

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

October, 2014

We're back, just in time to celebrate Freethought Day with Jennifer Michael Hecht (page 7), the reasonableness of reason, Kantian happiness, and Halloween. We wonder if humanist ethics apply to animals, what Richard Dawkins is thinking (or smoking), and whether we're Islamophobic. We re-read the creation myths of the Bible and the Constitution, and decide to sit out the Pledge. But first, we welcome a vital (and overdue) message from the 2014 World Humanist Congress. – JR

THE OXFORD DECLARATION ON FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND EXPRESSION

The 2014 World Humanist Congress, gathered in Oxford, UK, on 8-10 August 2014, adopted the following declaration on freedom of thought and expression:

All around the world and at all times, it is freedom of thought and freedom of expression that have proved the most essential conditions for human flourishing, but every generation must face new threats to these fundamental freedoms. Knowing this, we maintain:

*The right to freedom of thought and belief
is one and the same right for all.*

The human right articulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and elaborated elsewhere is and should be a single right, indivisible, protecting the dignity and freedom of all people by protecting their right to their personal beliefs, whatever those beliefs, religious or non-religious. As Article 7 of the Declaration says, 'All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.'

*No one anywhere should ever
be forced into or out of a belief.*

Freedom of thought implies the right to develop, hold, examine and manifest our beliefs without coercion, and to express opinions and a worldview whether religious or non-religious, without fear of coercion. It includes the right to change our views or to reject beliefs previously held, or previously ascribed. Pressure to conform to ideologies of the state or to doctrines of religion is a tyranny. Laws that prescribe or criminalize beliefs contravene human dignity and must be abolished. Every citizen of every state has the right to demand the repeal of such laws, and all states should support those, wherever they are, who demand that their social freedoms and personal liberty be upheld.

*The right to freedom of expression
is global in its scope.*

The human right articulated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes the right to 'seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers'. No parochial nationalism or state insecurity should prevent the global human community from fulfilling the promise of our new technologies, our mass media, our social media, and our personal access to transnational networks. States should invest adequate resources to allow their citizens' participation in this global conversation.

*There is no right not to be offended,
or not to hear contrary opinions.*

Respect for people's freedom of belief does not imply any duty or requirement to respect those beliefs. The expression of opposition to any beliefs, including in the form of satire, ridicule or condemnation in all media and forms is vital to critical discourse and any restraint that is exercised in this expression must be in accordance of article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, namely to protect the rights and freedoms of others. The best response to the expression of a view we disagree with is to reply to it. Violence and censorship are never legitimate responses. All laws that criminalize language on grounds of 'blasphemy' or of offence to beliefs and values impede human freedom and should be abolished.

*States must not restrict thought and expression
merely to protect the government from criticism.*

States that criminalize criticism of government policies or officials as treasonous or seditious, or as threats to security, are not "strong governments" championing the best interests of the public, but censorious bullies exercising tyranny in their own interests. States should ensure in the law of the land, in their education systems, and in the

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Articles published in PIQUE are archived in www.shsny.org. They may be reprinted, in full or in part, in other newsletters. SHSNY is an Affiliated Local Group of the Council for Secular Humanism, a Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association, and an Affiliate Member of Atheist Alliance International.

conduct of their national life generally, that freedom of thought and expression are actively promoted and pursued to the real benefit of every member of society.

*Freedom of belief is absolute
but the freedom to act on a belief is not.*

As responsible members of a community we accept that our freedom to act must sometimes be restricted, if and only if our actions would undermine the rights and freedoms of others. Freedom of belief cannot legitimize overriding the principles of non-discrimination and equality before the law. These balances can be hard to strike but with a focus on freedom and human dignity, we believe legislators and judiciaries can strike them in a progressive manner.

We assert the principles of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and secularism as providing the firmest foundation for the development of open societies where freedom of thought and expression will be protected and promoted.

We commit ourselves in all our work to uphold and promote existing rights to freedom of thought and expression within the international human rights framework and to resist national and international restrictions on the right of individuals to think for themselves freely and to openly express their views without fear.

We urge each of our member organizations and humanists worldwide to uphold these values in their own lives; to promote in their communities greater public understanding of the rights to freedom of thought and freedom of expression for all; to urge their governments to promote these values; and to join with humanists and others globally in defending and advancing them to the benefit of all humanity.

WHY REASON IS SO REASONABLE Paleolibrarian

(Reprinted from the Paleolibrarian blog, 7/30/2014)

A statement and question from a friend and reader of this site: "I was finding it very odd that artists portray Adam and Eve with belly buttons. I guess I have always questioned things instead of just accepting everything at face value. At what point do children stop asking "Why"? Perhaps I am still a child!"

Got reason?

That is the essential and eternal question that Carl Sagan would ask. He'd go into a classroom of 1st graders and they would ask a billion questions. Then he'd visit high schools and there would be silence amongst the students.

Sometimes education and most of the time religion teaches us not to ask any questions that cannot be answered inside a particular set of teachings or theological dogma. Certainly religion teaches us not to be excited about nature or the natural world from a perspective which is not theologically based.

So if you ask about the virgin birth or the Jesus story and see that mythology duplicated in other more ancient

religious traditions ... or ask about Noah, or Moses' journeys and see no archeological proof ... or see as reprehensible the actions to slaughter in the name of a particular god one's own son or countless thousands to prove your loyalty, or smash planes into buildings because of perceived insults towards a particular faith ... you are an apostate, you are indeed acting outside of what most authoritarian faith traditions expect from a common believer - acceptance of the improbable based on faith alone.

If you do ask questions like the belly button one, you're rejected or made to feel like a pariah, or you're told just to have faith. This essentially pulls a blanket over your curiosity and shuts down a keen interest in wonder about the world. But it isn't just in religion that this happens, look at politics too. Or parents saying, "Because I said so." Most authorities and certainly all religions don't like to be questioned. Every question is a threat to authority.

