

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

February, 2015

Come to Darwin Day - See Page 7!

Charlie Hebdo, Charlie Hebdo, Charlie Hebdo - we couldn't have avoided it if we'd wanted to (and we don't), coverage beginning below, and your opinions are solicited. In other news, we analyze separation yet again, deplore "intelligent" design, contend that our humanism will replace religion ... and consider three-toed sloths, a six-year-old liar, and the Ontological Argument for beer. — JR

JE SUIS CHARLIE MEANS JE SUIS SECULARISM (Charlie Hebdo's post-attack editorial)

(This is a translation of the editorial from the first Charlie Hebdo published since the Paris attacks – and reprinted on the National Secular Society (UK) blog 1/15/2015. It is reproduced here in solidarity with Charlie Hebdo.)

For a week now, Charlie, an atheist magazine, has accomplished more miracles than all the saints and prophets together. That of which we are the most proud is that you have in your hands the magazine that we have always produced, in the company of those who have always produced it.

What made us laugh the most is that the bells of Notre Dame rang in our honor. For a week now, Charlie has been moving far more than mountains across the world. For a week now, as Willem has shown us so magnificently in his drawing, Charlie has many new friends. Some anonymous, and some global celebrities. Some humble and some affluent. Some miscreants and some religious leaders. Some sincere and some akin to Jesuits. Some who will be with us for the rest of our lives, and some who are just passing by.

We take them all on board today, we have neither the time nor the heart to separate them out. But that doesn't mean that we are fooled. We wholeheartedly thank those in their millions, whether simple citizens or embodying institutions, who are truly at our sides, who deeply and sincerely

"are Charlie". They will know who they are. Piss off the others who don't give a fuck anyway.

There is, however, a question which still gnaws away at us: Are we finally going to see the foul expression "secular fundamentalist" disappear from political and intellectual lexicon? Finally going to stop devising learned semantic expressions describing equally assassins and their victims?

In recent years, we have felt rather lonely, trying to push back with our pencils straightforward bullshit and pseudo-intellectual subtleties that they were throwing at

our faces and that of our friends who were strongly defending secularism: Islamophobes, Christianophobes, troublemakers, people assuming no responsibility, those who throw oil on the fire, racists, you-asked-for-it ... yes we condemn terrorism, but. Yes it is not good to threaten cartoonists with death, but. Yes, setting fire to a magazine's headquarters is wrong, but.

We've heard it all, as have our friends. We've often tried to laugh it off, because that's what we're best at.

But now, really, we'd like to laugh at something else. Because it's already starting again.

Cabu, Charb, Honore, Tignous, Wolinski, Elsa Cayat, Bernard Maris, Moustapha Ourrad, Michel Renaud, Franck Brinsolaro, Frederic Boisseau, Ahmed Merabet, Clarissa Jean-Philippe, Philippe Braham, Yohan Cohen, Yoav Hattab, Francois-Michel Saada - their blood was not yet dry



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and Thierry Meyssan was explaining to his Facebook fans that this was obviously a Judeo-western-American conspiracy.

Who were the victims?

We were already hearing, here and there, these delicate people put on airs and graces on witnessing last Sunday's gathering, dribbling endless pettiness, seeking to justify, openly or in whispers, terrorism and religious fascism, expressing indignation at the fact that we can say Police = SS, among other things.

No, in this massacre, no one death is less unjust than another. Franck, who died in Charlie's premises, and all his [police] colleagues killed during this barbaric week, died to defend ideas which may not even have been their own.

Nevertheless we are going to try to be optimistic, even though it is out of season.

We will hope that as of this January 7, 2015, strongly defending secularism will be second nature for everyone.

That we will finally stop posturing for electoral reasons or through cowardice, legitimizing or even tolerating community separatism and cultural relativism, which lead to but one thing: Religious totalitarianism.

Yes, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a fact; yes, international geopolitics is a succession of maneuvers and underhand blows; yes, the social situation of "populations of Islamic origin" in France, as people say, is deeply unjust; yes, we must fight unremittingly against racism and all types of discrimination.

Fortunately there are several instruments with which we can try to solve these serious problems, but they are all inoperative if one of them is missing: Secularism. Not affirmative secularism, not inclusive secularism, not I-don't-know-what-kind-of-secularism. Secularism, full stop.

Pushing for universal rights, secularism alone allows for equality, liberty, brotherhood and sisterhood. It alone allows for total freedom of conscience which all religions, as soon as they move from the arena of the strictly intimate into the political arena, deny, more or less openly according to their marketing position. Oddly enough, it alone allows believers and others to live in peace. All those who claim to defend Muslims while accepting the totalitarian religious rhetoric are in fact defending their executioners. The first victims of Islamic fascism are the Muslims.

The millions of anonymous people, all the institutions, all the heads of state and government, all the political, intellectual and media celebrities, all the religious dignitaries who this week proclaimed "Je Suis Charlie" should know that also means "I am secularism". We are convinced that as far as most of our supporters are concerned, that goes without saying. The others can do what they like with it.

Last but not least, we would like to send a message to Pope Francis, who this week, he as well, "is Charlie": We will only accept that the bells of Notre Dame are ringing in our honor when it is the Femen* who are ringing them.

**The radical feminist protest group founded in Ukraine in 2008, now based in Paris, known for organizing topless demonstrations against sexism, homophobia and religious institutions. - JR*

EST-CE QUE NOUS SOMMES CHARLIE?

Sidney Finehirsh

The world-wide outpouring of solidarity for the victims of the January massacre in Paris, encapsulated in the slogan "Je suis Charlie", is heart-felt and welcome. Marches brought upwards of three and half million people into the streets of France in popular condemnation of the murder of the journalists at *Charlie-Hebdo* ("Weekly Charlie") and Jews targeted at a kosher market in the Parisian suburbs. Demonstrations were held in cities across Europe and the globe along with a huge outpouring of "Je suis Charlie" on social media.

All this is to the good, but it has to be asked: is this outpouring of protest still too weak, too easy? Not many people would ever step up to the risk taken by the French cartoonists who, of course, were the only true "Charlies".

