the only way to win in the war against terrorism was for all Americans to get down on their knees and pray.

Yeah, well, the lead “researcher,” Daniel Wirth, and one of his co-authors, Joseph Horvath, have both pleaded guilty to separate multi-million dollar frauds, neither has a medical degree, both have several aliases and long histories (including jail time for Horvath) as con artists— and the two real Columbia fertility specialists whose names are also on the study are not returning calls from the press. Nor is anyone else from Columbia.

ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE BELONGS IN OUR FREE MARKET

John W. Hillman

(Excerpted from a reply to Dr. Chic Schissel's February PIQUE article, “Is Alternative Medicine Really Religion?” when that article first appeared in LISH Inquirer in 2003.)

Dr. Schissel's implications are that “anecdotal observations” are not “scientific.” We have all heard reports from people who have, or think they have, benefited from chiropractic, acupuncture, etc. Are these to be completely rejected simply because they have not or cannot be subjected to rigorous laboratory-type analysis? In our free market system, all approaches to treatment should be permitted to exist side by side with “traditional” allopathic medical approaches. Simply put, what works, works. Placebo-controlled, double blind studies are commendable methods ... but the actual practice of medicine in the field is just as much anecdotal as alternative modalities.

The FDA and establishment medicine try to “protect” the public from treatments that could be dangerous to public health. Statistics show that there are hundreds of thousands of fatalities, and many more iatrogenic injuries, to patients of conventional medicine [in comparison to] the handful of bad results from herbs, supplements, etc. How about that scientific Estrogen Replacement Treatment! ... “To protect the public” is the paternalism

of an autocratic system that wants to monopolize the market, an extremely profitable market, as investors in the gigantic drug companies and health insurance corporations will affirm. There would be few people utilizing alternative therapies if modern allopathic medicine could provide satisfactory solutions to many human ills, and most importantly, was doing an adequate job in preventive approaches.

The scientific approach is to be revered, but there is much non-science operating behind the scenes in the world of medicine. In evaluating any aspect of modern day human enterprise, the first consideration should always be to “look for the money trail.”

Dr. Schissel replies:

I think many people misinterpret the concept of an anecdote. A patient’s description of symptoms is not an anecdote. A competent physician’s judgment is not anecdotal; it is based on assembling valid diagnostic information and drawing conclusions, all within established scientific parameters that exclude anecdotes.

The alternative fringe is flooding the media with fictional accounts of studies and illusory “statistics,” and too many of us are misled. Mr. Hillman alludes to undefined statistics to allege that conventional medicine leads to more fatalities than the “handful” of bad results from the alternative fringe ... And he repeats the outrageous fringe medicine claim that “statistics show that hundreds of thousands of fatalities” are caused by conventional medicine. What statistics?

I have never met anyone who knew of anybody who ever died from an adverse drug reaction. There are, indeed, rare serious side effects from FDA-approved medicines, but for every one hurt by a side effect there are thousands and thousands of lives that these treatments have saved. The point of testing should be to quantify the risk-benefit ratio in advance.

Mr. Hillman implies that the “FDA and establishment medicine” are wrong in their efforts to “protect” the public from dangerous treatments. He says, “in our free market system all approaches to treatment should be permitted to exist side by side with ‘traditional’ allopathic medical approaches.” Is this really desirable?

We don’t have a free market system in medicine. Dentists have a monopoly on drilling and restoring teeth. An unlicensed person who attempts abdominal surgery breaks the law. The system of licensing of professionals properly discriminates against the unqualified, and quacks should not be permitted to practice “side by side” on an equal basis with educated, trained, licensed professionals. Caveat emptor does not apply in the field of complex science; the public cannot be expected to have expertise in these matters and rightly relies on agencies like licensing boards and the FDA for needed and appropriate protection.