But I have to really respect science and the scientific method. Its whole reason for being is to find the accepted wrong and to get better by rejecting our current understanding of commonly accepted ideas. Hence, the unending conflict between science and religion that will continue because religious belief by its nature shuts down this vital and basic questioning. If you never stop asking "Why?" you'll always remain absorbed and present in this world rather than the next.

It's only when we turn off this capacity to question that reason dies. Then opinion becomes the norm—a very dangerous tradition—and peace and humanity then are at peril to the whims of those who shout the loudest rather than those who have the best argument or answers. Think of those in history and in modern times who use a religious mandate to harm others.

One of recent history's most loud evildoers was Adolph Hitler, a monster who was supported by the Roman Catholic Church. While there were individual Christian objectors to his policies of mass extermination, the Vatican and German Bishops were all too friendly to the Nazi party. And while some may claim Hitler was an atheist, the reality was that his ideas and his anti-Semitism were each based on religious teachings and indoctrination. You can no more connect his sick hatred to atheism than you can to his vegetarianism. But you can connect his beliefs very easily to the religious teachings of the time.

It should be noted that there are scientists who are devoutly religious. And in no way can we conclude that good science cannot be done by scientists with faith. Science is open to all, and is an equal opportunity employer if you have the skills to not only question but to also synthesize, prove and discover new theories, concepts and whole new fields within the natural sciences.

Stephen Jay Gould called this "non-overlapping magisteria", meaning that science and religion can indeed co-exist and not compete because they search for different truths about the nature of the universe*.

However, such compartmentalization and bifurcation isn't necessary. This is why the majority of scientists who

do work in numerous STEM fields [Ed: Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics] are in fact non-believers and skeptics.

There isn't religious truth and science truth; there is truth. So if you believe that the world is 6,000 years old and you try to make science fit this biblical interpretation you're not doing science. If you accept that humans were made by and in the image of a divine spirit, you are missing the point of evolutionary biology.

If you support prayer and religious politics that deny contraception you are doing so for your own reasons based on religious teachings or doctrine, and are not following what science tells us about preventing disease. Or what perhaps a higher secular morality tells us about a woman's right to make her own choices about her body and health.

The "common sense" opinions that for some are religion-based and support what those who are religious like to think the world works are not always supported by what science tells us is truth. Which is why we no more need faith than we need the extra undercoating (religion) that is offered on a new car. Sure, you're told it's good for you by the dealer (the authority) and it may make you feel safer knowing it's there (doctrine and prayer) but in reality it isn't needed and you can have a fine time without it.

If all of humanity – and we as individuals – were just as skeptical about accepting faith as we are about purchasing the undercoating for a new car, and at the same time embraced science and reason, the world would be a whole lot less dangerous and a much more reasonable place in which to live.

This would not negate the arts or literature or any of the emotional ventures we humans create to give us comfort or our lives meaning. I conclude that it would heighten these endeavors, since we'd be speaking to and for each other and not asking any invisible sky god to speak for us in terms of what is right or wrong, moral or ethical, or pleasurable and joyful.

**Comment: The biggest mistake of Gould's career. – JR*

THE MEANING OF LIFE

Philip Appleman

(Excerpted from *The Labyrinth: God, Darwin, and the Meaning of Life*)

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

GOOD WITHOUT GOD: A LETTER TO THE FAITHFUL

Emma C Williams

(Excerpted from <http://humanistlife.org.uk/2014/08/21/good-without-god-a-letter-to-the-faithful/>, 8/21/2014)

"How do you sleep at night? Or get up in the morning? Doesn't life seem pointless?"

The religious conviction that a life without God is somehow one devoid of meaning has always baffled me. I see the situation in reverse, for I struggle to understand how the faithful deal with the following.

Life is mundane – it's inevitable. There are forms to fill in, dishes to be washed and toenails to be cut. I do struggle to grasp how someone of faith gets through the unavoidable tedium of an average day whilst maintaining a conviction that life resonates with cosmic meaning.

Demonstrably, much of the time it doesn't. Furthermore, and unless you live in the Bible Belt of America, the majority of your days must be spent mixing with people of different faiths or no faith at all (hello!). However worthwhile your job might seem, I wonder how you motivate yourself to care about it when you believe that most of your colleagues and clients are destined for hell – whether for you that means oblivion, the absence of God, or the fiery furnace.

Life is cruel – or it can be. Whilst religious people claim that their faith is a comfort, this is another train of thought that I cannot get my head round. If your baby is sick and you pray fervently to God to save him, how can you still trust your God when your baby dies? Was God not listening? Then He abandoned you. Could He not help? Then He is impotent and prayer is pointless. Was He testing you? Then He's one sick-minded ruler. For those of us without faith, a devastating loss such as the death of a child is not something that we somehow have to reconcile with the paradoxical belief that an all-powerful and all-loving God still cares about us. It just ... happens. It's terrible, it's heart-breaking and it's unfair. And it happens. ...

For me, religion does not bring meaning, for it fails to explain anything even remotely to my satisfaction. ... For me, inventing a supernatural significance in order to give myself a sense of purpose is a pointless exercise.

So where do we find meaning in our lives? ... An older lady once said to me that life is a series of moments, and increasingly I think she is right. It is hugely important to me to be present in the here and now as much as I can. To feel filled with awe and wonder as I look straight into the eyes of an urban fox. To watch a pond-skater as it whisks across the surface of the water, and to be in a position to realize that the pond is their universe. To gaze at the stars and remind myself that some of them may not be there anymore. To stroke a purring cat. To stand on a limestone pavement and be told by a more knowledgeable friend that it was formed over tens of thousands of years.

This world and this life – with its inevitable tedium, its inescapable pain and its relative insignificance – is astonishing. For me, that is more than enough.

WHAT DOES RELIGION TEACH? GULLIBILITY.

Shadee Ashtari

(Excerpted from “Children Exposed To Religion Have Difficulty Distinguishing Fact From Fiction,” *The Huffington Post*, 07/21/2014, and forwarded by Dennis Middlebrooks)

Young children who are exposed to religion have a hard time differentiating between fact and fiction, according to a new study published in the July issue of *Cognitive Science*.