What risks we are willing to take in defense of freedom of expression is not the only question that begs for answers here. Even some of those who have condemned the murders in Paris have asked whether *Charlie Hebdo*, having violated the cultural sensitivity of the Muslim population brought the hate upon themselves. In other words, the cartoonists were Islamophobic and their attackers were just extremists in their defense of Islam.

The question of Islamophobia is, of course, also posed for atheists. Does the acknowledged Islamophobic stripe that runs in secular humanist circles justify a critique of our movement from the advocates of political correctness or perhaps the multiculturalists?

First of all, I would refrain from calling the martyred cartoonists Islamophobes. It was their chosen profession to humorously and demonstratively call-out stupidity – political, social, and religious. If the stupidity of certain purveyors of a self-proclaimed Islamic orthodoxy has been pervasive these days, they deserved their share of derision. But Charlie's mockery was never limited to just Muslims. The journalists of *Charlie Hebdo* were equal opportunity mockers.

It has been said that they "represented a radical, crude and vital strain of that nation's culture", but they also had family backgrounds as Christians, Muslims, Jews, and secularists. In a certain sense, their drawings defended individual piety as another expression of freedom. In one of their cartoons, Mohammed is depicted with a blade to his neck held by a black-hooded jihadist. The founder of Islam is saying "I am the Prophet, you idiot." The jihadist replies, "Shut your trap, you infidel." The cartoon is labeled, "If Mohammed came back."

Then there is the question to what extent were the murderers just extremists in defense of Islam – their actions supported by a broad swath of more quiescent Muslim opinion? Forget the surveys, useful mainly for bludgeoning political opponents. Forget all the manifestos and protests from Muslim religious and community leaders declaring the killers don't represent Islam – manifestos and protests that most American never see or never read. Islam like every religion has a vein of violence that rises to the surface

whenever social pathology is fanned by demagogic megalomaniacs who pose in the guise of protectors of the sect, saviors of the nation, or messiahs of revenge.

The difference between *Charlie Hebdo* and the Islamophobes is that Charlie recognized the distinction between the terrorists, along with their sanctimonious facilitators (read: America's ally and blogger flogger Saudi Arabia), as opposed to individual believers. The cartoonists meant their barbs to ridicule the purveyors of hate and taunt those who justify terror in the name of religion. However, I would suggest, they were also attempting to enlighten the benighted. They knew some would be enraged, but hope that some might see through the rage to the truth in the caricature. For that they were willing to risk their lives.

Throughout their barbed humor, there was a respect for individual adherents of Islam who, in their view, always had the capacity to adopt the values of the Enlightenment – whether these values were adapted to a secular or theist beliefs. To the best of my knowledge they never called for restrictions on benign religious practices; limitations on immigration based on country of origin, or racial profiling in law enforcement. They never promoted the paranoid fear that Sharia law was superseding civil law or ever condemned every Muslim on the planet as a threat to Western civilization.

Certainly, Enlightenment values were core beliefs of the Parisian humorists. And I think they would have welcomed the statement of those values as expressed by a Muslim – Malek Merabet, brother and eulogist of Ahmed Merabet, who died defending the staff of *Charlie Hebdo*.

My brother was French, Algerian, and of the Muslim religion. He was very proud of the name Ahmed Merabet, proud to represent the French police, and to defend the values of the Republic: liberty, equality and fraternity ... One must not confuse extremists with Muslims. Madness has neither color nor religion.

As Atheists we denigrate religion, including Islam, as a leftover from a pre-scientific era, but we can still make the same distinction as the pencil wielders of *Charlie Hebdo* between an Islamophobic universal condemnation of Islam as the main source of present day terrorism and respect for individuals who follow a religious conviction, however much we find it misguided.

LET US ALWAYS TELL THE TRUTH

Brad Wheeler

(Editor: In a January 15 New York Times Op-Ed essay, "An Islamic Reformer, Lashed", Nicholas Kristoff called on us all to "resist simplistic narratives ..." and to "engage in more than symbolism and actually support the moderates in the Islamic world who are pushing for change – and, sometimes, being flogged for it". Longtime SHSNY member Brad posted this in the Comments section of the Times website. – JR)

Yes, let us avoid simplistic narratives, especially when they're false. But above all, let us always tell the truth. Here's the truth. The sorts of Islam-fueled

atrocities cited by Mr. Kristof (a tiny fraction of the ever-greater total) will continue, not to mention the abuse of women and children, the science denial, and many other problems produced to some degree by all world religions, until a tipping point is reached.

That point will come when the vast majority of humanity realizes that human decency, sanity, and compassion must always trump the divisive, contradictory, and erroneous mandates found in *all* ancient "holy" books. And that will occur only when most people are able to realize that none of those texts contain the instructions or "will" of any supernatural deity, but instead are simply human artifacts. The tipping point will take place when the majority advances enough to be able to laugh, with the readers and creators of *Charlie Hebdo*, at people who believe in one or another "Santa Claus" up in "Heaven".

Until then, given modern communications, transportation, and easy access to horrific weapons, every person on earth will be imperiled by those who believe that "God" or "Allah" demands that unbelievers and apostates be made mortal enemies.

Until then, pleas like that of Mr. Kristof will disappear impotently like smoke in a high wind.

THE USUAL SUSPECTS COMMENT

Richard Dawkins

They shouted "We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad." Some useful idiot will claim it had nothing to do with religion.

No, all religions are NOT equally violent. Some have never been violent, some gave it up centuries ago. One religion conspicuously didn't. *(Thanks to John O'Brien)*

Salman Rushdie

Religion, a mediaeval form of unreason, when combined with modern weaponry becomes a real threat to our freedoms. This religious totalitarianism has caused a deadly mutation in the heart of Islam and we see the tragic consequences in Paris today.

I stand with *Charlie Hebdo*, as we all must, to defend the art of satire, which has always been a force for liberty and against tyranny, dishonesty and stupidity. "Respect for religion" has become a code phrase meaning "fear of religion".

Religions, like all other ideas, deserve criticism, satire, and, yes, our fearless disrespect.

Bill Maher

I'm the liberal in this debate. I'm for free speech. To be a liberal, you have to stand up for liberal principles. It's not my fault that the part of the world that is most against liberal principles is the Muslim part of the world.

