

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

August, 2015

Supersize us! The perfect newsletter, in the opinion of this Editor, would consist entirely of essays from readers. Next best? One that elicits so many contributions it has to expand. Welcome to the first 16-page edition of PIQUE, with wisdom from Epicurus and our new Humanist of the Year, idiocy from three Dumbths and seven pages of readers' thoughts on oxymoronic "atheist theology". We also consider what makes a None, and ask how *you* became one. But we open on a farewell. — JR

JOHN ARENTS, 1926-2015

John Stephen Arents, one of the founders of the Secular Humanist Society of New York in 1988, and for years its Secretary (1988-2004), as well as Treasurer (1993-2004) and Editor of PIQUE (1998-2002), died peacefully at Kendall on Hudson, in Sleepy Hollow, on July 3, at the age of 88.

A memorial service will be held at Kendall on September 12, at 11 a.m.

Teacher, chemist, author, humanist, and Emeritus Professor at City College of New York, John taught and did graduate work in quantum chemistry at Columbia University from 1950 to 1956 and then became a lecturer and professor at City College until his retirement in 1991. He was co-author through five editions of a general chemistry textbook used at colleges across the US. When he retired, after 35 years, he was Deputy Chairman of the CCNY Chemistry Department. Although he suffered many illnesses throughout his life with dignity and grace, he was dedicated to science and his students.

John's early life was unusual, to say the least. His father was Pastor Harold Arents, an evangelist who broadcast regularly on the radio and founded the Times Square Mission, serving poor and often homeless immigrants. John, who had read the Bible aloud four times by age four, joined his father's missionary work as a child gospel singer, but retired at age six because of ill health, and never resumed that career. He was home-schooled until age nine in mathematics and Spanish by his mother, an accomplished linguist. He eventually rejected religion and became a lifelong skeptic and humanist.

As he wrote of himself in "notes for an obituary" sent to this editor several years ago:

"John's early life was sheltered. He never acquired

social or athletic skills. He fully expected, even wanted, to be a lifelong bachelor. However, he met Gabriele Schatz, a German-born hospital dietitian, in 1965, when he was 38. They were married in less than five months. Besides love at first sight ... John never ceased to marvel that someone so dull and unattractive – in his self-image – could find love, especially with a person as wonderful as Gabriele.

"They enjoyed a happy marriage for 50 years [during which] they had an active social life and he became less of a misfit, but he never lost his propensity for spending much of his time alone."

John Arents' contributions to SHSNY cannot be overestimated. In the early 1990s the organization was fractured by internal bickering. Board memberships were assumed, then dropped, a vigorous social schedule was allowed to wither, and membership numbers plummeted. John, the self-described loner so ill-suited to the task, became the de facto Membership chair, personally writing dozens of letters each month to new and renewing members, as well as Events chair, organizing lectures and roundtables that kept SHSNY alive until new leadership arose.

Perhaps most important, during nearly five years as Editor ("because no one else wanted to do it"), he reshaped this newsletter into a widely-respected mini-journal of freethought opinion read and quoted throughout the US and around the world. As fellow SHSNY-founder Warren Allen Smith wrote of him in *Who's Who in Hell*:

"John Arents was a fiercely independent thinker and was critical of liberal and humanist irrationality as well as of any other kind."

A life well led – hail and farewell, John. — JR



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EPICURUS ON DEATH

Epicurus

Editor: Coincidental to the obituary on page 1, the subject of our June 29 Studying Humanism meeting was "How Should We (Humanists) Die?". Our lively roundtable discussion covered a lot of ground, including the following three essays, beginning with analyses of the two 2,300-year-old arguments against the fear of death made by the original humanist – Epicurus. – JR

The No Subject of Harm Argument

If death is annihilation, says Epicurus, then it is "nothing to us". Epicurus' main argument for why death is not bad is contained in the Letter to Menoeceus and can be dubbed the "no subject of harm" argument. If death is bad, for whom is it bad? Not for the living, since they're not dead, and not for the dead, since they don't exist. His argument can be set out as follows:

1. Death is annihilation.
2. The living have not yet been annihilated (otherwise they wouldn't be alive).
3. Death does not affect the living. (from 1 and 2)
4. So, death is not bad for the living. (from 3)
5. For something to be bad for somebody, that person has to exist, at least.
6. The dead do not exist. (from 1)
7. Therefore, death is not bad for the dead. (5 and 6)
8. Therefore death is bad for neither the living nor the dead. (from 4 and 7)

If death causes you no pain when you're dead, it's foolish to allow the fear of it to cause you pain now.

The Symmetry Argument

A second Epicurean argument against the fear of death, the so-called "symmetry argument", is recorded by the Epicurean poet Lucretius. He says that anyone who fears death should consider the time before he was born.

The past infinity of pre-natal non-existence is like the future infinity of post-mortem non-existence; it is as though nature has put up a mirror to let us see what our future non-existence will be like. But we do not consider not having existed for an eternity before our births to be a terrible thing; therefore, neither should we think not existing for an eternity after our deaths to be evil.

Editor: Reasonable, logical, even incontrovertible. So, freethinkers and rationalists, why don't the arguments satisfy? – JR

FOUR VIEWS OF THE ULTIMATE SCAREY

Julian Barnes

(Excerpted from Nothing to be Frightened Of)

Montaigne observed that "religion's surest foundation is the contempt for life". To have a low opinion of this rented world was logical, indeed essential, for a Christian: an overattachment to the earth—let alone a desire for some form of terrestrial immortality—would have been an impertinence to God. Montaigne's nearest British equivalent, Sir Thomas Browne, wrote: "For a pagan there might be some motives to be in love with life, but, for a Christian to be amazed at [i.e. terrified of] death, I

cannot see how he can escape this dilemma – that he is too sensible of this life, or hopeless of the life to come." ...

Brown also notes that "It is a symptom of melancholy to be afraid of death, yet sometimes to desire it." [Poet Phillip] Larkin again, a melancholic defining perfectly the fear of death: "Not to be here, / Not to be anywhere, / And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true." And elsewhere, as if in confirmation of Browne: "Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs." This line perplexed me when I first read it. I am certainly melancholic myself, and sometimes find life an overrated way of passing the time; but have never ... desired oblivion. I am not so convinced of life's nullity that the promise of a new novel or a new friend (or an old novel or an old friend), or a football match on television (or even the repeat of an old match) will not excite my interest all over again. I am Browne's unsatisfactory Christian—"too sensible of this life, or hopeless of the life to come"—except that I am not a Christian.

Perhaps the important divide is less between the religious and the irreligious as between those who fear death and those who don't. We fall thereby into four categories, and it's clear which two regard themselves as superior: those who do not fear death because they have faith, and those who do not fear death despite having no faith. These groups take the moral high ground. In third place come those who, despite having faith, cannot rid themselves of the old, visceral, rational fear. And then, out of the medals, below the salt, up shit creek, come those of us who fear death and have no faith.

WHAT MATTERS IS THAT WE GET TO BE ALIVE

Greta Christina

(From "Comforting Thoughts about Death That Have Nothing to Do with God," Skeptical Inquirer, March, 2005)

I don't know what happens when we die. I don't know if we come back in a different body, if we get to hover over time and space and view it in all its glory and splendor, if our souls dissolve into the world-soul the way our bodies dissolve into the ground, or if, as seems very likely, we simply disappear. I have no idea. And I don't know that it matters. What matters is that we get to be alive. We get to be conscious. We get to be connected with each other and with the world, and we get to be aware of that connection and to spend a few years mucking about in its possibilities. We get to have a slice of time and space that's ours.

As it happened, we got the slice that has Beatles records and Thai restaurants and AIDS and the Internet. People who came before us got the slice that had horse-drawn carriages and whist and dysentery, or the one that had stone huts and Viking invasions and pigs in the yard.

And the people who come after us will get the slice that has, I don't know, flying cars and soybean pies and identity chips in their brains. But our slice is no less important because it comes when it does, and it's no less important because we'll leave it someday. The fact that time will continue after we die does not negate the time that we are alive. We are alive now, and nothing can erase that.

HUMANISM, DOUBT, AND OPTIMISM

Part 1

Lawrence Krauss, 2015 Humanist of the Year

(Reprinted from *thehumanist.com*, 5/26/2015)

(Note: The following speech in acceptance of the Humanist of the Year award was delivered at the American Humanist Association's annual conference in Denver, Colorado, on Saturday, May 9, 2015. – JR)

Permit us to question – to doubt, that's all – and not to be sure. ... It is our responsibility...to proclaim the value of this freedom, to teach how doubt is not to be feared but welcomed and discussed, and to demand this freedom as our duty to all coming generations.