Hillman is right when he says alternative medicine is popular because scientific medicine does not have all the answers. In this sense, scientific medicine is a victim of its own success. When I was a kid people routinely died in their thirties, forties, fifties, without anyone being surprised. But with modern medical advances, and the life expectancy approaching eighty, people are astonished, even indignant, if someone dies earlier. Modern medicine, expected these days to solve every problem, takes the blame, and the scientifically naive turn to the alternative fringe. In logic this is called the argument from ignorance: “You don’t know the answer, therefore my way is right; doctors don’t know the answer, therefore the quacks do.”

Mr. Hillman wisely says, “look for the money trail,” but he might be advised to look in all directions. Alternative medicine is where the easy money lies: it is popular, takes no genuine expertise, and is profitable. The only skill it takes is the ability to look a patient in the eye, lie to him, and take his money.

The power which a man’s imagination has over his body to heal it or make it sick is a force which none of us is born without. The first man had it, the last one will possess it.
— Mark Twain in *Christian Science*, 1903.

BIOMAGNETS: AN EXERCISE OF FAITH?

Russell Dunn

Got a bad backache and want some relief? Don’t reach for the ibuprofen or heating pad. Strap on a biomagnet, the latest new-age fad that has pushed its way past crystals and pyramids to the medical forefront.

Just what are biomagnets? Despite the fancy-sounding name, they are simple magnets, relatively flat and thin, like the magnets you put on your refrigerator door. They are capable of exerting many gaussses of magnetic force. Believers wear them over those parts of the body that require medical treatment. Some even sleep on magnetic mattresses.

In this respect it’s worth mentioning that magnets for medical use are not new. Indeed, we have MRI’s (Magnetic Resonance Imagers), as well as other new age technology, that can be used scientifically, and quite legitimately, for diagnostic purposes.

Magnets for medical use, in fact, go far back historically. Cleopatra is said to have used them on her face in an attempt to ward off wrinkles. In 1856, the famous French magician Robert-Houdin (from whom Houdini later took his name) was called upon to help quell an uprising of Marabouts in Algeria. Houdin made use of the newly discovered principles of electro-magnetism to both awe and frighten his audience of religious zealots.

In 19th century America, a woman who billed herself as The Georgia Magnet appeared, claiming to be able to generate magnetic fields through her body so powerful that strong men would suddenly become powerless to lift her. In truth, The Georgia Magnet was an accomplished master of body mechanics, and knew how to use the laws of physics to her best advantage.

More recently, claims have been made by several European paranormalists that they can magnetically cause objects to adhere to their bodies, typically their heads and faces. These claims have not withstood close scrutiny, and are stunts that can be duplicated by any knowledgeable magician.

So, is there anything to biomagnetism?

To be sure, some argument could be made to theoretically justify the plausibility of biomagnetism. After all, we are living on a planet that is literally a large, spinning magnet, possessing north and south poles. Might not our bodies have evolved in some fashion to utilize the magnetic properties of the earth itself?

Indeed, we are electro-chemically wired, and completely regulated by the action of these subtle electro-chemical interactions. Perhaps, in some not-yet understood way, magnetic fields can affect these subtle but complex interactions.

Furthermore, the hemoglobin in our blood contains significant traces of iron [4 iron atoms per molecule, about 0.35%] (which is why patients with pernicious anemia get monthly injections of B-12 to increase oxygen-carrying efficiency). Isn't it possible that these traces of iron might in some way be affected by the properties of magnetism? *[This supposition comes partly from confusion between the very strongly magnetic iron of magnets and the iron atoms combined with other atoms in hemoglobin. Combined iron is not especially magnetic. — John Arents]*

Anything, of course, is possible, although in the end, that which is most probable should decidedly carry more weight. Even as I write these words, scientists are conducting controlled tests to determine the efficacy of biomagnets as a medical treatment.

What is telling, however, is that new-agers tout the positive benefits of their wonder products—pyramids to sharpen razor blades, crystals to conduct resonance, etc.—but the opposite argument is never made, that a particular product might have a significant negative effect and, therefore, be detrimental to health. Call me a curmudgeon or skeptic, but perhaps negative effects are never observed (when there are probably neither negative nor positive effects to be detected anyhow), for the reason that negative effects don't sell products.