We have to stop saying when something like this that happened in Paris today, we have to stop saying, well, we should not insult a great religion. First of all, there are no great religions; they're all stupid and dangerous. And we should insult them, and we should be able to insult whatever we want. That is what free speech is like.

WE HAVE A PROBLEM WITH RELIGION, AND WE HAVE TO DEAL WITH IT

Jeffrey Tayler

(Excerpted from “We must stop deferring to religion: Laughable absurdities must be laughed at”, salon.com, 1/8/2015)

It’s time for honest discussion: We have a problem with religion. Let’s figure out how we are going to deal with it. ... The “holy” texts of Islam, regardless of interpretation, offer literal justification to those who wish to commit violence in the name of the faith; and religious extremism, by far mostly Islamist, has been, since 2001, the main cause of terrorism across the world.

Faced with this uncomfortable but persistently deadly reality, what should we and our politicians (and pundits) do? For starters, we need to cease granting religion—and not just Islam—an exemption from criticism. If we do not believe the fables foisted on us (without evidence) by the faithful, we need to say so, day in and day out, in mixed company, and especially in front of children (to thwart their later indoctrination). We must stop according religion unconditional respect, stop deferring to men (and mostly they are men) who happen to preface their names with the titles of reverend or rabbi or imam, and de-sanctify the sacred, in word and deed.

Laughable absurdities—be they virgin births, parting seas, spontaneously burning bushes—deserve not oblique pardons (“We don’t have to take everything in the Bible literally”), but outspoken ridicule; courses in “religious studies” on campuses across the country might better be referred to as “lessons in harmful superstition, dangerous delusion, and volitional insanity”.

Sorry, hashtag activism—even the #WeAreAllCharlie Hebdo campaign underway on Twitter—won’t do. To avert more deaths, we have to stand up in real—and sometimes risky—ways to noxious ideologies masquerading as salvific faiths. Pundits need to overcome their fear of being labeled “politically incorrect” and speak their minds. Politicians must come clean and state, simply, “With Islam, we have a problem.” Better still, “We have a problem with religion. Let’s figure out how we are going to deal with it.”

THE BARMAID DESTROYS THE ONTOLOGICAL “PROOF” FOR GOD’S EXISTENCE (and beer)

(Transcribed from jesusandmo.net/2014/12/31/pints2/)

Jesus: Okay, Barmaid, try this: You can imagine God as an ultimately perfect being, right?

Barmaid: Yes, I can imagine it.

Jesus: And an ultimately perfect being would have to exist, right? Otherwise, by definition, it wouldn’t be perfect.

Barmaid: Er ...

Jesus: Therefore, God actually exists. Or your claim to be able to imagine Him would be false.

Mohammed: Ha, ha! Good one, Jesus. Now, we’ll have two more pints of your finest, please, Barmaid.

Barmaid: Why don’t you just define them into existence?

THE TRUE MEANING OF SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

Jonathan Engel

It seems that in the past few years some of us who favor the separation of church and state in our country (as was intended by the framers of the U.S. Constitution) have taken a somewhat different approach to this issue than has been traditional for secularists. Instead of arguing for a strict separation, some are instead utilizing a strategy that insists that all “religious” beliefs, including atheism (if atheism can be said to be a “religious belief”), must be treated equally.

While I understand this strategy, and believe that at times it can have a positive effect on the discourse, I worry that ultimately it may undermine what should be our ultimate goal of government separating itself from religion, instead of government accommodating religion, but in a way that accommodates all “religions”. A few examples of what I’m talking about are in order:

In Florida, American Atheists built a monument to non-belief to go alongside a granite slab of the Ten Commandments that sits beside the Bradford County Courthouse. American Atheists had sued to have the Ten Commandments monument removed, but during mediation of the case they were told that they could construct their own “counter-monument”, as it were, and so they did.

The Satanic Temple of Detroit placed a holiday display on the lawn of the State Capitol in Lansing, Michigan, to send the message that all religions have the right to be seen and heard (they do, but *not* on public property).

A six-foot tall “Festivus Pole” made from empty beer cans was erected in the Florida State Capitol building in December as a not-so-subtle protest to the recent placement of a Christmas nativity scene.

Even more alarming, the Supreme Court’s liberal wing seems to have embraced this approach. The case of *Town of Greece v. Galloway* involved a town in upstate New York that had the practice of starting its town meetings with a prayer, always given by a Christian clergyman and frequently invoking strictly Christian themes (as opposed to religious, but non-denominational themes). In a 5-4 decision the Court upheld this practice, but for the purposes of this essay I want to concentrate on the dissents in that case.

Justice Breyer filed a dissent that argued that the Town should do more to make its legislative prayer inclusive of other faiths. Justice Kagan filed a dissent in which she stated that the Town’s practices could pass Constitutional muster if chaplains who gave the prayer were told it must be “non-denominational”, or if the Town invited Clergy from all different faiths to give the prayers, rather than focusing almost exclusively on Christian ministers. This line of reasoning is based on a troubling misreading of the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause.

The Establishment Clause states “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion”, but the dissenters in “*Town of Greece*”, (and many others these days) seem to be interpreting this clause as if it said

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of *any particular religion*”. If you read the clause this way, it’s okay for “religion” in general to be established, so long as all religions are treated equally.

But that’s not what the framers of the Constitution wrote. What they wrote prohibits the establishment of *religion*, period, and not just the raising to pre-eminence of any particular religion. And so the Town of Greece’s practice of starting its Town meetings with a prayer (i.e. any prayer) violates the Establishment Clause regardless of how open they are to allowing all religions to participate.

Now, in some ways I am sympathetic to this line of reasoning from secularists, for two reasons. One is that I suppose that having various religions represented in government activities is better than just having one, although it still violates the Establishment Clause. The other is that representation of multiple religions in the public sphere helps to remind all of us (especially Conservative Christians) of the pitfalls of *any* religious establishment. For example, the individual who petitioned for the Festivus Pole in the Florida State Capitol has said that his intent in doing so was not really to celebrate Festivus, but rather to make a political statement regarding the need for the separation of church and state.