Researchers presented 5- and 6-year-old children from both public and parochial schools with three different types of stories – religious, fantastical and realistic – in an effort to gauge how well they could identify narratives with impossible elements as fictional.

The study found that, of the 66 participants, children who went to church or were enrolled in a parochial school were significantly less able than secular children to identify supernatural elements, such as talking animals, as fictional.

By relating seemingly impossible religious events achieved through divine intervention (e.g., Jesus transforming water into wine) to fictional narratives, religious children would more heavily rely on religion to justify their false categorizations.

“In both studies, [children exposed to religion] were less likely to judge the characters in the fantastical stories as pretend, and in line with this equivocation, they made more appeals to reality and fewer appeals to impossibility than did secular children”, the study concluded.

Refuting previous hypotheses claiming that children are “born believers”, the authors suggest that “religious teaching, especially exposure to miracle stories, leads children to a more generic receptivity toward the impossible, that is, a more wide-ranging acceptance that the impossible can happen in defiance of ordinary causal relations.”

SHOULD HUMANISM EXTEND TO ANIMAL RIGHTS?

Beth Zucker

(Reprinted from *TheHumanist.com*, 9/16/2014)

There’s a wonderful scene in the beginning of the film “Dawn of the Planet of the Apes” in which a large group of apes ambushes a herd of elk. The result is enough food for the whole community. The rest of the elk run free. The balance of nature is maintained.

In his 1992 novel, *Ishmael*, author Daniel Quinn describes a world where balance is key. As food supply increases so does the population. As food becomes scarce the population decreases, maintaining a delicate balance:

“The creatures who act as though they belong to the world follow the peace-keeping law, and because they follow that law, they give the creatures around them a chance to grow toward whatever it’s possible for them to become.”

When humans first arrived on the scene, by all accounts this was pretty much how things worked. Just like the apes, hunting parties would go out and find food for their tribes.

Animals would eat other animals, still others would graze the abundant vegetation. There was enough balance for most; some died out while others thrived.

But then things changed. As we humans continued to grow in both numbers and intelligence, we started to take over. We began to own other animals. We had ranches that bred cattle and other livestock. We started to change the balance. We needed more food and we were ready to get it any way we could. Not only did we breed an abundance of livestock but we discovered ways to make that livestock meatier. We have given them growth hormones and kept them in horrible conditions so that we could thrive and ultimately threaten the world with our overpopulation.

How did humans rationalize this treatment of other species? We maintained that they had no sentience. We preached that animals were put on Earth for the use of humans. And, as this attitude took hold, we started using animals for more than food. We stuck them in laboratories and experimented on them in all sorts of ways for the benefit of humans. We would cure our sick by using them to find cures for diseases. We used them to test cosmetics.

Before long our treatment of nonhuman animals became so devastatingly inhumane that one could argue we’ve had to simply stop seeing them as living creatures. Equally despicable is the practice of using animals solely for entertainment purposes. People flock to SeaWorld where simply in the name of “good fun” we torture highly sentient and intelligent creatures such as orcas and separate them from their loved ones abruptly and inconsolably.

Let’s get back to food production. We have entered a vicious cycle of factory farming animals that has resulted in a world food shortage, along with other devastating environmental effects. Not only do we raise animals in the worst conditions possible but then we have to feed those animals too. As our population grows to untenable numbers, not only have we created a food shortage for us but for animals as well. Examining a 2013 study released by the University of Minnesota, the *Daily Kos* reports, “An additional 4 billion people in the world could be fed if land currently used to grow crops for livestock were given over to crops for human consumption.”

Species are going extinct so that we can survive in greater and greater numbers. The food that we feed animals could be used to feed our human population if we simply stopped breeding such huge numbers of livestock.

Humanists must see this as an important part of our worldview. There is no mention of vegetarianism or animal rights in Humanist Manifesto III, “Humanism and its Aspirations”, but I hope this will not be true for the next one, whenever that will be issued. Not only is it important for us as moral activists, but it is important for our survival as well. If we don’t get a handle on our food supply soon, we’ll wipe out even more species and create a world so stripped of diversity and beauty that it will no longer resemble the world we currently live in.

We need to look at three areas going forward. The most important of these is food production. Once we can

put forth legislation that protects animals from being abused for our food supply we need to look for alternative food supplies. I am told that our need for protein is not nearly as large as people think. In a 2012 article on the Huffington Post dietician Jessica Jones claimed:

"The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey found that the average American male consumes 102 grams of protein per day, while the average female eats about 70 grams. That's almost twice the daily recommended intake established by the Food and Nutrition Board. For most healthy individuals, it's recommended that 10-15 percent of our daily calories come from protein (about 56 grams for men and 46 for women). This may sound like a lot, but it's easier to meet those needs than you think. Consider this: One cup of milk (8 grams), a 3-ounce piece of meat (21 grams), 1 cup of dry beans (16 grams) and an 8-ounce container of yogurt (11 grams) provide 56 grams of protein, according to the CDC. That didn't take much."

Once we figure out what we really need to live, we should be focused on growing food rather than killing it. Farmers are paid huge subsidies to not grow produce, and a huge amount of corn is grown to feed the livestock. We should be pushing for research and legislation that addresses these issues and figuring out how to find a better balance.

According to Quinn, "In the natural community, whenever a population's food supply increases, that population increases. As that population increases, its food supply decreases, and as its food supply decreases, that population decreases. This interaction between food populations and feeder populations is what keeps everything in balance."

As soon as we are able to find a better balance and a moral attitude towards livestock and food production the way will be clear to examine our other animal abuses. We will no longer need to excuse our abominations in the name of survival. At that point it will be an easier sell to create legislation to protect animals in the other two areas: laboratories and entertainment. If we believe that our treatment of animals in food production has improved the lives of animals and humans, it will no longer be so easy to rationalize the use of animals in other areas.

I'm an Ethical Cultivist, and I've met others who will not call themselves humanists, arguing that humanism is too Homo sapiens-centered. To live an ethical life is to respect and honor all life. To rid ourselves of feelings of superiority to the rest of the natural world and rather to see our intellect and ability to manipulate our environment as a responsibility to respect and protect those that do not have our particular gifts—that is my idea of humanism.