– Richard Feynman, 1988

Before I begin I would like to thank the American Humanist Association for this remarkable award. The list of past awardees includes many intellectual heroes of mine, and to join that list is truly one of the greatest honors of my life. Moreover, the context of this award, humanism, means a great deal to me, because humanism characterizes the spirit that I have tried to use as a guide in my personal, professional, and public activities.

That spirit, to me, can be summed up as follows: It is up to us to determine the nature of the way in which we carry out our lives, using a combination of reason, intelligence, and compassion. No one is taking care of us but us. Bad decisions produce bad consequences, and we must take responsibility for them, and, if possible, take actions to mediate or alleviate them. Whether or not the future for our children is better than the past is up to us.

We are, of course, constrained in our actions by the cumulative historical impact of ignorance and greed and the struggle for power, often accentuated by governments or churches whose interests may lie in permeating myths that build support for the status quo and squelch calls for change.

As a result, if we want to change the future for the better we must be prepared to encounter numerous obstacles. But I am a theoretical physicist trained to worry about possibilities, not practicalities. Moreover, I would argue that if we don't first imagine a possible future, we can never implement the practical steps that might make it a reality.

So tonight, I want to suggest that humanism offers the world one of the most important drivers of change that can improve our future, and in so doing I may express an optimism that seems naïve. Nevertheless I am emboldened by the recent experience in this country regarding gay marriage. In spite of what some of the media might suggest, and what middle-aged senators may say, the issue of gay marriage is a done deal. Why? If you speak to a young person my daughter's age, they don't understand what the problem is. Almost all of them have friends who are gay, or they know gay couples and they cannot understand what the previous generation was concerned about. If the public and legal debate isn't over right now, it soon will be. When

the next generation grows old enough to vote, to judge, to represent the media, and to run for office the debate will surely be over.

This would have been unheard of a generation ago—indeed, merely a decade ago. How could change happen so quickly?

Max Planck once said that science advances one funeral at a time. And what he meant was that old theories may never die, but old theorists do, and when they do, they take their theories with them. A new generation is always more comfortable dispensing with old ideas than are their predecessors.

So, I want to argue here that it is possible to imagine a future without the tyranny of religious myth and superstition, and its chokehold on supposed morality. And it is possible to imagine such a future soon. We are never more than a generation away from change. The key is reaching the next generation when they are young.

There has happily been a great deal of discussion of late about the importance of encouraging children, particularly young girls, to go into careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (so-called STEM subjects). From an economic perspective, it is good for the country, because in the twenty-first century those countries without a workforce with STEM skills will quickly fall behind the curve. It is good for the world, because the challenges of the twenty-first century, from global warming to energy production and storage, will require technological innovation as well as institutional changes at the global level. And it is good for girls and young women, because these careers will help empower them, raise many out of potential poverty, and free them from subjugation by men.

But exposing children to science is far more than merely providing them with Lego sets and playing “sink or float”. Moreover, providing a set of facts is not the primary purpose of education. Teaching how to distinguish between fact and fantasy is, along with how to derive facts by questioning and testing, and where to go to access reliable data.

The most important goal in educating our children should be to encourage them to question everything, to not be satisfied with unsubstantiated claims, and to be skeptical of a priori beliefs, either their own, their parents', or their teachers'. Encouraging skeptical thinking in this way, as well as directing a process by which questions may be answered—the process of empirical investigation followed by logical reasoning—helps create lifelong learners and citizens who can responsibly address the demands of a democratic society.

And there is overwhelming evidence that one of the key collateral benefits of a more scientifically literate populace is that the seeds of religious doubt are thereby planted among the next generation.

The late Christopher Hitchens once said that religion poisons everything. While there is ample room to debate this statement, even people who take a less extreme view must admit that in the current climate religion is poisoning

the political process in many places throughout the world.

The brutal terrorism of ISIS is merely one extreme. In this country numerous Republicans are now tripping over themselves to move to the right of the religious right—with the recent US House freshmen class reported to include a former Navy Seal who claims Hillary Clinton is the Antichrist, another who claims recent “blood moons” are fulfilling biblical prophecies, and another who proposed reclassifying single parenthood as child abuse.

The purpose of education may not be to destroy religious belief, but surely, as Richard Feynman alluded to in the quote at the beginning of this lecture, its purpose is to encourage doubt. In that arena we are sorely falling short.

At least one significant factor arises from the unwillingness, enforced by terror in much of the Middle East and political correctness in the United States, to openly ridicule in the public arena patently false and nonsensical claims, as long as they are religious claims.

This is particularly important in the current climate associated with satire of the type represented by *Charlie Hebdo*, because very few Americans support openly questioning or satirizing religious beliefs, even though they would be loathe to stifle questioning, debate, or even ridicule in almost any other area in the public arena.

In a Pew survey published in May of last year, the number-one negative trait listed for possible presidential candidates by US adults was atheism. Some 53 percent of adults indicated that they would be less likely to vote for an atheist for president, more than would be similarly inclined if the potential candidate had never held public office, had had an extramarital affair, or were gay or lesbian.

Avoiding confrontations with religion is not restricted to politics. Many scientists and teachers do it, too. Recent studies—including a comprehensive national survey in 2007 by researchers at Penn State University—show that up to 60 percent of high school biology teachers shy away from adequately teaching evolution as a unifying principle of biology. They don’t want to risk potential controversy by offending religious sensibilities.

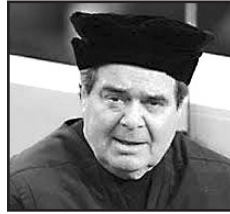
Instead, many resort to the idea, advocated by the late Stephen Jay Gould, that science and religion are “non-overlapping magisteria”—separate traditions of thinking that need not contradict one another.

Those in the public sphere who have openly questioned the need for God, or the consistency of religious doctrine with empirical evidence, are most often dismissed as strident. Sadly, many of those who express such a reaction are not religious fundamentalists but fellow scientists.

The claim is made—indeed a claim I myself used to make—that if scientists openly question the existence of God then we will alienate those who already view science as the enemy of faith, further hardening their stand against the teaching of concepts like evolution, the Big Bang, or even climate change and making it more difficult to break down barriers to education.

Editor: Part 2 of Professor Krauss’ talk will appear in September PIQUE.

***Dumbth, Dumbther, Dumbthest:*
June produced a bumper crop.
ANTONIN SCALIA, SUPREME COURT JUSTICE,
GIVES US A PEEK INTO HIS WORLDVIEW,
YOUNG-EARTH VERSION**



In June, giving the commencement address at the Bethesda school where his granddaughter Megan graduated, Justice Scalia actually said out loud:

“Class of 2015, you should not leave Stone Ridge High School thinking that you face challenges that are at all, in any important sense, unprecedented. Humanity has been around for at least some 5,000 years or so, and I doubt that the basic challenges as confronted are any worse now, or alas even much different, from what they ever were.”

**GRETCHEN CARLSON, WHO HAS A
FREE SPEECH JOB, IS NOT YEAR-ROUND
CRAZY ABOUT FREE SPEECH**

For Fox News host Gretchen Carlson, the “War on Christmas” is never over. Carlson told American Family Radio host Kevin McCullough in *June* that a Festivus pole display in the Washington state capitol next to a Christmas tree was “outrageous”, adding:



“I don’t want to have to drive around, eventually, years gone by, with my kids looking at all the Nativity scenes during Christmas time and say, ‘Oh look kids, there’s the baby Jesus, way behind the Festivus pole, you can barely see him.’” And then came the *Dumbth* clincher:

“I’m all for free speech and free rights, just not on December 25th.”

**“OH GOD, OH GOD, OH GOD!”
JOHN HAGEE HATES SOME SPEECH
HE HAS PROBABLY NEVER HEARD**



The founder of the Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, thinks we should all take taking the Lord’s name in vain more seriously.

“In this world of crimes and deaths that surround us, a simple blasphemy does not get that much attention when it should. ... Saying the Lord’s name in vain might seem petite and insignificant ... but there is no greater sin in terms of wrongly using God’s name than women who use it during sex. That is one of the filthiest, most derogatory and sinful uses of the Lord’s name I can think of.

“If it were up to me, I would put every single woman or girl who does that in jail.”

NO CLIMATE CHANGE IN TEXAS, BILL NYE

Harry Graber

As rationalists and freethinkers, we must completely agree with the people who have lambasted “Science Guy” Bill Nye for his ridiculous tweet about climate change and the bad weather in Texas.¹ We firmly believe—no, we *know*—that climate change has nothing to do with the recent storms and floods in that beleaguered state.