In the end, biomagnets are just another example of how willing some humans are to take matters on faith. In a culture of religion, proper skepticism is not always popular or regularly applied.

INSTITUTE FOR HUMANIST STUDIES DEBUTS CONTINUUM OF HUMANIST EDUCATION

The Continuum of Humanist Education (COHE) is “the world’s first online, interactive humanist educational program,” according to the sponsoring Institute for Humanist Studies. COHE debuts with courses in humanism (*Humanist Activism*); psychology (*Understanding Ourselves and Our Universe*); religion (*Developing Human Potential Without Religion*); science (*Evolutionism, Creationism and the Nature of Science*); ethics (*Sacred vs. Secular Ethics*), and politics (*Religion and the Constitution*).

All are accessible to anyone with an Internet connection at what IHS terms low rates, and some, like the *Introduction to Humanism* demo course, are free. Check it all out at <http://HumanistEducation.com>

SUMMER SCHEDULE

Next month, the editor of PIQUE, the local and national staff, and all correspondents in all our bureaus worldwide will be on vacation.

Next issue: September, the first of our Presidential Election issues — so send us your opinions, arguments, considered judgments and intemperate tirades.

CULTS AND COERCION: HOW ORDINARY PEOPLE ARE TURNED INTO EXTRAORDINARY FANATICS

Paul Grosswald, reported by John Arents

On May 26, we had the privilege of hearing a lecture inspired by one highly intelligent and articulate man's six-month experience as a member of a powerful cult. Mr.

Grosswald has, happily, freed himself from the cult's control with help from his wise and determined parents and made a life. He is now a successful young lawyer.

Mr. Grosswald emphasized that the problem is not with a cult's beliefs. Religious freedom guarantees the right to hold and propagate whatever beliefs one chooses. The problem is with their techniques. They don't leave people alone. They have very effective methods to control them. He had learned in Hebrew school about the Moonies—a whole course about them—but the lessons were not generalized, and he was unprepared for the cult he encountered: Scientology.

A "cult" can be any devoted group of followers, but the term is applied most often today to destructive and disruptive cults. A distinguishing characteristic is a pyramidal organization: all power flows down from the leader; all money flows up from the members. People are recruited deceptively, and clever mind-control techniques are used to keep them locked in. Cult leaders see the end—building and strengthening the cult—as justifying any means, and they have no respect for laws.

Who is likely to join such a group? Typical recruits are bright, curious, either leaders among their peers or followers of others whom they respect, self-doubting, eager to be liked, willing to take risks. Anyone is a possible recruit, but timing is crucial. No one leads a charmed life. People lose jobs and friends. They fail in school. They become disoriented and depressed. The cult may have just the message to help vulnerable wanderers, and recruiters learn scripts to respond to common problems. They are very friendly and concerned with the prospect's suffering ("love bombing"). The time to recruit people is when their guard is down.

Cults have many "front" organizations which never reveal their affiliation. For example, Sterling Management is a Scientology front: it offers management and financial services to dentists. Mr. Grosswald climbed onto a chair and unfurled a list of Moonie fronts, longer than from ceiling to floor.

The key to resisting the blandishments of cults is to recognize what they are doing. Few people have learned critical thinking skills. Mind control is not an exotic technique peculiar to cults. Everyone does it to some degree with friends, family, lovers, customers, and so on. We just need to know how to spot it.

One trick is "loading the language." Scientology has its own vocabulary. A "suppressive person" is anyone who criticizes the movement. Avoidance and hostility strengthen the bond against a common enemy. "Auditing" is a form of confession in which the auditor attempts to clear the mind of harmful patterns ("engrams"). Auditing has to be paid for, and all the confessions are written down. They become part of a database that can be used for blackmail.