THE AMERICAN WAY OF HALLOWEEN

(Excerpted from Harper's Magazine, October, 2014)

Amount Americans spent last year on UNICEF donations to trick-or-treaters: \$3,731,057.

On Halloween costumes for their pets: \$330,000,000.

OUR NEWEST DUMBTH NOMINEES: ONE BACON-PHILIC, ONE PIECHART-PHOBIC



Meet Bryan Fischer, the Director of Issue Analysis for Government and Public Policy at the American Family Association, who hosts a radio show. On air September 15 Fisher gave us all absolute and indisputable proof that the United States is a Christian nation:

"Do you want one single item of proof that America is a Christian nation? And not a Jewish nation? And not an Islamic nation? ... We freely allow restaurants and grocery stores to sell and to serve bacon. That can only happen in a Christian country. You can't do that in Israel ... because it is a Jewish country. You go to a Muslim country, you are not going to get pork; you're not going to get bacon; you're not going to get a ham sandwich anywhere.

"The sheer fact that we clearly allow the consumption of bacon is absolute proof that we are in fact a Christian nation."

Well, okay – case closed.

Now say Hello to Congresswoman Renee Ellmers, a North Carolina Republican who recently addressed an RNC Women's study group on her party's lagging popularity with women. The problem, she says, is that ...



"Men do tend to talk about things on a much higher level. ... Many of my male colleagues, when they go to the House floor, you know, they've got some pie chart or graph behind them and they're talking about trillions of dollars and, you know, how the debt is awful and, you know, we all agree with that."

And then came the Dumbth-nomination clincher:

"We need our male colleagues to understand that if you can bring it down to a woman's level and what everything that she is balancing in her life – that's the way to go."

"Down to a woman's level" – Wow.

NO, NOT DUMB, JUST MEAN AND VICIOUS

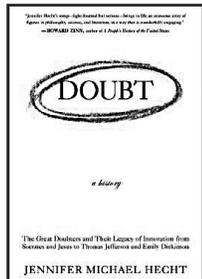
When medical missionaries Dr. Kent Brantly and Nancy Writebol, who were infected with Ebola while working with patients in Liberia, were flown back to the U.S. and Emory University Hospital in Atlanta, columnist and former Dumbth-award winner Ann Coulter questioned why they were working in the "disease-ridden cesspools" of Africa.

"If Dr. Brantly had practiced at Cedars-Sinai hospital in Los Angeles and turned one single Hollywood power-broker to Christ, he would have done more good for the entire world than anything he could accomplish in a century spent in Liberia."

SHSNY CALENDAR: OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2014

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, OCT 2, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK
28 East 35 St. (Park-Mad)
 (3 doors West of the church - red door)
 We'll discuss
DOUBT: A HISTORY
The Great Doubters and
Their Legacy of Innovation
Jennifer Michael Hecht

Historian, Poet, SHSNY Honorary Member (and our Freethought Day speaker), Hecht champions doubt as one of the great, if unheralded, intellectual traditions that distinguish the Western mind. This is an account of the world's greatest "intellectual virtuosos", and of their attempts to reconcile the seeming meaninglessness of the universe with the human need for meaning ... ranging from the early Greeks and such Hebrew figures as Job and Ecclesiastes, to modern critical thinkers like Schopenhauer, Darwin, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, the existentialists. – *All formats.*



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

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www.facebook.com/pages/The-Secular-Humanist-Society-of-New-York/168704396485734

MEET US ON MEETUP
www.meetup.com/shsnny-org/

TEXT US ON TWITTER
 @NY_Sec_Hum_anist

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, NOV 6, 7-8:30 pm
 Community Church of New York
NATURE'S GOD:
The Heretical Origins of the
American Republic
Matthew Stewart

The radicals who founded America set their sights on a revolution of the mind. Derided as "infidels" and "atheists" in their own time, they wanted to liberate us from the tyranny of supernatural religion. "Stewart's lucid and passionate investigation surprises, challenges, enlightens, and entertains at every turn." – *All formats.*

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, DEC 4, 7-8:30 pm
 Community Church of New York
WAKING UP:
A Guide to Spirituality
Without Religion
Sam Harris

Harris's new book is a guide to meditation as a rational spiritual practice informed by neuroscience and psychology. He argues that there are important truths to be found in those experiences and more to understanding reality than science and secular culture generally allow. – *All formats.*

PLANNING AHEAD
 The usual SHSNY schedule is ...
Book Club: First Thursday
 at the Community Church of NY
Movie Night: Second Monday
 at Stone Creek Lounge.
Brunch: Third Sunday
 at The Stag's Head
Great Lectures: 4th Wednesday
 at Stone Creek Lounge.
Studying Humanism: Last Monday
 at the Community Church of NY
 More info: www.shsnny.org,
 and/or 646-922-7389



BRUNCH & CONVERSATION
SUN, OCT 19, at 12 NOON
MONTHLY CASUAL BRUNCH
The Stag's Head
252 East 51 St.

The Stag's Head offers an American-traditional brunch menu, all in the \$10.95-12.95 range, and including a drink. Join 15-20 other freethinkers and humanists for fellowship and well-fed conversation.

After-Brunch Discussion:
The Midterm Elections

MON, OCT 13 at 7:00 pm
SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
ADVISE AND CONSENT

Henry Fonda stars as the president's candidate for secretary of state, but a Senate committee has been assigned to investigate the nominee's past, brewing a storm of scandal. Otto Preminger-directed, star-studded, engrossing.



After-Film Discussion:
Politics in the 60s, Politics today.
SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.
 (But put something on the bar beside your elbow.)

SHSNY MEMBERS ALSO ...
 • **Tue, Sep 30, 8pm, Mary Bopp** and Chamber 16 present an evening of Brahms. St. Peter's Church, Lexington & 54 St. \$20 suggested.
 • **Sat, Oct 11, 10am, John Rafferty** will address the Queens Libertarians on "Is America a Christian Nation?" at Pride House, 76-11 37th Ave., Jackson Heights.