They are all Rick Perry’s fault.

Has everyone forgotten that four years ago, when Mr. Perry was still governor, Texas was suffering from the opposite problem – severe drought? Governor Perry’s reaction was to ask all Texans to get together and pray for rain, and thousands of them did in a stadium in Houston.² It’s as plain as a day in Texas that today’s precipitation events are simply the Almighty’s affirmative reply to all that beseeching.

What about the time lag? There is no time lag! Don’t forget that to the Almighty a thousand years are as a single day.³ Therefore this four-year delay is as close to instantaneous prayer-granting as a reasonable person can reasonably expect. Four years is only one two-hundred-fiftieth of a Divine Day, or a bit less than 6 minutes. (The Almighty might have been making a sandwich, or have gone to the bathroom.)

When reached for comment, Mr. Perry said, “Oops!”

1. <http://www.rawstory.com/2015/05/fcking-ahole-conservatives-goberserk-after-bill-nye-links-texas-floods-to-climate-change/>.

2. <http://www.news-journal.com/news/2011/aug/05/local-churches-pray-for-rain-as-governor-organizes/>.

3. Psalm 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8

TEXAS, HISTORY, ANTI-HISTORY AND TEXTBOOKS – YET AGAIN

Emma Brown

(Excerpted from “Texas officials: Schools should teach that slavery was ‘side issue’ to Civil War”, in The Washington Post, 7/5/2015)

Five million public school students in Texas will begin using new social studies textbooks this fall based on state academic standards that barely address racial segregation. The guidelines for teaching American history also do not mention the Ku Klux Klan or Jim Crow laws.

And when it comes to the Civil War, children are supposed to learn that the conflict was caused by “sectionalism, states’ rights and slavery” – written deliberately in that order to telegraph slavery’s secondary role in driving the conflict. Slavery was a “side issue to the Civil War”, said Pat Hardy, a Republican board member, when the board adopted the standards in 2010. “There would be those who would say the reason for the Civil War was over slavery. No. It was over states’ rights.” ...

Historians acknowledge that disagreements over states’ rights played a role in the Civil War. But the states’ rights issue was inseparable from slavery, they say: The right that states in the South were seeking to protect, after all, was the right to buy and sell people.

RE: HUMAN RIGHTS FOR CHIMPS

Edd Doerr

Thanks for running the piece (“How Do We Feel About This, Humanists?”) in June. My 1974 short novel, *Eden II*, dealt with the human rights of chimps, which win in the end with a Supreme Court ruling based on 14th Amendment voting rights. The novel grew out of a column I wrote in *The Humanist*, which garnered wide attention, even internationally. It was reviewed favorably in *UU World* in March 1976. Clearly, chimps, bonobos, gorillas and orangutans are sufficiently like humans that they merit at least the rights accorded young children.

I enjoy PIQUE every month. Keep up the good work.

JESUS AND MO ON RIGHTS FOR WOMEN

(Transcribed from jesusandmo.net/2015/05/20/only/)

(The boys are at the bar, announcing their news to the Barmaid)

Jesus: We’re going to a conference on religion and women’s rights.

Mohammed: For too long religion has been cast in the role of oppressor when it comes to women.

Jesus: We’re all equal in the eyes of God. So we’re hoping this conference will help raise awareness and put a stop to the ignorant slanders of militant secularists.

Barmaid: Sounds interesting. Can I come?

Mo: Sorry, men only.

Jesus: It’s in Saudi.

GOT A QUESTION ABOUT SEX? ASK A MULLAH.

Popular Muslim televangelist Mūcahid Cihad Han, responding to a question about masturbation posed by a viewer of his Turkish TV show, claimed that the Prophet Muhammad teaches that a man who masturbates will meet his hand “pregnant in the afterlife”. In fact, “One *hadith* states that those who have sexual intercourse with their hands will find their hands pregnant in the afterlife, complaining against them to God over its rights.”

And in Iran recently, another Muslim televangelist, the Ayatollah Hossein Dehnavi, explained that men who fantasize about other women while impregnating their wives will cause their children to be gay or lesbian.

THE DEATH-BY-INCHES OF SEPARATION IN NYC

Dennis Middlebrooks

As per the June 4 *New York Post*:

“Mayor Bill de Blasio is organizing a faith-based group of religious leaders to advise him on issues. ... The mayor’s office declined to discuss details of its clergy advisory board. But mayoral spokesman Phil Walzak said, ‘Vigorous community engagement with New Yorkers from all walks of life ... is a hallmark of Mayor de Blasio’s leadership style.’”

All walks of life? Rest assured that no Ethical Culturists, Unitarians, atheists or humanists will be invited to participate in this advisory group. Priests, rabbis, imams, preachers, yes; freethinkers, not so much.

ARE WE BECOMING A SOCIETY OF “NONES”?

Donald R. Prothero

(Excerpted from “The Times, They are a Changin’” on eSkeptic, 7/1/2015)

Last month, a new Pew survey was released that showed that the “nones” or “religiously unaffiliated” in America have become the second largest religious group in America (22.8 percent of the surveyed population, jumping up from only 16 percent in 2007). They were outnumbered only slightly by Evangelical Protestants at 25.8 percent. “Nones” are even more numerous than Catholics, and the numbers of mainstream Protestants is plummeting. “Nones” are ten times more numerous than Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and other faiths (most are only 2–3 percent or less).

Not only are the numbers of “nones” increasing rapidly, but nearly every religious group in America is declining just as fast, including a 0.9 percent drop even in the dominant Evangelicals. More importantly, the largest percentage increase in unaffiliated people is among the younger generations, especially the Millennials (those born between 1981–2000), who are becoming increasingly non-religious (36–44 percent or higher). Even more striking, the usual trends of people getting more conservative and religious as they age is not holding true with the Millennials, since the older Millennials show just as high a rate of lack of religiosity as do younger ones. If this is true, then religion may be on a permanent downward trend in this country, just as has already occurred in largely secular countries of the developed world in Europe and Asia.

Naturally, the blowhards in the right-wing political/religious community bemoaned this news, although it has been developing for a long time and is really not news to those of us who have been paying attention. Bill O’Reilly of Fox News blamed it on rap music. Former Pennsylvania Senator and two-time presidential candidate Rick Santorum blamed it on the lack of anti-abortion zealots running for president. Rush Limbaugh (who is losing channels and sponsorships right and left) blamed it on gay marriage. Pat Buchanan blamed it on the Supreme Court, the liberal elites in the media, and the counterculture of the 1960s (even though the Boomers are mostly religious). Ken Ham of the Creation Museum and Answers in Genesis Ministry, blamed it on the public schools as “churches of atheism” and the lack of early indoctrination of children. Similar responses could be heard from Pat Robertson and other evangelical ministers.

As a number of people have pointed out, however, these simplistic cartoon villains of religion need to be replaced with more realistic causes, backed up by poll numbers and demographic trends. The Pew Foundation is set to release another report soon on their analysis of the reasons, but already scholars have pointed to several plausible causes. Professor of Secular Studies Phil Zuckerman of Pitzer College in Claremont, California, has written several books on the religious changes in the United States (*Faith No More, Society without God*). He just released his

newest book on the topic, called *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions*. Zuckerman and most of the analysts point to several trends that have probably contributed (although it’s hard to decide which ones are most important):

- The ascendancy of the extreme fundamentalists/evangelicals, and their grip on the GOP, has meant that the ugliest, meanest, most anti-science, most intolerant side of Christianity—anti-abortion, homophobic, racist, sexually repressed and woman-hating, and hating anyone different from them—has become the public face of Christianity. In states where they have enacted their hard-right agenda, the polls show a huge backlash from Millennials and young people who are much more tolerant of gays, other races, and much more pro-science and feminist in orientation. These young people have not switched to more liberal Christian denominations, but left religion altogether. It appears unlikely that they will come back to religion any time soon after they have formed their opinions of Christianity from their younger years. ...

- A second factor may be another thing creating a black eye for religion, especially among the young: the acts of religious leaders and fanatics. These range from radical Islam and its terrorist tactics and barbaric treatment of people (especially women), to pedophile priests (probably the single biggest reason Catholicism is declining), to the hypocritical ministers with feet of clay who scold others about their morality, then turn out to be closeted gays, or child molesters, or adulterers, or criminals.