Then there’s the case of Valarie Hodges, a Louisiana State legislator who, having mistakenly equated “religious” with “Christian”, retracted her support for Governor Bobby Jindal’s school voucher program (which includes religious schools) after being informed that such vouchers could be applied to Muslim schools. In this case, the inclusion of “all religions” led at least one legislator to belatedly embrace the concept of separation of church and state, even if her reasoning was somewhat less than salutary. This understanding goes back to James Madison’s *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments*, in which the primary drafter of the Constitution warned those who would want to establish religion that, in the long run, you can never be sure exactly whose religion it is that might be established, and that it might not be yours.

Regardless of the above, secularists and all those who honor the intent of the Establishment Clause should resist the urge to accept the “let’s embrace all religions” concept. Instead we should remember that our goal, as outlined in the Constitution and in the contemporaneous writings of the Constitution’s framers, is to separate church and state; not to force government to recognize all religious beliefs, but to prevent government from establishing *any* religious beliefs. If we do so, we can hasten the day when our country realizes the words of John F. Kennedy when he said, “I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute ... I believe in an America that is neither Catholic, Protestant, nor Jewish” Note that then-Senator Kennedy did not yearn for an America that is Catholic, Protestant, *and* Jewish, but one that is none of those things, that is, where religion, and not just any particular religion, can be privately practiced, but is not established by the government in any way.

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK

#87: ALABAMA OFFICIALS

SIGN THEIR TOWN OVER TO GOD

(Excerpted from “City Officials Declare God ‘Owner’ of Their Alabama Town”, by Travis Gettys/Raw Story 1/6/2015)

An Alabama mayor and City Council have declared God “owner” of the city they represent. According to an opinion piece in *The (Marion County) Journal Record*, Mayor Randy Price successfully pushed City Council members to declare Winfield a “City Under God”.

“Mind you, some of other religions — or no religions — might fuss, but if our coins can say, ‘In God We Trust’, we see no harm in acknowledging the Almighty at Christmas,” read the editorial. “We think that the whole fuss about cleaning God from the specter (*sic*) of public service has been much ado about nothing.”

#88: SOUTH CAROLINA WILL TEACH

THE NRA CURRICULUM

(Excerpted from “South Carolina legislators want schools to teach an NRA-approved curriculum on the Second Amendment”, by Meteor Blades, *Daily Kos*, 1/8/2015)

Republican legislators in the South Carolina House have reintroduced the Second Amendment Education Act of 2015 ... [which] mandates that, 30 days after the statute passes, “the State Superintendent of Education shall adopt a curriculum developed or recommended by the National Rifle Association or its successor organization”.

The bill, two of whose originators are members of the Koch-founded/funded American Legislative Exchange Council, sets aside each December 15 as “Second Amendment Awareness Day”. [It] also requires that teachers in elementary, middle and secondary public schools spend *three consecutive weeks* each year studying the Second Amendment.

Three weeks is an extraordinary amount of time to spend on such a narrow subject, particularly for elementary school students. ... One South Carolina charter school, for example, devotes just two weeks to “The Slave System and the Coming of the Civil War” and only a week and a half to World War II in its Advanced Placement United States History course.

#89: PISTOL-PACKIN’ PASTOR STANDS HIS

(SACRED) GROUND IN FLORIDA

(Excerpted from “Who’s Going to Patch Up the Bullet Holes?” on *ThisIsTrue.com* 1/9/2015.)

Pastor Terry Howell of the Living Water Fellowship Church in Osceola County, was at church when a man pulled a gun and fired “several” shots at him. Howell was not hit, but he pulled his own gun and fired back, taking out the gunman. Benjamin Parangan Jr., 47, was hospitalized in stable condition. Multiple church employees witnessed the exchange, and agreed Howell acted in self-defense.

Parangan was charged with aggravated assault with intent to kill, and he’s been fired from his job — as the maintenance man at the church.

Comment: See? “Open carry” and “Stand your ground” work!

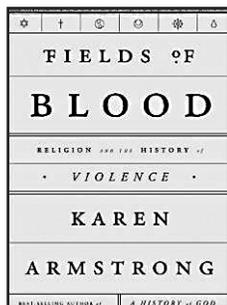
SHSNY CALENDAR: FEBRUARY - APRIL 2015

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, FEB 5, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

40 East 35 St. (Park-Mad)
 (Church basement - elevator)

We'll discuss
FIELDS OF BLOOD:
Religion and the
History of Violence
Karen Armstrong

From the renowned and best-selling author of *A History of God*, a sweeping exploration of religion and the history of human violence.



"A valuable, readable rebuttal of a pernicious contemporary myth. The problem is not that religion corrupts human nature, but that human greed too often corrupts religion . . . Armstrong goes through the centuries and assorted cultures to demonstrate again and again how religious principles and religious leaders were co-opted to support warfare."

"Provocative and supremely readable . . . the comparative nature of Armstrong's inquiry is refreshing . . . Bracing as ever, she sweeps through religious history around the globe and over 4,000 years to explain the yoking of religion and violence and to elucidate the ways in which religion has also been used to counter violence." – *Hardcover, Kindle & AudioBook.*

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

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, MAR 5, 7-8:30 pm
 Community Church of New York
DOUBT: A HISTORY

The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation
Part 3

Jennifer Michael Hecht
 We'll conclude our study of this groundbreaking history – from Chapter 8 through the Conclusion – of the efforts of the world's great intellectuals to reconcile the seeming meaninglessness of the universe with the human need for meaning. Around the conference room table we'll discuss poet and historian Hecht's thesis that "doubt" is one of the great, if unheralded, intellectual traditions that distinguish the Western mind.

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, APR 2, 7-8:30 pm
 Community Church of New York
IMAGINE THERE'S NO HEAVEN:
How Atheism Helped Create the Modern World
Mitchell Stephens

Traveling from classical Greece to twenty-first century America, *Imagine There's No Heaven* explores the role of disbelief in shaping Western civilization. Stephens makes a strong and original case for its importance not only to today's New Atheist movement but to the way many of us – believers and nonbelievers – now think and live. – *Hardcover, Kindle, and half-price download from Amazon.com*

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www.meetup.com/shsny-org/
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BRUNCH & CONVERSATION
SUN, FEB 15, at 12 Noon
CASUAL SUNDAY BRUNCH
The Winslow Public House
243 East 14 St. (West of 2nd)

A classic British-inspired "public house and eatery", The Winslow welcomes SHSNY (two of the waiters snatched up our literature) into a back-room space that is the setting for our round-the-table discussions. The broad and excellent brunch menu (see it at the-winslownyc.com), has selections from \$8-\$20 (add a Bloody Mary or Mimosa for just \$4).