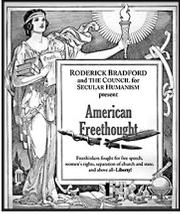
SHSNY CALENDAR: OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2014

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, OCT 22, 7:00 pm

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

AMERICAN FREETHOUGHT Part IV



Rise of Roman Catholicism. Freethinkers challenge Sunday Laws. The Haymarket Tragedy, McKinley's assassination, World

War I. *The Truthseeker* exposes the YMCA and Salvation Army, is barred from the mails. The Palmer Raids. The deportation of Emma Goldman. The Scopes Trial, Clarence Darrow, William Jennings Bryan. DeMille's "God-less Girl", H.L. Mencken, Rise of Radio Evangelism, Billy Sunday and his plagiarism of Ingersoll. Decline of the freethought movement because of the world wars.

Great Lectures on DVD is FREE.
(But put something on the bar beside your elbow.)

STUDYING HUMANISM

(Previously *Humanism 101, 102*)

MON, NOV 24, 6:30-8:30

**Community Church of New York
28 East 35 Street (red door)**

2014-15 Meeting/Discussion #1

First, let's review the basics:

Online at americanhumanist.org/
Edwards: *What is Humanism?*

Book: Paul Kurtz (Ed.): *The Humanist Alternative*

Then, let's plan our studies.

- What humanist subjects shall we cover in 2014-15?
- What do *you* want to read?
- Will you lead a discussion?

Note: Studying Humanism is a study group, not a book club. If you have not done the reading, you may still audit the discussion – all are welcome, definitely including newcomers!

SHSNY 6TH ANNUAL FREETHOUGHT DAY BRUNCH, LECTURE & CONVERSATION

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 12

at 12 Noon, at

PETE'S TAVERN, 129 East 18 Street
(Irving Place)

Outstanding Guest Speaker:

JENNIFER MICHAEL HECHT

"FREETHINKING ABOUT HAPPINESS:

A Couple of Godless Versions of the Good Life"



Epicurus suggested that the meaning of life is located in friendship. Others great minds have described a good life in terms of art, or family, or community. There is also romantic love. And quests. Hecht will draw history and ideas from all of her books to talk about some meanings of this life.

Join SHSNY Honorary Member Jennifer – poet, historian, philosopher, and commentator, and the author of seven books, including *Doubt: A History*; *The Happiness Myth*; and *Stay: A History of Suicide and the Philosophies Against It* – along with dozens of your fellow humanists and freethinkers, for an informative, stimulating, and delicious couple of hours.

Brunch is \$20 if you pre-pay online (\$25 at the door) for your choice of 11 entrees, one drink (Bloody Mary, Mimosa, etc.), and coffee or tea, and including all taxes and tips.

Pre-pay now at www.shsnny.org
with your credit card or your PayPal account.
Questions? Call 646-922-7389, and leave a call-back number.

ON ISLAMOPHOBIA AND PIQUE

Sidney Finehirsh

I recently received my renewal letter and my direction is, of course, continued support of SHSNY, which I have always found to be the least sectarian and most democratic of any atheist organization.

I do have to add that I was very disturbed by the seeming editorial approval (“Sam Harris Interviews the Now-Politically-Incorrect Ayaan Hirsi Ali about Islamophobia”, PIQUE, June) of the views expressed by Hirsi Ali. I found this disturbing because Islamophobia is a first cousin to Judeophobia and even Atheist-phobia. In each case, text (e.g. Koranic) is taken out of context to justify non-historic and anti-science hateful bigotry. It is sad that this type of stupid bias affects our movement and is even expounded by some of our leading spokespeople like Sam Harris.

Islamophobia is non-historic because it is a highly selective reading of 1,400 years of Islamic history and it is anti-science because it ignores the sociology of Islam with its overwhelming peaceful majority. And it ignores the curious correlation in the 20th century between the rise of modern Jihadist terrorism, and the modern colonialist carve-up of the Middle East into spheres of influence assigning authoritarian potentates and dictators to rule as its clients. Sadly, much blood has been spilled for oil, mostly Muslim blood.

Islamophobia is simply benighted prejudice that every atheist should find abhorrent. For atheists, Islam is a religion that is ridiculous and sometimes violent, *just like every other religion!* However, any objective reading of its history cannot help but note its many periods of intellectual openness, contributions to science and the arts, and relative communal acceptance.

Certainly alongside medieval Christian Europe with its repeated massacres of its own people (Jews, Cathars, intellectuals – Giordano Bruno and Michael Servetus, burned at the stake in Catholic Italy and Protestant Switzerland—not to forget witch burnings, torture by inquisitors, and mass expulsions of non-Christians), many of the Caliphates represented an environment that was rather tolerant, certainly by comparison. During long periods of Muslim rule, philosophy, mathematics, and science advanced, ancient Greek classics were preserved and translated, and arts flourished, including homoerotic poetry.

It is curious that Islamophobes display the same ignorance of this history that the Jihadist terrorists display themselves. The Belgian-Egyptian journalist Khaled Diab in an article entitled “The Caliphate Fantasy” that appeared in *The New York Times* on July 2 describes the Medieval Arab scholar living under Islam, Abu’l Ala Al-Ma’arri, who he calls “the Richard Dawkins of the 11th century”, quoting him as saying: “Do not suppose the statements of the prophets to be true ... The sacred books are only such a set of idle tales as any age could have and indeed did actually produce.”

Of course, “Dhimmis” – non-Muslims – under the caliphates faced discrimination and the special tax called the

“Jizya”, similar to the Roman imposed “Fiscus Judaicus”, and some Muslim regimes attacked and massacred minority communities. However, on the whole, life was much better for non-Muslims under the Caliphs than under the Popes. In fact, when Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, masses of that community found refuge in the Ottoman caliphate. Indeed, contrary to the Islamophobes, perhaps the toleration found in many historic Islamic societies and among so many Muslims today is a result of the Koran? For those fond of finding only Jihadist terrorism in the Koran, there is Sura 2:256: “There is no compulsion in religion.”