- Zuckerman pointed to a third important factor: the rise of the internet. Just a generation ago, if you had religious doubts but lived in small-town America, you had no one to talk to. Everyone’s first question after they meet you is “What church do you go to?” You had to keep your ideas to yourself and stay in the closet. Now, thanks to the internet, you can connect with virtual communities of secularists all over the globe. There are many different secularist meetings where you are among like-minded individuals who also reject religion. In this day of instant information, any bizarre claim by religion can be instantly Googled. In many cases, the sites debunking religious claims will be in the top few hits (e.g, Scientology). In my day, it took me a long time to find a few books on atheism (such as Bertrand Russell’s *Why I Am Not A Christian*) in the library (if the library dared order such a title). Now, the entire debunking of religious claims is just a few clicks away, and books by Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens are best sellers. Anyone with just a bit of curiosity or doubt, especially among the younger generations, can find things in just a few seconds that I never encountered in years of reading and searching when I was young and questioning my family’s Presbyterian faith.

- Another surprising factor that Zuckerman discovered: the rise of women in the work force, and the profound changes it has meant in all of American society. Women tend to be the religious backbone of most families (my mother sure was!). In conservative religious families, they

are the enforcers and the teachers of the faith to their children. But changing economic and demographic factors have led women out of their traditional roles, exposed them to new ideas, and made them less likely to rely on religion when being homemaker isn't their only job. ...

When Zuckerman gave a talk about his book for the Skeptics Society at Caltech on April 19, he told a story about how much life has changed in northern Europe. In most cities, huge cathedrals and other religious buildings no longer have any congregations, but have been sold and are now used as meeting houses, public places, and even local pubs and taverns. They have become cathedrals of secularism.

I'm not expecting this to happen in the U.S. next week, but it can happen very fast. The change occurred in Europe over only two generations, mostly before the internet gave it any help—thanks to cradle-to-grave social safety nets provided by their governments, which remove the fear that drives religious belief. In Quebec in the 1960s, the Catholic hierarchy once ruled the entire province, but a series of elections of secular governments led it to become the most progressive and least religious province in all of Canada in a single generation. John Lennon imagined no religion. Now the rest of the country is catching up.

HOW I BECAME A “NONE”

Donna Marxer

Religion never gave me a hard time. I was raised “Protestant Light” by my tolerant parents, who didn't really know what to do with their only, super-bright child, so they let me make my own decisions early on. It turned out to be a good move.

When I was still in my single digits, they took me to church (Congregationalist), which I remember as being white clapboard and sunny. I knew as a child that I wanted to be some kind of artist and would stare dreamily out the high, clerestory windows in the plain white room during service, hearing not a word, but entranced by watching the birds flutter about in the visible treetops. May I point out that we lived on the outskirts of 1930s Miami, which was rural in those days. We had a sugarcane field nearby that I my friends I walked past and poached daily on our way back from school. The white church was in Sebastian, Florida (population 250), where we lived for a year.

When I was still a tot and learned that there was no Santa Claus, I guess I threw the baby (Jesus) out with the bathwater. I had conflated St. Nick and the latter because they were both the guys you asked for Stuff.

Anyhow, I told my parents that I didn't want to go to church any more (age 10) and they okayed it. It turned they didn't want to go either because, in spite of being people of faith, they didn't go in much for organized religion. They, like so many parents today, just thought that children should be brought up churchgoing. They did make me go to Sunday school. It was years before I realized that that was because my perpetually honeymooning Mom and Dad wanted me out of the house!

When I was ten, I had my life planned. I no longer believed in God (which I did not make public for six more years when I went off to college). I was committed to art and independence, and requested an allowance to cover all my expenses, including clothes. I also wanted an oil painting box and Saturday classes at an art school. All my requests were granted and I got to be a whiz at depicting hibiscus and palm trees.

My parents let me choose my own Sunday School to attend and were nonplussed when I picked the Christian Science Church. They worried about the cultish religion as represented by Mary Baker Eddy, with its disbelief in the science of medicine.

They needn't have worried, as their little girl ignored the teachings. I regret letting my dear, kind and sweet and plain little parents go to their graves without knowing that I only went to the Christian Science Sunday school because they had the best crayons.

The year of my independence was 1945, when WWII ended and the whole world changed forever. And I won a \$25 First Prize in a Scholastic art contest. My career was launched.

I've celebrated 61 years as a career painter and an atheist. For me, art has always been enough, and becoming a bona fide secular humanist is the icing on the cake.

HOW DID YOU BECOME A “NONE”?

John Rafferty

We want your story. How and when did *you* become a humanist, rationalist, skeptic, atheist — any one of those isms that the pollsters now lump together under the heading of “None”?

We're calling on every reader of PIQUE to tell us their tale of conversion. Did you have a “road to Damascus” moment of enlightenment (and what were you smoking)? Did Philo 101 or Basics of Biology open your eyes to books beyond the Good Book? Was it when your priest/minister/rabbi/imam demanded money one time too many? Maybe when someone you had the teenage hots for looked at you pityingly and asked, “You still believe that crap?” Or maybe you just read a lot, thought, and made up your mind.

Any way, we want your story. Every issue from now on (if enough of you cooperate), we'll print one reader's “How I Became a None” story. And if your story runs you'll receive a gift book — on a humanist theme, of course.

Okay, length? Donna Marxer's memoir (above), is 542 words, just about right for a full column, but really, any length between 250 words and 1,000 will be okay. So start writing, and send your text to editor@shsny.org. Now.

BIAS AGAINST REASON?

(From *The Fusco Brothers comic strip* — 5/24/2015)

He: Speaking of unfair, I was fired from my last job simply because I don't believe in intelligent design.

She: Wow, that's terrible. What was your last job?

He: I was a designer.

SHSNY CALENDAR: AUGUST - OCTOBER 2015

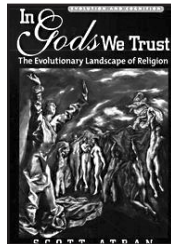
SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, AUG 6, 7-8:30 pm
**THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
 OF NEW YORK**
 28 East 35 St. (Park-Madison)
 (Gallery)

We'll discuss
 Chapters 1 and 10 of
IN GODS WE TRUST:

*The Evolutionary Landscape
 of Religion*
 Scott Atran

Using our knowledge of the evolution of cognition, cognitive anthropologist and psychologist Scott Atran argues that religion is a by-product of human evolution just as the cognitive intervention, cultural selection, and historical survival of religion is an accommodation of certain existential and moral elements that have evolved in the human condition.



We'll focus our discussion on Chapters 1 and 10 of this very important and impressive book.

— All formats

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

PLANNING AHEAD

The *usual* SHSNY schedule is ...

Book Club: First Thursday

at the Community Church of NY

Movie Night: Second Monday

at Stone Creek Lounge.

Brunch: Third Sunday

at Stone Creek Lounge

Great Lectures: 4th Wednesday

at Stone Creek Lounge.

Studying Humanism: Last Monday

at the Community Church of NY

More info: www.shsny.org,

and/or 646-922-7389

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, SEPT 3, 7-8:30 pm
 Community Church of New York
 40 East 35 St. (Park-Madison)
 (Church basement)

RELIGION EXPLAINED:
*The Evolutionary Origins of
 Religious Thought*
 Pascal Boyer

Why do people have religion? Cognitive anthropologist Boyer does not shrink from the task of explaining "the full history of all religion (ever)".

Using findings from anthropology, cognitive science, linguistics, and evolutionary biology, *Religion Explained* shows how this aspect of human consciousness is increasingly admissible to coherent, naturalist explanation. — All formats

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, OCT 1, 7-8:30 pm
 Community Church of New York
SAPIENS:

A Brief History of Humankind
 Yuval Noah Harari

One hundred thousand years ago, at least six different species of humans inhabited Earth. Today there is only homo sapiens. What happened to the others? And what may happen to us?

From a renowned historian comes a bestseller narrative of humanity's creation and evolution, exploring how biology and history have defined us and enhanced our understanding of what it is to be "human". — All formats

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<https://www.facebook.com/SHSofNY>

MEET US ON MEETUP

www.meetup.com/shsny-org/

TEXT US ON TWITTER

@NY_Sec_Humanist

SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

MON, AUG 10, 6:30 pm
 Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
 140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
MERCHANTS OF DOUBT

Fifty years ago they were paid by Big Tobacco to convince us that "all the facts weren't in" on the links between cigarettes and cancer. Today many of the same people and companies are doing the same dirty work for climate-change deniers.



This revealing 2014 documentary examines the network of scientific "experts" paid by major corporations to spread disinformation about looming environmental threats, including chemical pollution and global climate change.

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.