Come join 15-20 other freethinkers and humanists for food, fun and well-fed conversation.

After-Brunch Discussion:
Cops & Community

MON, FEB 9, at 7:00 pm
SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
PRIDE

It's 1984 and miners in the UK are on strike against Margaret Thatcher's pit closures.



In a small, strike-bound Welsh town, the locals are not quite sure how to respond to the support of a coalition of gay and lesbian activists who arrive with donations to help tide over the workers' families. Will it all work out in the pub? Bet on it. Bill Nighy and Imelda Staunton star in this 2014 comedy.

After-Film Discussion:
The Supreme Court and Marriage Equality
SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.
 (But put something on the bar beside your elbow.)

SHSNY CALENDAR: FEBRUARY - APRIL 2015

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
WED, FEB 25, 7:00 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)
LAURENCE KRAUSS:
"A UNIVERSE FROM
NOTHING"

Where did the universe come from? What was there before it? Why is there something



instead of nothing? Such questions have been at the center of religious and philosophical debates, but in recent years science has been closing in on answers.

In a cosmological story that rivets as it enlightens, pioneering theoretical physicist Lawrence Krauss explains the groundbreaking new scientific advances that turn the most basic philosophical questions on their heads.

With wry humor, Krauss reveals that modern science is addressing the question of why there is something rather than nothing with surprising and fascinating results.

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

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 Pullman Kitchen
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

STUDYING HUMANISM
MON, FEB 23, 6:30-8:30
Community Church of New York
40 East 35 St (church basement)
2014-15 Meeting/Discussion #3
Feminism & Humanism,
Then & Now
Moderators/Discussion Leaders:
Elaine Heller & Donna Marxer

Book:

• Mika Brzezinski, *Knowing Your Own Value*

Online: (Links to all are at shsny.org/Calendar)

• Gloria Steinem, *After Black Power, Women's Liberation*

• Elaine Heller, *Short Bios of Selected Feminist Thinkers*

Note: All of the online can be read in little more than an hour.

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!*

OTHER REASONABLE NEW YORK EVENTS

www.reasonablenewyork.org

Drinking With Atheists: Every Friday, fun and conversation. meetup.com/GothamAtheists/

Feminist Freethinkers of NY:

Check feministfreethinkers.org

New York Philosophy: For date and place of Feb *Cocktails & Conversation*: www.nyphilosophy.com
NY Society for Ethical Culture:

• Sun, Feb 1, 2 pm, *Sunday Assembly-NYC - Free*

• Fri, Feb 6, 7 pm, *Ethics in Film: Woody Allen's Sleeper*. \$5 suggest.

• Fri, Feb 13, *Ethics and the Theater: Reading of the play Intimate Apparel* by Lynn Notage. \$10.

Full Feb calendar at nysec.org/calendar-date_nysec/month/2015-02

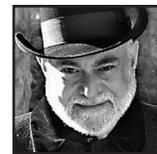
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ARE WE “AGGRESSIVE”? SHOULD WE BE?

Emma Green

(Reprinted from “The Origins of Aggressive Atheism”,
theatlantic.com, 11/24/2014)

American faith has gone through many awakenings. Depending on how you count, there have been three or four distinctive surges of Protestant religiosity in the United States, marked by tent revivals, missionary work, widespread conversions, and, often, intense rhetoric about the consequences of sin. These “Great Awakenings” have been memorialized through texts like “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”, a sermon delivered by the preacher Jonathan Edwards in 1741, who warned of the “fire of wrath” in Hell.

So it’s provocative to title your book *Atheist Awakening*. Oxford University Press’s newest release on non-belief, by researchers Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, claims to be the “first sociological exploration of organized secularism in America”, tracing the evolution of the atheist community over the past several decades. The “awakening” part is “not so much a growth in numbers as an awakening to claiming atheism for themselves, and becoming more public about it”, said Cimino.

By numbers alone, American atheists really aren’t that big a group. According to a 2012 Pew report, atheists make up only about 2.4 percent of the population. Even agnostics, whom you could maybe call atheistic-ish, only account for an estimated 3.3 percent of Americans. Although both groups have grown somewhat since 2007, the bigger change has been among those who identify as “nothing in particular” – roughly 13.9 percent of the population, which is an increase of 2.3 percentage points over five years.

When you read headlines about the rise of the so-called “nones”, or people who don’t consider themselves part of a religion, that’s what they’re mostly referring to: the shruggers. They might be intensely spiritual or perfectly apathetic about faith, but for some reason or another, they don’t self-identify as definitively atheistic.

Among those who do identify as atheists, though, the tone taken toward organized religion, especially recently, has been more shout-y than shrug-y. At the 2012 Reason Rally in Washington, D.C., for example, “a band fired up the crowd with a rousing song that lampooned the belief in ‘Jesus coming again’, mixing it with sexual innuendo”, Cimino and Smith write. Attendees sported T-Shirts and signs with slogans like “I prefer facts” and “religion is like a penis” (involving a rather extended metaphor). There was a life-sized Jesus puppet.

This wasn’t just some small enclave meeting for some drinks and Judeo-Christian trash talk; there were between 8,000 and 20,000 people there (a puzzlingly wide range of estimates, but still: in the thousands). Richard Dawkins, one of the keynote speakers, encouraged attendees to “ridicule” people’s faith. Not all atheists take this tone toward faith, but it’s a somewhat common posture, especially among some of atheism’s most vocal advocates, including Dawkins and people like PZ Myers and Bill Maher.

“It’s definitely one of their strategies,” said Cimino. “There is this strong attempt to be kind of irreverent.” This is a quality particular to “new atheism”, he said, a term for Dawkins-style arguments against faith, which rely heavily on science and invocations of rationalism. “There’s a sense that once you make fun of it, you can kind of demystify religion,” he added.