Now for Mr. Grosswald's own experience. His religious heritage is Reform Judaism. At Hofstra University, he was separated from his parents for the first time. He found himself with no goals or direction, no friends, no success in meeting girls. Someone gave him a copy of a personality test, which could be analyzed without charge. Once he began to participate in the movement, he found himself isolated: not physically in midtown Manhattan, but psychologically, by associating only with Scientologists and receiving all his information from them. In auditing, he had to repeat the same story over and over, producing a hypnotic state of heightened suggestibility. When he ran out of money, he was invited to join the staff. He signed a billion-year employment contract, including future reincarnations. His talents being obvious, he was next offered a position in the Sea

Org, the top management, where military-style uniforms are worn. But with this promotion, he would have to drop out of college and move to California.

His panic-stricken parents showed up at the Scientology building with four “exit counselors,” demanding a meeting with their son. They finally wangled 45 minutes for dinner. The whole group went off for a much longer session, where the counselors gave him information unfavorable to Scientology and new to him. When he returned, he started asking questions about Scientology based on his new learning. They decided that he had been contaminated and would be a source of trouble. They expelled him from the movement, he returned to his parents, and his six-month Scientology career came to an abrupt end.

The audience was grateful for his informative and eloquent presentation. There was a long and vigorous discussion. Can a romance possibly succeed when the lady and her parents are adherents of Landmark Education, an offshoot of Scientology? Is there really evidence for reincarnation? We were too hungry to spend the whole night resolving these burning issues.

[box]

[Picture of singer Madonna with Hebrew-character tattoos on her bicep]

POP DIVA MADONNA

(“CALL ME ESTHER”)

EMBRACES JUDAISM

And Jews the world over sigh a collective “*gevalt*.”

[close box]

IN MEMORIAM

[Picture of Ray Charles]

Last month, America lost one of its greats, a man known for his class, courage, and boundless optimism. Rest in peace, Ray Charles.

When the headlines, as they do so often today, cause you to despair of your country, pull out and play your old recording of Ray singing, swinging, stomping “America the Beautiful.”

AN END TO A FEMINIST ILLUSION

Barbara Ehrenreich

(Excerpted from her commencement address at Barnard, as reported in The New York Times, June 6.)

You saw them, too, the photos of American soldiers humiliating and abusing detainees in Iraq. These photos turned my stomach—yours too, I’m sure. But they did something else to me: They broke my heart. I had no illusions about the U.S. mission in Iraq, but it turns out that I did have some illusions about women.

All we had to do to make the world a better place— kinder, less violent, more just— was to assimilate into what had been, for so many centuries, the world of men. We would fight so that women could become the generals, the C.E.O.’s, the senators, the judges and opinion-makers and that was really the only fight we had to undertake. Because once they gained power and authority, once they had achieved a critical mass within the institutions of society, women would naturally work for change. What I have finally come to

understand, sadly and irreversibly, is that the kind of feminism based on an assumption of female moral superiority is a lazy and self-indulgent form of feminism. It is not enough to be equal to men, when the men are acting like beasts. It is not enough to assimilate. We need to create a world worth assimilating into.

RUSH LIMBAUGH ON THE PICTURES FROM ABU GHRAIB

May 4: These were just boys and girls blowing off steam during a stressful situation.

May 5: I think a lot of the American culture is being feminized. I think the reaction to the stupid torture is an example of the feminization of this country.

May 6: If you look at these pictures, you cannot deny that there are elements of homoeroticism. ... I've seen things like this on American websites.

Comment: *Um, tell us more about those interesting websites you're visiting, Rush.*

CONGRATULATIONS

On May 3, debonair former SHSNY President Ed McCartan and the witty and charming Rita Cheren married. Every one of us wishes them long years of continuing joy and love.

MY THINKING PROBLEM

(Received anonymously on the Internet.)

It started out innocently enough. I began to think at parties now and then “to loosen up.” Inevitably though, one thought led to another, and soon I was more than just a social thinker. I began to think alone—“to relax,” I told myself—though I knew it wasn't true.