(But put something on the bar besides your elbow.)

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, AUG 16, 11:30 am
 Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
 140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

Stone Creek works for us — our July discussion in the private back room went on and on over coffee.



The expanded pub-grub menu includes an \$11 breakfast special, the Bloody Marys are hot, the beer is cold, and conversation sparkles, long after the plates are cleared.

Come join 20 or more other free-thinkers/humanists for food, fun and well-fed conversation.

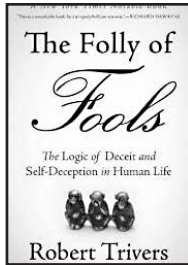
Discussion: "The Pursuit of Happiness" — How is yours going?

SHSNY CALENDAR: AUGUST - OCTOBER 2015

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, AUG 19, 7:00 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
 140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)
THE FOLLY OF FOOLS:
The Logic of Deceit & Self-Deception in Human Life
Dr. Robert Trivers

Whether it's in a cockpit at takeoff or the planning of an offensive war, a romantic relationship or a dispute at the office, there are many opportunities



to lie and self-deceive – but deceit and self-deception carry the costs of being alienated from reality and can lead to disaster. So why does deception play such a prominent role in our everyday lives?

In his bold new work, Rutgers University evolutionary theorist Robert Trivers unflinchingly argues that self-deception evolved in the service of deceit – the better to fool others. We do it for biological reasons – in order to help us survive and procreate. From viruses mimicking host behavior to humans misremembering (sometimes intentionally) the details of a quarrel, science has proven that the deceptive one can always outwit the masses. But we undertake this deception at our own peril.

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

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, SEP 23, 7:00 pm
NEANDERTHAL MAN: IN SEARCH OF LOST GENOMES
Dr. Svante Paabo

This is a re-scheduling of our June Great Lectures on DVD evening that didn't come off.

STUDYING HUMANISM

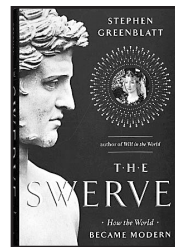
MON, SEP 28, 6:30 - 8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
 40 East 35 St (church basement)
 2015-16 Meeting/Discussion #1
"Epicureanism & Humanism"

We begin our fourth year (*Wow, already?*) of Studying Humanism with, as usual, a review of the "What-is-humanism?" basics (online), and with special attention to a Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner that explains how ancient Epicureanism prefigured and defined modern humanism.

Did you know that Jefferson wrote, "I am an Epicurean"?

Our reading for September 28:
Online: at americanhumanist.org/
 Edwards: *What is Humanism?*

Book:
 Greenblatt, Stephen: *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*



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

SHSNY MEMBERS ALSO ...

- Aug 7-28, artist Donna Marxer will exhibit hanging scrolls and paintings in "The Artful Butterfly" at Tahawus Windows Gallery, 14234 Rt 9N, Main St, Au Sable Forks, NY. Opening reception, Fri, Aug 7, 5:30-8pm. Info: tahawus@verizon.net.

- Aug 7-29, artists Irene Christensen and Donna Marxer will both curate and exhibit in "Everglades in the Adirondacks", works by 28 Artists-in-Residence from Everglades National Park. At Tahawus Windows Gallery, 14234 Rt 9N, Main St, Au Sable Forks, NY. Opening reception, Fri, Aug 7, 5:30-8pm. Info: tahawus@verizon.net.

- Sep 10, 7:00pm, John Wagner will address the Long Island Atheists Meetup Group on "Promoting Secular Politics in the Empire State". Plainview-Old Bethpage Library, 999 Old Country Road, Plainview, L.I.

- All SHSNY Members: To publicize an event (performance, lecture, roundtable, etc.) in PIQUE in which you are personally involved, and which is open to the public, email editor@shsn.org

TWO VIEWS OF THE NEXT SEVEN PAGES ...



WHY YOU'RE HOLDING (AND I HOPE READING) AN EXPANDED (16 PAGES!) ISSUE OF PIQUE

John Rafferty

It all began with an OpEd piece in the May 30 *New York Times Sunday Review* ...

WANTED: A THEOLOGY OF ATHEISM

Molly Worthen

One Sunday last month, I walked into an auditorium past greeters and a table loaded with coffee, fruit and cookies. Onstage two young men tuned their guitars. A blank screen hung down, a silent signal that not knowing the words would be no excuse for not singing along. But this was no typical church service.

I'd come for Sunday Assembly, a godless alternative to church founded in London in 2013. A cheerful woman with a name tag stood and promised a crowd of about 40 people "all the fun parts of church but without any religion, and with fun pop songs". The band led us in secular "hymns" like "Walking on Sunshine" and "Lean on Me". The day's guest preacher, a Ph.D. candidate from Duke, described his research on bonobos and the biological roots of our species' instinct to help one another — the "seeds of a nature that is good", he told us.

Is this what secular humanism — the naturalist worldview that many nonbelievers embrace and religious conservatives fear — looks like in practice? In one sense, secular humanism is a style of fellowship intended to fill the church-shaped void, but it is also a strand of the liberal intellectual tradition that attempts to answer the canard that godlessness means immorality.

It's no secret that nonbelievers still grapple with social stigma. Last year, more than half of Americans told pollsters that they would be less likely to support a presidential candidate if they learned he was an atheist. The nonbelievers I met were eager to challenge the stereotype of atheists as ill-tempered nihilists whose only sacred tradition is picketing the City Hall Christmas tree.

How will these nonbelievers do that? By focusing on a "100 percent celebration of life" and being "radically inclusive", according to Sunday Assembly's non-creedal creed. They'd rather befriend a Christian than argue faith and reason. "When it comes to daily life, ideas are not the thing that matters; human connection matters," said Nichelle Reed, who helped found Chapel Hill's Sunday Assembly.

Most Christians, especially evangelical Protestants, would find the outlines of Sunday Assembly familiar: hymns and a worship band; a sermon; afterward, coffee hour. (The organization attracts a mix of recovering believers and people who have never been religious.) The meeting last month even featured a ritual that echoed the ancient Christian practice of the Passing of the Peace, the moment when congregants reconcile with one another, often by shaking hands. Instead, the Assembly leader asked us to turn to our neighbors for a quick thumb-wrestling match.

Humanist fellowships have often imitated the practices

of traditional worship. Sunday Assembly's close relative, the Society for Ethical Culture, has featured rousing music and a lecture at Sunday meetings since 1876. Yet it is a mistake to think of secular humanism as a pale, materialist substitute for religious communion. Some activists call it a movement — and if it is, then it's a movement grounded in ideas, despite what Ms. Reed says.

Groups like Sunday Assembly are not pseudo-churches, but the fraternal embodiment of an intellectual tradition, a branch of moral philosophy that goes back to Socrates' sly challenges to the moral authority of Olympus. This tradition has never been livelier than it is today, when even New Atheist writers known for impolitic screeds have refocused their efforts on preaching secular alternatives to religious morality.

Sam Harris's 2004 best-seller, *The End of Faith*, compared religion to mental illness and dismissed even religious moderates as dupes of a "dilution of Iron Age philosophy". More recently he's gotten interested in promoting science as a universal moral guide. This proposal is an old one. The 19th-century French philosopher Auguste Comte and the Americans Walter Lippmann and John Dewey all wrote that moral progress depended on the scientific method.

Morality depends on "the totality of facts that relate to human well-being, and our knowledge of it grows the more we learn about ourselves, in fields ranging from molecular biology to economics", Mr. Harris told me. He has stressed the special role of his own field, cognitive science. Every discovery about the brain's experience of pleasure and suffering has implications for how we should treat other humans. Moral philosophy is really an "undeveloped branch of science" whose laws apply in Peoria just as they do in the Punjab.

Pragmatist philosophers like Philip Kitcher offer a different approach to the question of atheist morality, one based on "the sense that ethical life grows out of our origins, the circumstances under which our ancestors lived, and it's a work in progress". In the pragmatist tradition, science is useful, but ethical claims are not objective scientific facts. They are only "true" if they seem to "work" in real life.

"Successful experiments" — the trial and error of weighing self-interest against the needs of the community — "built the human conscience," Mr. Kitcher wrote in his 2014 book, *Life After Faith*. "People and societies may balance valuable things in different ways. A certain kind of pluralism is O.K.. But that's a long way from moral relativism. A bedrock of ethical truth emerges and remains stable."