But there’s also a sense, at least in reading *Atheist Awakening*, that derision toward faith among outspoken atheists is partially a product of accumulated bitterness. “It is hard not to come to the conclusion that atheists have spent a far greater deal of time thinking and writing about religion than religious people ever have of atheists as a group,” the authors write. American voters disapprove of atheist politicians; parents dread the possibility of atheist boyfriends and girlfriends for their kids; and in general, the public feels less warmly toward non-believers than almost any other faith. Being an atheist means defining oneself in opposition to theism, but that doesn’t necessarily go both ways. America is a land of ambient distrust of people who don’t believe in God, but mostly in the way of a high school full of queen-bee cool kids and nearly invisible geeks.

This milieu shaped the rise of what you might call aggressive atheism, the kind that mocks and dismisses religious belief. As Cimino and Smith point out, this outspokenness has helped atheism gain visibility and coherency as a movement. But it also has downsides.

“In accepting a label, particularly the label of ‘atheist’, it seems to me that we are consenting to be viewed as a cranky sub-culture,” said the writer Sam Harris at an Atheist Alliance conference in 2007. “We are consenting to be viewed as a marginal interest group that meets in hotel ballrooms. ... As a matter of strategy, we have walked into a trap.”

For the next generation of atheists, though, things might be different—fewer dinners of bad baked chicken at conferences, more Internet.

“Especially with young people ... there’s an openness with respect to choosing your religion, as opposed to just staying with the religion you’re born into,” said Smith. The Internet facilitates this: People who might otherwise feel isolated by the religious mores in their hometowns have access to communities of people who believe otherwise. “Atheists [aren’t] loners without any sort of social networks,” he said. “You can have social community, and social gatherings, without being in the same geographic meeting place.”

This includes websites like freethought blogs and Reddit, which hosts a forum where people can post ideas and links about atheism. “According to its many testimonial posts, the forum known as r/atheism is a lifeboat in a sea of religious intolerance and incredulity,” Cimino and Smith write. Topics include family and friends who aren’t open to atheism, debates about social issues like abortion, and basic stuff like “atheist symbols other than the Darwin fish”.

There are also downsides to these kinds of anonymous online communities. In a 2011 incident referred to as

“redditgate”, a 15-year-old girl posted an image of herself holding a book on atheism she got for Christmas; a number of commenters replied with sexually explicit remarks. Other instances of sexual harassment in the atheist community have raised questions about how friendly it is for women.

And in general, American atheists are much more likely to be male than female; in 2012, Pew estimated that about 64 percent of self-declared atheists are men. They’re also whiter, wealthier, and more educated than the general public.

But they’re also much, much younger. An estimated 42 percent of atheists are between 18 and 29 years old; in general, that age group only makes up 22 percent of the American population. Most other adult atheists are under 50; there just aren’t that many self-professed non-believers among the Baby Boomers and beyond.

As thinkers like Sam Harris grow a following for less aggressive, combative strains of atheism, and as online communities of young non-believers grow, perhaps there will be less of a need for the shout-y, derisive brand of atheist activism. Whether or not that constitutes an awakening is open for debate; in the future, it might be closer to a “chilling out”, a culture in which it’s easier to be casually open about not believing in God.

Or maybe not. “For the near future, dialogue and empathy may have limited traction in a young social movement,” the authors ultimately conclude. For members of a movement that’s struggled to gain legitimacy and visibility in a deeply religious country, shouting may still seem more effective.

Comment: Bet on it. – JR

SECULAR HUMANISM, NOT NEW ATHEISM, CAN REPLACE RELIGION

Philip Kitcher

(Interviewed by Chris Stedman)

(Excerpted from religionnews.com, 12/1/2014)

A recent court ruling has reignited a long-running debate among humanists: Is humanism a religion? Philip Kitcher, [John Dewey] professor of philosophy at Columbia University [and SHSNY Honorary Member], suggests that whether or not you call it a religion, secular humanism can function like religion at its best—and perhaps even replace it. Now he’s published a thoughtful, thorough, and approachable book based on his 2013 Terry Lectures at Yale on the subject: *Life After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism*.

The first part of our conversation—on his disagreements with “New Atheism”, how secular humanism is similar to religion and how it is different, and what Humanists can learn from religion—appears [here]. Check [March PIQUE] for the second part of our discussion, where Kitcher explores how to disentangle ethics from religion, the connection between Humanist values and community, and why doubt is just the beginning of humanism.

Chris Stedman: In the introduction to *Life After Faith* you say that you “resist the now dominant atheist idea that religion is noxious rubbish to be buried as deeply, as thoroughly, and as quickly as possible”. Why?

Philip Kitcher: For my entire adult life, I’ve been trying to figure out what I should say about religion. It came to a head for me in the wake of the resurgence of “New Atheists” in the early part of the century. Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris—there’s much that I agree with in their books and presentations, but all of them seem to be missing some important things.

I think that the “New Atheist” critique has a very narrow view of religion. For people like Dawkins, religion is all about people having false beliefs—and they think that when people have false beliefs, it’s better to correct their beliefs. I think in general that’s right, though having a misguided belief isn’t the worst thing that can happen to a person. But you can’t just leave things with “Well, we’ve now shown you why your traditional beliefs are false, enjoy yourselves and get on with it!”

Dawkins would also rightly say that the forms of religion he attacks are the ones that cause the most violence and suffering in the contemporary world. But there are many people who practice less problematic—even socially valuable—forms of religion. It isn’t the end of the story to wipe out religious doctrine and say that’s the end of it. One must come to terms not only with religion’s history of problems, pain, and suffering, but also with its achievements.

My perspective aims to widen the critique of religion, be more sympathetic to religion at its best, and strive towards finding a positive position that could replace religion. Some suggest that people never give up a perspective, however bad it may be, until they’ve got something to replace it. My fundamental difficulty with the “New Atheism” is that I don’t think it has supplied anything to replace religion. Secular humanism tries to fill that gap. I wrote *Life After Faith* because I wanted to put the focus back on the positive: on secular humanism as a positive perspective on life.