Thinking became more and more important to me; finally I was thinking all the time, even on the job. I knew thinking and employment don't mix, but I couldn't stop myself. I began to avoid friends at lunchtime so I could read. I soon had a reputation as a heavy thinker. One day the boss called me in. He said, “I like you, but if you don't stop thinking on the job, I'll have to let you go.”

This gave me a lot to think about. I went home early. “Sweetheart,” I confessed, “I've been thinking ...”

“I know you've been thinking, and if you don't stop, I want a divorce! You think as much as college professors, and they don't make any money, so if you keep on thinking we won't have any money!”

“That's a faulty syllogism,” I said impatiently, and it all went downhill from there. Soon I'd had enough.

“I'm going to the library,” I snarled as I stomped out the door. I was in the mood for some Nietzsche. With NPR on the radio, I roared into the parking lot and ran up to the big glass doors.

Closed! To this day, I believe that a Higher Power was looking out for me that night. As I sank to the ground clawing at the glass, whimpering for philosophy, I saw a poster, you know the one: “Is heavy thinking ruining your life?” A Thinkers Anonymous poster.

Today I'm a recovering thinker. I never miss a TA meeting. We watch mindless videos—this week it was “Porky's 2”—then share our experiences of avoiding thinking since the last meeting. I still have my job, and things are a lot better at home.

Life's been so much easier since I stopped thinking.

It was reported that President Bush does not even read his “President’s Daily Briefs,” which are apparently quite short, but has them orally summarized for him.
— *Harper’s Weekly* 4/20/04

The penalty that good men pay for not being interested in politics is to be governed by men worse than themselves. — Plato

**THE BOOK CLUB READS *DOUBT: A HISTORY*,
AND MEETS JENNIFER MICHAEL HECHT**

John Rafferty

“I started the book for myself, because in my own research I found there was no single source I could turn to for information about the atheists, agnostics and skeptics of history. I had questions and there was no one source for answers. I realized there was an important story being ignored.”

Thus did Jennifer Michael Hecht answer the first question—Why did you write *Doubt*?—at the June 16 gathering of the SHSNY Book Club. Twenty-five SHSNY members and friends filled the SLC Conference Center room, and enjoyed nearly two hours of lively, literate discussion — participated in, as per this reporter’s observation, by every single person in the room.

[Picture of Jennifer Michael Hecht]

How important a story was being ignored? “Huge,” says Hecht, Professor of History at Nassau Community College, an award-winning poet, and a dynamic young scholar who charmed while she enlightened. “Everyone knows the Bible was the first book Gutenberg printed,” she said, “but within a couple of years he also printed Lucretius, because Lucretius [the Epicurean who argued that the universe is governed by natural law, not gods] was *huge*, as big as the Bible in readership.”

Hecht argues convincingly that doubt is “no shadow,” no negative in the history of ideas, but rather a positive concept with its own history. As she writes in the opening line of the book, “Like belief, doubt takes a lot of different forms, from ancient Skepticism to modern scientific empiricism, from doubt in many gods to doubt in one God, to doubt that recreates and enlivens faith and doubt that is really disbelief.”

“In fact,” Professor Hecht told us, “my research led me to have more respect for the many religious people who started as doubters and thought their own way through to belief—unlike so many of the contemporary religious who would have us stifle doubt and just shut up and believe.”

And why that title, *Doubt*? “It started as *A History of Atheism*,” she said, “but that turned people off. Most people I talked to—a very unscientific survey—doubted God and religion, but were uninterested in a book about atheism. But ‘doubt’? They were all interested.”

How interested was our group? We had to shoo people out of the room so that the SLC Center could close. And the lively discussion continued for those of us who had dinner afterward with Professor Hecht, her personable husband John, and their four-week-old Max, who slept through dinner like, well, like a baby.

The Scale of Doubt Quiz

(From Doubt: A History, Jennifer Michael Hecht, Harper Collins, 2003, (C) Jennifer Michael Hecht, pp. x-xi.)