The average nonbeliever may know even less about his tradition's intellectual debates than the average Christian does — because its institutions, like Sunday Assembly, tend to be tiny, relatively new and allergic to anything that resembles dogma. But nonbelievers should pay attention. Atheism, like any ideological position, has political and moral consequences. As nonbelievers become a more self-conscious subculture, as they seek to elect their own to high office and refute the fear that a post-Christian America will slide into moral anarchy, they will need every idea their

tradition offers them.

Yet modern secular humanism is also a species of 21st-century liberalism, and many of its adherents have absorbed the modern liberal tendency to shy away from ideology in favor of a message of nonjudgmental inclusion. Mr. Harris worries about any secular humanist who upholds “tolerance, above all, as the master value. What that person doesn’t see is that these irrational beliefs he’s refusing to criticize are of huge consequence geopolitically and personally – and are themselves sources of intolerance.”

Today, nonbelievers often seem inclined to describe atheism and secular humanism as an “identity” whose claimants should focus on winning cultural acceptance rather than intellectual debates. Here, they are taking their cues from the civil rights movement, particularly the rhetoric of gay liberation. Some organizations, for example, declared April 23 the first “Openly Secular Day”, “a celebration of secular people opening up about their secular worldview, and an opportunity for theistic allies to show their support for secular friends and family”.

“Many atheists are still in the closet,” said Nichelle Reed of Sunday Assembly. Nonbelievers like her hope that if they emphasize good works over grand argument, they can convince the bigots that atheists are decent human beings. Kelly Damerow, the interim executive director of the Secular Coalition for America, said that there is little discussion of moral philosophy among the activists she works with. “We get it. We know we’re good to each other,” she told me. “We would rather show people that we’re good.”

In the short term, this is a smart strategy. The language of tolerance and personal identity has particular appeal to Millennials, who account for 40 percent of the atheist and agnostic population, according to the Pew Research Center’s latest study. August E. Brunsman IV, who directs the Secular Student Alliance, said that “Nowadays you’re seeing a whole lot of people for whom it’s more important that they’re understood and valued by fellow citizens, not seen as being too weird.”

Yet the liberal notions of tolerance and freedom of conscience are not anodyne slogans; they are contentious issues. As nonbelievers tangle with traditional Christians over same-sex marriage and navigate conflicts between conservative Muslims and liberal democracy, they will need a confident humanist moral philosophy. The secular humanist liberation movement, in its zeal to win over religious America, should not encourage nonbelievers to turn away from their own intellectual heritage at the time when they will want it most.

SO ...

... I sent an email to our SHSNY distribution list, asking for your comments, rebuttals, ideas, whatever.

The response was spectacular, and the reason for this super-sized PIQUE. In all, we received 26 essays, from a few words to a few dozen – most thoughtful, some mocking, a few angry, even a few in agreement. Here they are ...

Remo Cosentino

The article is an excellent discussion of the “modern secular humanist”. Not unlike some of the arguments in PIQUE, and in exchanges with fellow secularists or “atheists” who are out of the closet. For me, who up to his 25th year believed fervently in Catholic doctrine, I find all the parsing of stances related to secularism and atheism tiresome.

I left the church, the liturgy and a number of comforting rituals behind. No doubt, especially at the celebration of a mass for dead family members, I’m swept back into the cocoon of uncertainty, and against my will believe that there may be an answer and purpose to life. When I regain my rationality, and lose the fear, I know that there is no heaven, no God, no spiritual enterprise. It is only us: men and women born fortuitously to other men and women and raised to believe as they do. As a man I have tried to put aside these childish beliefs.

If modern humanists desire the rituals and the totems of a religion and human companionship through assemblies, let them. I see little difference between what’s described as “Sunday Assembly” in the article and what I experienced at mass in a church filled with strangers.

Secular humanism is a cast of mind that seeks to discover and live by ethical principles. Discoverable through, as Kitcher says, “Successful experiments ... built (by) the human conscience”. And it is a work in progress; unlike the Church, I don’t believe I can tell another human being how to conduct his or her life. The choices should be made by the individual, keeping in mind, even if he is not part of a regular community, he or she is part of the community of man.

Harvey Wachtel

Doesn’t apply to me. I’m an ill-tempered nihilist.

Martine Reed

Overall, I am very glad that such an article was published. It will contribute to a wider acceptance of non-believers, hopefully in public life as well as private life.

The tone of the article is somewhat defensive and that’s too bad. We non-believers do not have to prove that we are “as good” as the believers because so many believers are *not* good in the first place. That’s not the issue.

There needs to be a very serious discussion about what attitude a democratic government should have toward religion. It should be one of complete neutrality. Everyone should be free to practice any religion as long as its practices do not violate laws. But the public institutions of a democratic society should *not* permit the intrusion of religion, any religion, into the *public* domain, especially in education and public health.

The French call that *laicite*, difficult to translate.

Bob Murtha

Sounded too much like church for my taste.

Brad Wheeler

Many of us will quibble with parts of Molly Worthen's *NYTimes* piece, "A Theology of Atheism". But I think secular humanism has not reached the point where we ought not be grateful for any bit of calm and fair press mentioning, for example, "the canard that godlessness means immorality".

Still, here's a quibble. Prof. Worthen perpetuated yet another canard when she wrote, "In one sense, secular humanism is a style of fellowship intended to fill the church-shaped void ...". Certainly humanists enjoy the company of, and find comfort among, other people who apply high standards of reason to all aspects of life. And where reason grows and superstition recedes the sort of caring and supportive communities that once were exclusively religious will eventually and naturally arise in secular contexts. This will happen not so much because we're secular humanists but because we're human beings.

While I sincerely appreciate the intentions of Sunday Assembly, I'd wager that ritualistic and "churchy" gatherings prove the exception rather than the rule in that process of growth.

"Church-shaped void?" Au contraire. For most of us who were once immersed in church, synagogue or mosque, the real void was filled when we stopped nodding our heads to ancient nonsense and found fulfillment in the infinitely richer world of evidence-based reality. That's when we discovered our integrity. Subsequently encountering fellow free and clear thinkers is simply a great bonus.

Joel Galker

Professor Worthen's article cautions that atheists/humanists shouldn't turn believers away from the moral teaching of religion. Is there any danger of that? I doubt that most believers are insufficiently human, lacking an inherent impulse to consider other people. And don't we see enough believers acting out, forgetting the moral commandments of their faith?

Humanism isn't about de-converting believers, and believers are too believing to be dissuaded. I see humanists as more focused on privileging ethical behavior than, if absent god's commandments, drifting without knowing or thinking about how to treat other people. Morals are values and ethics; reason, though not founded on "the word" handed down from god, necessarily puts man at its center. What other alternatives are there?

Morality for atheists, antecedent to ethical reasoning, more fundamentally derives from sympathy and empathy. If we choose to discount as unfounded the impulse to identify with other people, ethics becomes personal, a private question or one of property, of law and redress. I have more confidence, though, in most people most of the time. And if not always manifest in understanding, then in its potential, humanism puts people at the center of ethical values, absolutely and without contradiction.

Humanists—though probably not all humanists—know from whence moral values derive, from affect and the

social instinct. The message of humanism to the believers is a kind of Pascal's Wager, that people do exist, whether god does or doesn't, and what are we going to do about it?

Emily Kingsley

I remember reading somewhere about the need for there to be an organization of People who Don't Particularly Like Mushrooms ... or People Who Don't Play Chess ... one could go on and on listing all the groups that *might* exist of people who *don't* do one thing or another.

We are just one more, so what's the big deal?

Earl Cooper Bowers

SHSNY activities, especially the book club, satisfy so much of my needs for group socializing, not so much for any position re religion but because of the chance to converse regularly with so many interesting people and read so many interesting books on so many subjects for later discussion.

Brian Lemaire

The Sunday Assembly co-exists side-by-side with local secular humanist groups in the effort to provide community, personal connection, for people who prefer an alternative to religion. Many people go to church for the community, not because they believe all the dogma.

Evan Sinclair

I knew someone once, when I was facilitating a Socrates Café in midtown, a militant anti-theist whose great wish was to set up a Church of Rationality. I recoil from this idea. Along with SHSNY, there is a vast community of non-believers, a diverse group of people no more or less moral than any given cross-section of religious folks. To paraphrase from another long misunderstood minority community, "We're here, we're secular humanists, get over it."

Donna Marxer

Respect has to be reciprocal. Although I approved of the article in general, I don't like the word "theology" used in connection with the philosophy of humanism. Nevertheless, I think Prof. Worthen has it all essentially right. The wish to commune is an ingrained part of human nature and secular humanists study together what it means to be human and "good without god". We learn that it is folly to argue atheism with people of faith. But it is equally foolish for evangelicals to try to convert us.