One does not have to refuse to acknowledge that Ayaan Hirsi Ali has been courageous in her struggle for woman’s rights. She has survived and continues to speak out despite murderous threats, but at the same time it is disingenuous not to see the hate in her words: “Violence is inherent in Islam – it’s a destructive, nihilistic cult of death. ... The Islamic vision is a caliphate – a society ruled by Sharia law – in which women who have sex before marriage are stoned to death, homosexuals are beaten, and apostates like me are killed.”

Is she quoting the Koran or Leviticus?

Hirsi Ali contends that she should not be considered controversial since she is only defending women, and Sam Harris supports her in that contention. How egregiously stupid and phony.

The controversy is not her defense of women, but her simplistic ridiculous claim that the oppression of women is because of the Koran and hadith.

By extension, we must believe that Hindu girls are raped because of the Vedas. An Arab teenager is burned to death by Israeli Haredim because of the Talmud. And Ugandan gays are murdered because of Paul. How utterly myopic! Hirsi Ali certainly deserves the right to speak on college campuses, but not honor – neither by Brandeis nor by our movement.

As a democratic organization, I know SHSNY recognizes the right of dissent by its members. With that in mind, I would ask that you publish this email in a forthcoming issue of PIQUE.

MO INSTRUCTS JESUS ON ISLAMOPHOBIA

(Transcribed from jesusandmo.net/2014/07/30/2396/)

Mohammed: Children who don’t pray will go to Hell, women who refuse to have sex with their husbands will be punished by angels, and Christians and Jews are lazy, ignorant liars.

Jesus: Gee, Mo, that sounds a bit ... bigoted?

Mo: Are you passing judgment on the acceptability of my particular strand of conservative Islam?

Jesus: God, no! I’m just ...

Mo: Because I’m perfectly within my religious rights to express those views.

Jesus: Of course. I’m sorry. It’s *me* who’s the bigot for questioning you.

Mo: You should watch that Islamophobia of yours.

Jesus: I’m *really* sorry. Please don’t tell anyone.

WHAT THE HELL IS RICHARD DAWKINS THINKING?

John Rafferty

Atheist, activist, international celebrity and author or editor of more than a dozen books, from his explosive debut with *The Selfish Gene* to the blockbuster best-selling *The God Delusion*, he is the face of New Atheism. Perhaps even its pope.

But this renowned ethologist and evolutionary biologist, Oxford's long-time Professor for Public Understanding of Science, seems no longer able to keep his feet out of his mouth than any 2 a.m. drunk on Twitter.

Last fall in a magazine interview he gratuitously condoned "mild pedophilia" that he didn't believe caused "lasting harm". And a few months ago he commented that "date rape" wasn't as bad as "violent rape at knifepoint" – a position that may make logical sense, as he later argued, but that instantly and internationally outraged hundreds of thousands of women whose traumas he had trivialized.

Lesson learned? Apparently not. In mid-August he responded to a woman's hypothetical question on Twitter about whether to carry to term a child with Down syndrome with this: "Abort it and try again. It would be immoral to bring it into the world if you have the choice."

Really? "Abort it and try again"? Can anyone think of a quote that more perfectly describes the old B-movie stereotype of the cold-blooded atheist scientist?

Richard, why not answer questions about atheism, about biology and evolution, and otherwise just shut up?

RICHARD DAWKINS WAS MY HERO Emily Perl Kingsley

I'm debating about whether to nominate my former hero Richard Dawkins for a Dumbth Award for his recent misguided (should I say idiotic?) remarks about the advisability of aborting people with Down syndrome because of the fact that they add to the total amount of suffering in the world. Talk about speaking about something you know nothing about.

Besides the utterly fascistic notion that only super-intelligent people should be allowed to live on this planet (and where would you place the cut-off line? at an IQ of 120? 130? 140?), I wonder where he got his data on suffering anyway?

I am so disappointed and disillusioned in Dawkins. This guy was my *hero!* I actually sailed with him to the Galapagos Islands (on that voyage sponsored by the Skeptical Humanist Society in 2006 with Eddie Tabash and a lot of other skeptics) and sat at his feet and soaked up his wisdom and considered him a guru! Bought all his books.

I was so incensed at these comments that I fired off a letter to *The New York Times* and they printed it, edited considerably. Here's the original I submitted:

T*o The Editor:* While I respect Richard Dawkins's expertise and scholarship on Darwin and evolution, I take issue with his views on Down syndrome.

My son with Down syndrome has written and published a book (*Count Us In: Growing Up With Down Syndrome*, a Harvest Publication), plays the piano and violin, paints oil paintings, lives and works in the community and recently performed as Snug the Joiner in a New York City performance of "A Midsummer Night's Dream".

While not all individuals with Down syndrome will achieve on this level, it is impossible to predict at birth, and certainly prenatally, what their level of accomplishment will be.

What is safe to say, however, is that my son will never shoot anybody with a gun. He will never be a drunk driver. He will never rape anybody at a drunken fraternity party. He will never fly an airplane into an office building. He will never behead anybody. He will never be the CEO of a huge corporation, remorselessly cheating millions of people out of their life savings. He will never be a Senator obstinately determined to obstruct progressive legislation.

I question who brings more suffering into the world.

IMMANUEL KANT'S FOOLPROOF RECIPE FOR HAPPINESS

Steven Mazie

(Excerpted from <http://bigthink.com/praxis/kants-foolproof-recipe-for-happiness>, 9/19/2014)

Listen to what Immanuel Kant, the great 18th-century philosopher, has to say about the pursuit of happiness. It's quite different from the average 21st-century advice.

Happiness, Kant wrote in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, "is such an indeterminate concept." While "every human being wishes to attain it, he can never say, determinately and in a way that is harmonious with himself, what he really wishes and wills". This adds up to a conundrum: human beings "are not capable of determining with complete certainty, in accordance with any principle, what will make him truly happy, because omniscience would be required for that".