CS: You argue that a secular perspective “can fulfill many of the important functions religion, at its best, has discharged”. How does secular humanism function in ways that are similar to some expressions of religion? How is it different? What can humanists learn from religion?

PK: For some religious people, religion is really all about values and not about specific doctrines. By values I mean that they are genuinely concerned with human wellbeing and make great sacrifices to try to promote it. That’s a very important part of religion at its best. I grew up in Britain with a church that was much less interested in doctrine and dogma, and much more interested in social reform—in trying to help people live valuable lives. I respect that.

Practically, secular humanism can learn a lot from the ways in which religious communities have looked after the poor, looked after those who are suffering, tried to create a more humane world, and in general involved themselves in

ethical projects. I think that's admirable, and it's something that the secular community is going to have to learn how to do as well.

CS: I love the book's concluding lines: "A secular worldview ought to be forged in dialogue, even in passionate interaction, with all that has been most deeply thought about what it is to be human—including whatever can be refined out of religious traditions. For secular humanism is only secondarily secular; it is primarily humane."

PK: In a sense, that's the credo of the entire book. Humanism is all about values—located in human beings, not in anything beyond us. We're not important because we are the children of a divine being; we are just important. And our lives matter when they connect with others, when they matter to others.

At times, dogma has inflicted massive, unnecessary suffering on many unfortunate people. That's religion at its worst. But religion at its best is when other human beings, with all their faults and flaws and needs, come first—and when people work together to try to build a situation in which as many people as possible can live as well as possible. That's secular humanism at its best, too.

(Part 2 of this interview will run in March PIQUE. Meanwhile, see more at: <http://chrisstedman.religionnews.com/2014/12/02/philip-kitcher-separate-ethics-religion/#sthash.4Fr12j3d.dpuf>)

INTELLIGENT? DESIGN?

Giddian Beer

(Reprinted from the *Paleolibrarian* blog, 1/3/2015)

Intelligent Design (ID) is a concept proposed by some who are unable to accept evolution. They assume that (1) life, with its nearly infinite variety, is far too complicated to be the result of a series of chance events; (2) that only an intelligent being could have created life and (3) that, since evolution does not answer *every* question about the genesis and progression of life, a totally different scenario should be considered. Although they imagine that the time between the origin of the universe and the present is only several thousand years, so far they have not proposed that we dump the other findings of physics and cosmology just because these disciplines have not answered every question about the universe.

In fact, life is even more complex than it appears to be. In addition to the innumerable obvious differences among life forms, there is a seeming infinity of tiny but crucial characteristics, so obscure that many of them have only recently been discovered. For example: the epigenome, thousands of chemical tags distributed along the DNA strands that react to signals external to the cell and turn individual genes on or off.

However, there is a gradual but simple process that would *automatically* result in a system having *all* of life's variety and complexity. That process is 3,500,000,000 years of accumulating adaptations (i.e. those "chance events" which were not harmful) to varied and changing environments, along ever more numerous diverging lines,

each adaptation a potential origin for another line (species) or, for simpler organisms in the distant past, a potential origin of a more inclusive group, such as genus or family.

A system composed of interacting parts, each of which is essential for the system's functioning, is said to be irreducibly complex. Without any of these essential parts, the system is useless. ID advocates claim that, since most organisms contain many such systems, these organisms/systems cannot have come into being (evolved) piecemeal. However, the fact that such systems cannot function without all of their necessary parts is no reason to believe that those parts did not develop concurrently from simpler parts of simpler systems. This happens in animals and plants as they mature from fertilized eggs or seeds into mature individuals; it also happens as species develop. Supporting evidence (ignored by ID advocates) is obvious and plentiful.

ID is nothing but *willful ignorance and defective reasoning in support of childish fantasy*. It is based on those three (above) assumptions and on the tsunami of delusional evidence and junk science produced to back it up.

All of the observed evidence supports evolution. Evolution is not only a principle of biology, it is absolutely the fundamental *purpose* of life, which is to survive by adapting to different and inconstant environments, i.e., by evolving.

ID proponents point to the "order of the universe" as evidence for a creator. *Order?* Black holes, exploding stars, dead and dying stars, cosmic rays, colliding meteors, comets, planets and galaxies, dark matter, dark energy, the paradoxes of quantum mechanics! Most of gravity's effects are orderly but, except for these, there is no more order in the universe than there is in a house fire.

They also argue that the earth is so perfectly attuned to our needs that it must have been created with humans in mind. *Perfectly attuned?* Myriad horrible diseases (infectious as well as DNA errors like cancers, both autoimmune and hereditary), plagues and pestilence, parasites and mosquitoes, lethal poverty, famines, "acts of God" such as hurricanes, tornados, droughts, floods, earthquakes, landslides! For a large percentage of humanity life is "a cesspool of misery and suffering".

Another of the obscure characteristics of life mentioned above is found in chromosomes, those incredibly long, slender molecules that carry the DNA instructions for replication of all living things. Excepting the simplest organisms, for most of their length (over 97 percent in primates) these molecules contain no instructions at all. Much of this non-coding DNA has packing or regulatory functions. Between genes there are large sections of repetitive sequences (small sequences of nucleotides repeated thousands of times) that may have no purpose and, within genes, there are smaller *unused* sections called introns that are probably obsolete code.

More than 99 percent of the species that have inhabited Earth could not adapt, that is evolve, and are extinct. Furthermore, the paleontological record is replete with

evidence that every existing species has been modified over time. Many of them contain, in their skeletons or their DNA, remnants of structures that were needed by their ancestors but are useless in the current version.

For example: vestigial legs and a pelvic girdle in whales, fossil snakes with leg and hip bones, pythons and boas with vestigial thigh bones. Not to mention the human appendix and the shark-like gill slits and tail that appear in the early stages of the human embryo. A complete list would be very, very long.

Is this design? Where is the intelligence?

ON THE OTHER HAND, GIDDIAN, HOW DID EVOLUTION DO THIS?

(Reprinted from The Writer's Almanac with Garrison Keillor.com, 1/3/2015)

The Three-toed Sloth Fleur Adcock

The three-toed sloth is the slowest creature we know for its size. It spends its life hanging upside-down from a branch, its baby nestling on its breast.