We humanists try to be tolerant of our god-fearing fellows, and I only wish they would do the same for us. We aren't the only ones who should be expected to bend. I commend Richard Dawkins for encouraging us to come out of the closet, but it really hurts to realize that no atheist can ever hope to be elected President of our "Christian Nation" in my lifetime.

Yannis Tziligakis

The first false premise of that article: "Evangelical Christians are Christians ..."

Jonathan Engel

Lousy title, good article. I'm not even sure what it means to speak of a "Theology of Atheism", so I found the title a bit off-putting, but the article itself made some interesting points. I think it is important for secularists to be open about their beliefs so that our colleagues and neighbors who have at least a semblance of an open mind will become more accepting of us. Progress in this area can be made (as the LGBT community has proven), and visibility is an important element of such progress.

But I don't think we should refrain from expressing our opinions in order to achieve acceptance. Reliance on superstition and the supernatural is harmful to both individuals and society as a whole, and there's nothing wrong with saying so.

While I respect my neighbor's First Amendment right to practice religion (but not impose it on others), I do not willfully surrender my right to engage in rigorous debate on this topic. There is no reason religious practices should be immune from critical examination. I don't think secularists should have to choose between achieving acceptance and equal rights on the one hand and freely stating our opinions on religion (or any other topic) on the other.

Jack Herschlag

The *Times* story gets a B-minus. The editors are to be complimented on devoting the lead story in the prestigious Sunday Review section to secular humanism/atheism, as it stimulates interest and conversation in our political mainstream. Also, the article is generally positive, even if off-base, in my opinion, on some of its conclusions.

Having said that, I will express one of my negative reactions, which is to the last sentence, which may hold a record for non sequiturs and wrong conclusions in a single statement. The sentence reads: "The secular humanist liberation movement, in its zeal to win over religious America, should not encourage nonbelievers to turn away from their own intellectual heritage at the time when they will need it most."

To begin with, the heritage in question is not essentially "intellectual", but spiritual or emotional or habitual. "Intellectual" is more at home in the secular humanist/atheist message. Also, who can decide, and how to decide, when is "the time when they will want it [the intellectual heritage] most"? To pick that time in an individual's life is probably impossible, and to pick that time for a population is truly impossible. I suppose we in the "movement" should wait for a sign from above.

Barbara Lifton

Secular humanists do not have to justify their existence, nor should we enter into "debates" with people who are uneducated and ignorant about the nearly 14-billion year natural history of the universe.

There is no "debate" as to whether or not there is a supernatural being hovering somewhere in this vast cosmos.

There is simply no proof supported by scientific method or by other valid, verifiable evidence, of the existence of any omnipotent, omniscient power manipulating the universe. Only if a theist claims that his or her position is factual and supported by such evidence should we enter such discussions in order to hear their claims, and refute them. Otherwise, we are wasting our time.

Again, as I have said before, I do not call myself an "atheist". Theism presupposes that the belief in the existence of a god – one which atheists "oppose" – has some validity. There is nothing for me to oppose, because there is nothing there.

There is too much for us to do as humanists, in our short lifetimes here on Earth, to fight constantly for justice, and *do* justice, and do charity, every day, to waste time in opposition arguments with science ignoramuses who cannot use their reason.

Jane Everhart

I think what Prof. Molly Worthen is trying to say is that we nonbelievers should not "tolerate" religion because *religion does not tolerate us*. She dances around the topic, as professors are wont to do, but that's what she's saying.

It's nothing new. Both Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins have been saying that for years. In fact, Hitchens put it stronger: he said we should not tolerate religion simply because it is detrimental to society's progress. I think you will find that most vigorous nonbelievers are opposed to accommodation in any form.

Robert Worth

Theology consists of stories, some of them charming, that attempt to explain the big questions, such as how human beings came to exist. It is the study "of divine things or religious truth", according to the dictionary. As such it has one overriding characteristic, it is made up – none of it is factually true.

Does atheism need a theology? That is the last thing it needs. As E. O. Wilson's wonderful little book, *The Meaning of Human Existence* makes clear, we now know roughly how human beings came to exist. God and theology have become irrelevant.

When atheists speak of truth, we mean scientific truth, not religious truth, which is a contradiction.

Except for the title: "Wanted: A Theology of Atheism", Molly Worthen's op-ed doesn't mention theology. It argues that secularists need "a confident moral philosophy". I believe we have one, and it has the advantage of starting off with scientific facts rather than made-up stories.

John Wagner

The call for a theology of atheism is obsolete. Atheism does not need a theology; atheists already have a dynamic and robust philosophical and ethical foundation that has been built over the last two centuries. That foundation is called humanism.

David Orenstein

I think Professor Worthen is right that we non-theists are certainly developing a sense of political strength with the changes and challenges in what she's noting is a "post-Christian" America. So we as nonbelievers in the U.S. do have a growing populist stance that we should embrace and share politically, socially and in as many venues as possible.

The trigger may have been a reaction to the right-wing spread of evangelism in government since the 1980s, but a lot now comes from our growing popularity among younger people, and a whole world-wide movement toward nonbelief with so many writing, speaking, and meeting to discuss in local, national and international forums.

I disagree in terms of her linking morality with politics and atheism. As noted, politics for sure because it is, in my mind, the next civil rights movement.

But morality has nothing to do with atheism. All atheism is, frankly, is nonbelief in a supernatural deity or set of deities. Atheism also denies first cause, like the creation of the universe, Earth or even humans, by a creator god, but instead accepts the scientific and evidenced view of how all this has come to into being.

Morality is connected not so much to atheism, but to the humanist ideals of openness, acceptance and passion for global and local justice. As such, our morality and ethics cannot be defined or informed by atheism but can be defined by a long tradition of humanistic thinking, which Worthen does discuss in the piece.

Regarding her comments concerning "Openly Secular Day", that day is needed as an educational and civil rights tool to battle against the already well-established National Day of Prayer, with its indoctrination already infused into American culture. So her missing this tidbit of information makes the secular humanist movement look a little bombastic when in fact it is just reacting to the religiously-minded heavy-handedness that already exists in the U.S.

I'd give the article a 7 out of 10 for accuracy. My guess is she didn't select the biased title, some editor at the paper probably did that just to get reader's eyes onto the piece. The piece itself seems more moderate than the title suggests.

BTW: Worthen is a philosophy professor at the University of North Carolina, so as a young academic, getting published in the *NYT Op-Ed* most probably will help with her tenure/promotion, because the article itself is just shy of being vanilla, not really breaking any new ground.

Carl Marxer

Professor Worthen seems to have something of a closed mind in regard to humanism in her writing, so I looked her up on Wikipedia.

Molly Worthen (born 1981) is a historian of American religion and a journalist. She is assistant professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Raised in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, she graduated from Yale in 2003 and earned a Ph.D. in American religious history there in 2011.

Her first book, *The Man on Whom Nothing Was Lost*, a biography of American diplomat and Yale professor Charles

Hill, was published in 2006 and reviewed by *The Boston Globe* and Michiko Kakutani in *The New York Times*. Her most recent book, *Apostles of Reason*, examines the history of American evangelism since 1945.

So, without religion she has nothing to research.

Sidney Finehirsh

If the choice of atheist theologies is between the scientism of Sam Harris and the pragmatism of Philip Kitcher, the decision is rather clear-cut. Mr. Harris offers us a conflation of all religions with fundamentalism, particularly when he comes to Islam. Prof. Kitcher offers a nuanced disproof of doctrinal faiths along with an empirical possibility, albeit an extremely weak possibility, of transcendent reality.

Mr. Harris's ethics leads to his statement, "The people who speak most sensibly about the threat that Islam poses to Europe are actually fascists" (*Los Angeles Times*, 9/18/2006). Prof. Kitcher, in *Life After Faith*, tells us that in much of the world, "Particularly in the United States, there are no serious opportunities, outside the synagogues and churches and mosques, for fellowship with all the dimensions religious communities can provide." Indeed, "Secular humanists can reasonably see refined believers as allies in an ethically fundamental enterprise, co-campaigners whose currently greater successes make them worthy targets of emulation."

The moral choice between these two visions is quite evident.

Chic Schissel

"What that person doesn't see is that these irrational beliefs he's refusing to criticize are of huge consequence geopolitically and personally – and are themselves sources of intolerance."

Here, I think, is the major problem. Tolerance is attractive, but since religion has done so much damage in the world, aren't we obligated to fight against it? It's a fight we can't win, but what we can do is try to ensure that religion stops doing major damage, locally and worldwide. Fighting for separation of church and state and against laws based on religion is what we can do here. And we could fight to have our country use its influence worldwide to mobilize our allies to take action and prevent religions doing damage.