1. Do you believe that a particular religious tradition holds accurate knowledge of the ultimate nature of reality and the purpose of human life?
2. Do you believe that some thinking being consciously made the universe?
3. Is there an identifiable force coursing through the universe, holding it together, or uniting all life forms?
4. Could prayer be in any way effective, that is, do you believe that such a being or force (as posited above) could ever be responsive to your thoughts or words?
5. Do you believe this being or force can think or speak?
6. Do you believe this being has a memory or can make plans?
7. Does this force sometimes take a human form?
8. Do you believe that the thinking part or animating force of a human being continues to exist after the body has died?
9. Do you believe that any part of a human being survives death, elsewhere or here on earth?
10. Do you believe that feelings about things should be admitted as evidence in establishing reality?
11. Do you believe that love and inner feelings of morality suggest that there is a world beyond that of biology, social patterns, and accident—i.e.: a realm of higher meaning?
12. Do you believe that the world is not completely knowable by science?
13. If someone were to say, “The universe is nothing but an accidental pile of stuff, jostling around with no rhyme nor reason, and all life on earth is but a tiny, utterly inconsequential speck of nothing, in a corner of space, existing in the blink of an eye, never to be judged, noticed, or remembered,” would you say, “Now that’s going a bit far, that’s a bit wrongheaded”?

If you answered No to all these questions, you’re a hard-core atheist and of a certain variety: a rationalist materialist. If you said No to the first seven, but then had a few Yes answers, you’re still an atheist, but you may have what I call a pious relationship with the universe. If your answers to the first seven questions contained at least two Not Sure answers, you’re an agnostic, though not of the materialist variety

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Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is a ridiculous one. — *Voltaire*

Faith is a wonderful thing but it's doubt that gets you an education. — *Wilson Mizner*

THE SHSNY BOOK CLUB LINE-UP FOR FALL

Several people at the June 16 meeting made book-selection suggestions, so here's our schedule for Fall. Exact dates/places will be announced in September PIQUE, in e-mails, on postcards, and wherever we can get publicity. Prices quoted are the cheapest quoted currently on amazon.com.

SEPTEMBER: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel Huntington. \$10.50. Harvard Professor Huntington's controversial thesis: we should view the world not as a collection of states, but as a set of seven or eight cultural "civilizations"—Western, Eastern Orthodox, Latin American, Islamic, Japanese, Chinese, Hindu, and African—linking and conflicting in terms of their identities.

OCTOBER: *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, Susan Jacoby. \$18.70. One nation under God? Not according to Pulitzer Prize-finalist (and CFI-MetroNY Director) Jacoby, who argues that America's secularists are the bedrock on which our nation was built, that freethinkers have been "at the center, not in the margins" of American life.

NOVEMBER Dual Selection: *American Jezebel: The Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson, the Woman Who Defied the Puritans*, Eve LaPlante; and *Fanny: A Fiction*, Edmund White. (Each \$17; *Fanny* soon in paperback.) Read either or both, and join a discussion of women in the history of American freedom and secularism. Hutchinson was expelled from Massachusetts for thinking "more bold than a man," was the inspiration for Hawthorne's Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, and co-founded Rhode Island colony with Roger Williams. Fanny is a historical teaser of a novel about two extraordinary real-life 19th century women: radical feminist Fanny Wright, who founded the utopian community of Nashoba in Tennessee, and Mrs. Frances Trollope, mother of novelist Anthony, herself best known for *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, on her travels in America (she didn't like us much) in the 1830's.

DECEMBER Dual Selection: *Ever Since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History*, Stephen Jay Gould (\$11.20, also audio cassette); and *A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love*, Richard Dawkins (\$11.20). Read either or both, and join a discussion of modern ideas on evolution. Gould's essays reexamine Darwin in light of modern evolutionary biology, and show how biological theories have been distorted to justify social ills. "Friendly antagonist" Dawkins, who argued with Gould about the question of whether evolution "progresses" (Gould: No, Dawkins: Yes, depending on your definition of "progress") offers opinions on evolution and seemingly everything else in this "greatest hits" collection of essays.

Remember: No August PIQUE — See you in September.