I'm not sure Kant would regard the reams of happiness research today as a plausible proxy for that lack of omniscience. And I think he would stand by this deflationary assessment of setting out to maximize our own happiness:

The more a cultivated reason gives itself over to the aim of enjoying life and happiness, the further the human being falls short of true contentment

It's a terrible irony: the more effort you expend trying to be happy, the more elusive your goal becomes. Some introspection will likely confirm this phenomenon. How many times have your best-laid plans translated into a less-than-perfect vacation? Did that 3D television set you've been pining for (or the Jaguar, or the raise) really make you happier? Even lottery winners often suffer more post-jackpot than they did back when they were average Joes and Janes dreaming of hitting it big. For many, that dream becomes a nightmare.

So what is a happiness-seeking soul to do? Kant's answers may seem implausible, but it's good advice: give up

the search. Orienting your life toward goods or goals that seem to promise happiness is bound to fail. ... For Kant, it's committing yourself to a life of rationality and morality in which you perform worthy deeds out of a sense of duty.

Kant's instruction may sound austere, but it is quite the opposite. One of the versions of Kant's categorical imperative—an algorithm for discovering what the moral law actually asks of us—is the so-called “humanity as an end” formula. We should always, according to Kant, act in ways that recognize and affirm the humanity in ourselves and in our fellows. We may use others as a means (we need the barista to make us the latte and the kind stranger to guide our way to the subway), but we act immorally if we treat these individuals and others around us as mere tools for our benefit. People are not instruments: they are inherently and objectively worthy human beings with a common dignity, and they deserve our respect. The implications of Kantian morality range from the quotidian (looking a shop clerk in the eye and offering a smile; thanking a mentor with a thoughtful note or some homemade cookies) to the transnational: most global conventions of human rights reach back to Kant's writings for grounding and justification.

For Kant, it is the recognition that everyone is due a measure of happiness and a commitment to cultivate the wellbeing of others that ultimately brings an individual true contentment. You're unlikely to get there, though, if advancing your own happiness is the true motivating force behind your philanthropy.

I NOMINATED MIKEY WEINSTEIN FOR PRESIDENT IN THESE PAGES YEARS AGO

John Rafferty

The backstory: An atheist airman crossed out the words “so help me God” on his Air Force reenlistment paperwork. The Air Force tried to deny him reenlistment. The AHA took up the airman's case, and the Air Force folded, announcing last month that the words were now an “optional” part of the oath.

But TV preacher and SHSNY Lifetime Achievement in Dumbth award-winner Pat Robertson blamed not the AHA but Military Religious Freedom Foundation President Mikey Weinstein for this anti-theist “terrorism”.

“There's a left-wing radical named Mikey Weinstein who has got a group about people against religion or whatever he calls it, and he has just terrorized the armed forces. You think you're supposed to be tough, you're supposed to defend us, and you got one little Jewish radical who is scaring the pants off of you.”

According to rawstory.com, Weinstein, who does in fact lead the movement against religious proselytizing in the military, responded to Robertson's remarks in a brief statement to *The Friendly Atheist*:

“Pat Robertson is to human dignity and sanity and integrity and character what dog shit on the menu is to a fine French restaurant.”

“IT'S NOT IN THE CONSTITUTION!” (OR SO THEY SAY)

Jonathan Engel

Like Joshua in the Bible, there are Americans today who would like to blow their trumpets loud and strong in order to destroy the “wall of separation between church and state” of which Thomas Jefferson spoke approvingly in his 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptists.

But instead of trumpet blasts echoing off the walls, the faithful are shouting a mantra of sorts that they tend to repeat loudly and ad nauseam: “Separation of church and state is not in the Constitution!” And of course the actual words “separation of church and state” do not appear in the Constitution. But that does not mean that the framers, signers and ratifiers of the U.S. Constitution did not intend this concept to be an important pillar of our governing institutions. They did.

How do we know? There are a number of ways, including the contemporaneous writings of the founders. These include the aforementioned letter from Jefferson to the Danbury Baptists, as well as James Madison's “Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments” (1785), in which he argued that government suffered where religion was established and that religion suffered when it got too close to government. This certainly seems as though Madison, the Constitution's primary draftsman, believed that government and religion should be kept separate.

Then there's the Constitution itself, which in its original form (prior to amendments) mentioned religion only once, in Article VI, paragraph 3, which prohibits any religious test for public office holders. If separation of church and state was not intended, why would the Founders have crafted the document that directs how our government shall operate, and only mention religion to say that no one has to believe it (or any particular version of it) in order to hold public office?

But there's another very simple counter-argument that I want to posit. Remember how we were taught in grade school that the Constitution provided for the “separation of powers” between our three branches of Federal government, the executive, the legislative, and the judicial? Remember how we were also taught how this “separation of powers” gave our government a system of “checks and balances”? You must remember that — we all knew that just remembering those two phrases could guarantee us a passing grade on a History test, even if we didn't remember anything else about the Constitution.

Now, get out your pocket copy of the Constitution and show me where those phrases appear. Better yet, don't bother, because you won't find either one of them. Does this mean that our teachers were lying and/or mistaken when they taught us that the “separation of powers” and the “system of checks and balances” were two of the Constitution's founding principles? Of course not. We can see from the document itself and from the words of its

drafters that this was exactly what was intended. Just like “separation of church and state”. We didn’t need the exact words to appear in the Constitution to know these concepts were intended as governing principles of our country.

One more thing: at the start of this essay I analogized between Joshua’s wall and Jefferson’s. Those who think that removing the wall separating church and state (or pretending that it never was there to begin with) would be a good thing would be well advised to remember what happened after the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. Joshua’s army entered Jericho and didn’t stop until “they utterly destroyed what was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep and ass with the edge of the sword” (Joshua 6:21). Just the kind of thing we deplore Muslim militants like ISIS doing today.

Now I’m not saying that the failure to separate church and state in our country would result in a bloodbath as happened in Jericho, but it would inevitably cause rifts in our society as various sects argued over whose beliefs should be paramount. The bottom line is that the separation of church and state—which was meant to protect both government *and* religion—was a founding principle of our system of government, as was the separation of powers between the branches of government. This is true whether or not these exact words appear in the Constitution.