Edd Doerr

Molly Worthen's "Wanted: A Theology of Atheism" was informative, but while it mentioned the Ethical Societies, which have been around for over a century, it neglected to mention the decades-old Humanistic Jewish congregations or the fact that a great many of the 1,000 Unitarian Universalist congregations in the US are humanist oriented. Indeed, half of the 34 signers of the 1933 Humanist Manifesto were Unitarian ministers, as were many of the numerous signers of the 1973 Humanist Manifesto II.

A positive, compassionate, naturalistic humanism is well established in America and has roots in the Epicureanism of people like Jefferson, Paine and Franklin.

I write as a columnist in the secular humanist journal

Free Inquiry, as a former president of the American Humanist Association, as a 1973 signer of Humanist Manifesto II, as a cantor for a Humanistic Jewish congregation, and as a member of humanistic Unitarian Universalist congregations since 1950.

Ellen Peckham

One of the things that I find so unacceptable in all the alternatives to “faith” is the need to recycle the old forms: gatherings, singing, lectures, etc. Daoism, Zen and other philosophies do away with this aspect of “belief” or demonstrations of anti-faith and simply embrace nature or the ying/yang of life.

That one’s belief system needs to be made public, theatre or communal seems to me, and the article does go into it, the weakest element of being free of cant.

Jason Torpy

Professor Worthen did very effective journalism, which got her a lot of views. She basically mentioned some non-“theological” expressions of atheism and then implied that there aren’t any expressions of atheism that inform meaning/values/community.

From the Humanist Manifesto to books like *Becoming More Fully Human* to whole organizations like Ethical Culture, we have lots of good options that people are simply ignoring. Why not mention those instead of doing thin research? It’s like Alain de Botton and his “church of atheism”. That was also presented as if it were groundbreaking when it’s been going on for 100 years and he simply chose to ignore it.

What we need is atheists willing to find out about their own history and the best ways to live. The information is available and not hard to reach if people can look beyond the latest fads.

Brian Rafferty

I reject the tacit assumption that we need to be accepted as upstanding members of society; that somehow atheists have to figure out a way to win the hearts and minds of Christian America in order to be recognized as equals. Being a Christian has never meant, to me, that a person volunteers at soup kitchens, paints dilapidated exteriors in run-down parts of town or holds bake sales for a community center. To me, that fits a particular brand of person, not a faith. To try to fit atheists into that role in order to show how good we are puts us, as ever, on the defensive.

A Christian doesn’t have to do any of those things to be seen as an equal to the people who volunteer and donate to charity; they need only say they believe, while their actions (or lack thereof) often stand in contrast to the texts they thump. Being a moral person has as much to do with belief in a higher power as having a degree in the sciences does with being a Christian. They can be, and often are, overlapping circles in a Venn diagram, but they in no way rely upon one to make the other possible.

Just as it is true that Christians can be very un-Christian,

atheists can be very “Christian” in action. But again, these are not requirements – just consequential overlaps.

The idea of “showing” the rest of America—and the world—that we are good people is just simple pacification, easing their fears. These sorts of gatherings are fine for the people who will genuinely get something out of them, but certainly not a doctrine I would enforce on my child.

I have a vision of the future where science is the basis of politics and economy. That doesn’t mean that there is no room for discussing moral values, that the majority stifles the minority or that—like scientific theory throughout the ages—we learn that we made a mistake and then have to work to solve a new problem. This is not a Utopia that I see, but a world where pragmatism and endeavoring to do what is best for our people, our planet and our universe weighs foremost in the minds of the people who write our laws. This is a world where we openly challenge decisions, based not on belief but logic. Arguments don’t end on one side by saying, “because that’s how it is”. To me, this ideal world is not rooted in religious dogma but in scientific law.

The argument can be made (and often is) that a culture of science begets the disposal of humanity or, as some call it, the soul. The truth is, I believe in the soul, but not as any religion I’ve ever heard of defines it. It is neither eternal nor fixed, but rather malleable, corruptible and, beyond all else, human. It does die with us, but it is also how we are remembered. I believe that we can have soul-enriching experiences, be empathetic, do good for others – or not.

This is something that is unique to every person, shaped by every external influence and self-adjusted based on experience. I do not believe we are born with a clean slate in this matter, and I don’t think we can fix everything. We are, after all, human; we are flawed in many ways due to millions of years of self-preservation-based breeding.

So do I need to gather with others with whom I share a sliver of like-mindedness? Maybe. Maybe not. I don’t need to unless I feel a need to. If pressed for an answer today, it would be No. I may yet have some life-changing or soul-shaking event occur in my life—or idea pop into my head out of the blue—that changes my mind tomorrow, but that’s tomorrow. I only know what has come up until this moment, and cannot know what lies ahead.

So do I need to work on pacification, on winning the hearts and minds of Christian America? No. I cannot change the disposition of people whose deeply rooted beliefs tell them that I am somehow less than they. Should I change who I am to meet their needs? No.

All I can do is hope that they see the light. Surely, if this were the other way around I would be told that they will pray for me. That is likely as valuable and effective as my hope for them.

The difference between me and them can be summed up in a great Neil deGrasse Tyson quote: “The good thing about science is that it is true whether or not you believe in it.” If more of our politicians adopted that line of thinking, imagine the possibilities.

Of course I wrote my own response to The Times, and to my surprise they ran it – top of the Letters column – on June 7.

No, I don't need a "theology of atheism", and no, I don't want to sing along in an "assembly" so like an evangelical church service. Professor Worthen might have more usefully devoted some of her field research to look into the rich social life of New York's freethought community. My own organization, the 27-year-old Secular Humanist Society of New York, brings together humanists and rationalists of all stripes with interesting communal events—book clubs, brunches, lectures, study groups, movies—every week of the month, celebrating the good life together. We don't need community, we *have* it.

The only thing that will change the minds of the people who believe, against all evidence, that secularism will cause America to "slide into moral anarchy" is to actually meet atheists and humanists, to recognize the decent, moral, freethinking friends and family all around them.

Which is why we support "Openly Secular Day" and urge every secularist to stand up and announce: "I'm good without a god."

John Rafferty, President, Secular Humanist Society of New York

I forwarded the letter to our distribution list under the self-mocking subject line "Required Reading", and the reaction of so many of you ("Way to go!") truly delighted me, made my day – hell, made my year.

Let me end this with my sincere thanks to the so-many of you who bothered to send an electronic thumbs-up. So, Thank-Yous (in pretty much the order in which the good wishes were received) to: Sid Finehirsh, Carl Marxer, Phil Livingston, Jacob Appleman, Hope Knutsson (*from Iceland!*), Remo Cosentino, Joel Galker, Frank McKenna, Stanley Wiegand, Brian Lemaire, Chic Schissel, Richard Milner, Roy Speckhardt, Harry Graber, Colin Rafferty, Regine Kelly, Norma Simon, Stan Friedland, Lee Wiggins, Larry Shaw, Emily ("It's all so freakin' silly!") Kingsley, Marleny Rafferty, Rowena Johnson, John Wagner, Liz Heywood, Martine (*What a way to start the day!*) Reed, Philip Appleman, Sheila Turken, Dorothy Kahn, David Rafferty, Eileen (*Amen!*) Regan, Deeya Pavelle, Shelly and Anita Grosnas, Barri Rafferty, Jennifer Vriens, Shelly (*Shared you on Facebook*) Roitman, Jack Herschlag, Marjorie Vai, Carlos Mora, Massimo Pigliucci, Jina Spitaleri, Jerry Travis, Anne Klaeyen, Dennis Middlebrooks, Barbara Lifton, Evan Sinclair, Gretchen Robinson, Walter Balcerak, Al (*Give 'em hell, John*) Bloom, Earl Bowers, Mary Ellen Goodman, Dennis Horvitz, Jennifer Michael Hecht, Bob Murtha and Charlotte (*Exsultate jubilate!*) Marzani.

And Thanks and Welcome, too, to our three new members – Rosayn Anderson, Cynthia Roesner and Suzanne Nash – who read the letter, Googled SHSNY, went to the website, and joined!

Thank you all. – *John*

Farewell to a Founder
Page 1
Humanist of the Year
Lawrence Krauss on
Doubt and Optimism
Page 3
How did you become a
None? Tell us.
Pages 6-7
Readers (26 of them!)
consider
"A Theology of Atheism"
Pages 10-16

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