It never cleans itself, but lets fungus grow on its fur. The grin it wears, like an idiot clown, proclaims the joys of a life which is one long rest.

The three-toed sloth is content. It doesn't care.

It moves imperceptibly, like the laziest snail you ever saw blown up to the size of a sheep.

Disguised as a grey-green bough it dangles there in the steamy Amazon jungle. That long-drawn wail is its slow-motion sneeze. Then it falls asleep.

One cannot but envy such torpor. Its top speed, when rushing to save its young, is a dramatic fourteen feet per minute, in a race with fate.

The puzzle is this, though: how did nature breed a race so determinedly unenergetic?

What passion ever inspired a sloth to mate?

DICK COUSINEAU 1934-2014

We extend our sympathy to the family and the many, many friends all over America of Richard Cousineau, a founder of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara (CA), a prolific writer on science and reason for many local and national publications, and a long-time subscriber to this publication, as well as a generous contributor to SHSNY.

MARIO CUOMO 1932-2015

A DIFFERENT KIND OF POLITICIAN

I can offer you no final truths, complete and unchallengeable. But it's possible this one effort will provoke other efforts—both in support and contradiction of my position—that will help all of us understand our differences and perhaps even discover some basic agreement.

READERS RESPOND TO JANUARY PIQUE

(Note: We solicited response to "Next on Our Human Agenda: "The Greatest Moral Dilemma", about the ethics (and dangers) of "retrofitting the human genotype". Sadly, we received only two responses, but both, offered here, are excellent. – JR)

To the Editor: Human GMO? To genetically modify human beings is not like modifying corn. Corn is modified by genetically altering seeds. Human children are born with millions of cells, a complete set of genes in each cell. To modify every cell nucleus is impossible.

Human modification, like modifying corn, must be done by altering the genetic make-up of sperm and eggs, our seeds. A new corn crop is developed and can be evaluated in a few months; human alterations could take generations to assess. If modified seeds result in bad corn, we eliminate that corn crop. But can we do that with humans? The moral implications of developing poorly functioning defective humans are enormous. The time, effort, and expense of developing GMO humans are great, and there are other, more immediate problems facing humanity.

To survive, humanity must deal with overpopulation, the degrading of the environment, religious terrorism, problems with the health of the ocean, clean water, food, clean air, energy, global warming, and others. We are teetering on the edge of survival. At this point I think we might well leave human genetic modification to the philosophers, to be taken seriously only when (and if) our other problems are resolved. – *Chic Schissel*

To the Editor: Pondering James Watson's question ("If we could make better human beings by knowing how to add genes, why shouldn't we?"), I am reminded of a famous remark by a prominent biologist and philosopher of the last century, Jean Rostand: "Science has made us gods before we are even worthy of being men."

Let us forgive him for saying "men" instead of "humans" (he was, after all, writing some 70 years ago) and consider the prescience of his words. – *Peter Rogatz*

GUESS WHAT: THE KID LIED John Rafferty

It turns out that "The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven" didn't come back – in fact, didn't even go in the first place. Now a teenager, Alex Malarkey (*That name wasn't giveaway enough?*) has just admitted that the story he made up about dying and going to Heaven after waking up from a two-month coma when he was six, and which he turned into a huge 2010 *New York Times* best-seller with "help" from his father, Kevin, was all—how should we put this—bullshit.

Publisher Tyndale House has pulled the book, even though a repentant Alex has said, "I want the whole world to know that the Bible is sufficient. Those who market these materials must be called to repent and hold the Bible as enough."

Comment: Okay, kid, next step: *That book is bullshit, too.*

QUICK, QUICK – ONE MORE CHANCE TO VOTE FOR DUMBTH-OF-THE-YEAR, 2014

John Rafferty

You've received this issue of PIQUE before January 31, so you still have a chance before that deadline to cast your vote at editor@shsnny.org, or by leaving a message at 646-922-7389. Celebrators will get a second ballot at our February 12 Anniversary/ Darwin Dinner (see page 7), at which the winner of the not-so-coveted horse's-ass trophy will be announced.

One more time, here are the nominated idiots ...

Arizona congressional candidate **Jim Brown** thinks federal "entitlements" are worse than slavery because they hurt business. In April he Facebooked:

"Basically slave owners took pretty good care of their slaves and livestock, and kept business rolling along."

Former Republican House Leader – and convicted money launderer – **Tom DeLay**, in a new "moral crusade", calls the U.S. Constitution as "a document of faith" because ...

"God created this nation and He wrote the Constitution."

Ex-Senator **Jim DeMint**, afraid anyone might think "big gummint" ever accomplished something, wrote:

"Well the reason that the slaves were eventually freed was ... a growing movement among the people, particularly people of faith ... So no liberal is going to win a debate that big government freed the slaves."

Reactionary Minnesota activist **Marjorie Holsten**, said the reason schools teach Sex Ed is that liberal educators are trying to increase the number of "Democrat" voters.

"Why would they teach such awful things to our children? ... when children are desensitized to sexual things ... how do they vote? Democrat."

Past Chumpion Ann Coulter dissed July's World Cup mania and soccer/futbol as a plot against America.

"Any growing interest in soccer can only be a sign of the nation's moral decay" ... [because] "it's foreign".

Kentucky State Senator (and mine owner) **Brandon Smith** argued that man-made climate change is scientifically implausible because ...

"The temperature on Mars is exactly as it is here. ... Yet there are no coal mines on Mars. There's no factories on Mars that I'm aware of."

(Earth average temp is 57°F; on Mars it's -81°F. Minus 81.)

The American Family Association's **Bryan Fischer** gave us all indisputable proof that ours is a Christian nation:

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

Congresswoman **Renee Ellmers (R-NC)** suggested how Republicans could attract more women.

"Men do tend to talk about things on a much higher level. ... if you can bring it down to a woman's level ... that's the way to go."

Cast Your Vote Now ... and Again on Darwin Day!

Can Secular Humanism
Replace Religion?
Page 9
Dawkins, Rushdie, Maher,
Fineirsh, Wheeler, Taylor
and Charlie Hebdo
on Charlie Hebdo
starts on Page 1
7th Annual Darwin Day &
SHSNY Anniversary Banquet
— Book now!
Page 7

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