IN THE BEGINNING(S): QUESTIONS FOR CREATIONISTS AND BIBLICAL LITERALISTS

Timothy Beal

(Excerpted from “In the Beginning(s): Appreciating the Complexity of the Bible” on HuffingtonPost, 2/16/2011)

People love to argue about the Bible. Whether very many of them are actually reading it is less clear. Take the creationism-versus-evolution debates, which have become a central battleground in the larger atheist-versus-believers debates. Despite more than a century of conflict, few in these debates seem aware that there are actually several different accounts of creation scattered throughout the Bible, and they don’t all agree. The opening chapters of Genesis give us two.

In the first, God begins on the macrocosmic level, calling forth light from dark, waters from waters, and land from sea. Then comes vegetation, then the sun, moon and stars, and then animal life. Finally, as the *piece de resistance* of creation, God makes humankind, in the plural, male and female, in God’s image.

In the second story, which immediately follows this one, the order of creation is entirely different. Here God’s first act of creation, before there are any plants or animals, is to form a single human, not yet male or female, by shaping it from the dust of the earth and then bringing it to life by breathing into its nostrils. Thus *ha’adam*, Hebrew for “the human”, is formed from *ha’adamah*, “the earth”, and becomes a living soul by divine breath. A beautiful image of the ecological spirituality of humanity: a God-breathed and breathing lump of clay, human from humus, an incarnation

of divine transcendence and earthy immanence, as intimate with the ground as with God. Then come plants and animals. Then, when no animal fits the bill as lifelong companion (sorry, Fido), God essentially divides the human into two, male and female. So, in the first story, humans in the plural, male and female, are created last; and in the second, a single human is created first. These two versions of creation simply do not sync.

That’s just the first few pages of Genesis. There are several other creation stories in the Bible, and they don’t add up to anything like a coherent biblical account of cosmic or human origins. In Job 38, for example, the first act of creation involves a conflict between God and the sea, that is, the formless, watery deep that was there before the world began. God sinks foundations into it for the earth to rest, like some huge primeval offshore drilling station. God then sets boundaries for the waters so that they don’t overwhelm it.

In the brief account of creation in Psalm 74, on the other hand, there are monsters, and the struggle to establish order is much more intense. God must first slay Leviathan and the sea dragons, forces of primordial chaos, in order to create the cosmos as a safe, orderly place. Then again, in Psalm 104, Leviathan is not a monstrous opponent of creation but a sea creature with whom God plays.

And then there’s the account of creation in Proverbs 8, in which God has a divine cohort, Wisdom (in Hebrew, *Hokmah*), who declares that she was with God “from the beginning, from the origin of the earth ... there was still no deep when I was brought forth, no springs rich with water, before the mountains were sunk”. When God “assigned the sea its limits” and “fixed the foundations of the earth”, she says, “I was at his side as confidant. I was a source of delight every day, playing before him all the time” (my translation). This may remind us of the account of beginnings in the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the *logos*”, usually translated as “Word” but also carrying the meaning of “Wisdom”, now incarnate in Christ.

These and other biblical visions of beginnings don’t add up to a consistent biblical account of creation. Unlike the creationism in circulation today, the Bible’s own creationism is rich in different, mutually incompatible ways of imagining cosmic and human beginnings. There is no single biblical account of creation. The Bible doesn’t seem to have a problem with that. Why should we?

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #2 (NOT “TOO”)

Tim Torkildson, a social-media specialist employed by Nomen Global Language Center, a Provo, Utah-based English-language learning center, wrote a blog explaining homophones (you know, words that sound the same but have different meanings, e.g., there-their, be-bee) for his foreign students learning English.

So, Torkildson’s boss, Clarke Woodger, language-challenged himself, screeched, “Our school is now going to be identified with homosexuality”, and fired Torkildson.

DON'T SAY THE PLEDGE **TheHumanist.com Staff**

(Excerpted from "Atheist Group Asks Everyone to Sit Out the Pledge of Allegiance", TheHumanist.com, 9/8/2014)

The American Humanist Association has launched a national campaign to encourage people to sit out the Pledge of Allegiance until the phrase "under God" is removed from it.

The campaign includes YouTube video ads, as well as bus stop advertisements placed in New York City and Washington, D.C. Ads will direct students and others to a website, DontSaythePledge.com, which provides information about the history of the Pledge, including that "under God" was not added until 1954, during the McCarthy era, and that a 1943 U.S. Supreme Court ruling on West Virginia v. Barnette gives students the right to opt out of saying the Pledge. The website also provides resources for parents to discuss the Pledge with their children, as well as a way for students to report harassment or bullying they might have experienced for exercising their right to remain seated during the Pledge.

"We want everyone to know that the current wording of the Pledge discriminates against atheists and others who are good without a god, and we want them to stand up for fairness by sitting down until the Pledge is restored to its original, unifying form," said Roy Speckhardt of the AHA.

"Through the daily Pledge exercise, our public

schools are defining patriotism by promoting god-belief while stigmatizing atheist and humanist children," said David Niose, legal director of the AHA's Appignani Humanist Legal Center. "This violates the principles of equal rights and nondiscrimination, which is why we are currently challenging 'under God' with a lawsuit in New Jersey."

The campaign was launched in response to a study by The Seidewitz Group ... which found that 34 percent of Americans supported removing the phrase "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance after learning that the phrase was not part of the original Pledge wording.

Learn more at DontSaythePledge.com.

I'M IN. HOW ABOUT YOU?

John Rafferty

I don't like the pledge even in its original form; why are we the only nominal democracy in the world that requires its citizens to proclaim their loyalty regularly and publicly? Why are we imitating North Korea?

That said, making a non-theist point by refusing to stand for "under God"—and politely explaining why to questioners ("I'm an American and a patriot, but I'm not a theist.")—is an excellent idea.

Realistically, we're not going to get rid of "under God"—it ain't gonna happen—but sitting out the pledge makes *our* statement about church-state separation. Let's do it.

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