

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

March, 2015

Is it spring, yet? While waiting for warmth we wonder what “religion” is, what we would say to “God”, and share a first century sense of wonder itself. We celebrate our Darwin Day/ Anniversary celebration, welcome a new Board member, and nominate our first 2015 Dumbth. More on *Charlie Hebdo*, Islamic extremism/terrorism (your choice), modern Mideast history and Islamophobia, beginning on page 8. But first, the conclusion of one of our best-ever essays. — JR

SECULAR HUMANISM, NOT NEW ATHEISM, CAN REPLACE RELIGION – Part 2

Philip Kitcher

(Interviewed by Chris Stedman)

(In his new book *Life After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism*, Columbia University philosophy professor Kitcher argues for the merits of secular humanism. The first part of this conversation appeared in February PIQUE, invoking so much favorable comment that we’re leading with it this month. – JR)

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 – was published yesterday. Below, Kitcher explores how to disentangle ethics from religion, the connection between values and community, and why doubt is just the beginning of Humanism.

CS: In *Life After Faith*, you talk about the popularity of the idea that there is a tight link between religion and ethics. How would you suggest we disentangle them?

PK: This is very important. The moment religion became tightly connected with ethics is a deviation in the history of our ethical lives.

Evolutionarily, our ethical practices go back deep into our human past. Morality was originally worked out through negotiations on roughly equal terms in small groups. Gradually those groups expanded and we came to live in more complex societies, made possible by the fact that we’ve laid down some rules, conventions, and practices that enable us to live together. But along the way the democratic nature of our ethical life was distorted by thinking that there was something beyond us – a divine being – which was the ground of ethics.

People believed in gods for all sorts of reasons – that gods were in control of all the mysterious things, or caused

accidents and sudden changes in people’s lives. The idea of gods or a God suggests that it’s not just other members of the local group who are watching and ready to do something to you if you step out of line – there is also a being constantly looking down who will do bad things if you break the rules. That’s a very powerful device for getting people to comply with your ethical code, because it paves the way for a moment in which somebody says, “I have a vision. I can fathom the will of this being.”

Once that happens, the whole character of ethical life changes. It’s no longer something people work out together, but something that has a basis in the will of a deity that has to be fathomed. And you end up with all sorts of things written down in the ethical codes of various religions which reflect transient prejudices, like attitudes towards same-sex relationships.

CS: What foundation would you suggest instead?

PK: What I would like to see in a secular ethical life is a return to the fact that we’re all involved in a project. We have to work out our obligations together. An example is the common project to save our planet. It seems to me that these kinds of ethical decisions can best be made if we don’t think of there being some source of transcendent expertise, but rather think of the effort as something that we need to work out together.

In doing that, we can sometimes rely on what great thinkers in the past have seen. The Buddha, Jesus, and others have seen the fundamental importance of attending to other human beings – the suffering and the downtrodden. Those ethical insights can be preserved. But the idea that there is some recourse to a sacred text that should dictate what we do? It seems to me that has to go in favor of the pragmatic, democratic working out of our ethical lives together on conditions of respect and valuing one another as human beings. That’s the heart of humanist ethics.

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CS: What's the connection between community and the moral lives of nonreligious people?

PK: Community is crucial because it helps people to operate together. The problem in the U.S. seems to be that churches, mosques, and synagogues are the places in which people can find genuine community. It's very easy for us academics to forget that we actually have a nice community, and that we can cooperate on various kinds of projects. But for most people the workplace doesn't function that way. Many, many people who lose their faith or drop out of religious life find themselves deprived of the communities they used to have, in which they would engage as morally dedicated citizens. And something immensely important is lost without that community dimension.

When it comes to higher rates of charity and volunteerism among the religious, I don't think it's the case that nonreligious people are less motivated to help others – it's that we don't have as many institutions that give us good opportunities to do so. And it may even be that, as we don't participate in institutions and communities, our motivations are sapped. So I think that humanist associations like Ethical Culture, Humanist Unitarian Universalist congregations, and humanist chaplains on campuses are terribly important. I'd like to see those resources spread.

Still, it seems to me that secular institutions still have a lot of things to work out. It's generally not the case that they are as well-developed or as rewarding as religious communities. The building of the secular world is a task that secularists have to face up to. The major world religions have been experimenting with this for thousands of years. We can learn from their past experiments, and I think we can learn to build better forms of community for humanists.

But the problem has to be recognized, and we have to applaud Ethical Culture and Humanist Unitarian Universalism. They've seen the problem and they're doing something about it, even though I don't think they have it perfect yet.

CS: You write, "Secular humanism begins in doubt, but doubt should be only the beginning." If doubt is just the beginning, what's the next step for people who want to develop a robust humanist worldview?

PK: Two things: Participate in discussions with other humanists, and see secular humanism as a work in progress. Restoring the dimension of ethical life in which we come together and try to think about collectively attending to the problems of society is the next step. That is best done in groups.

So the problem of building community and the problem of developing the ethical dimension of life go together. When I think about the vibrancy of churches in Harlem and the way in which they're involved in social projects, I see that something similar from a Humanist point of view is essential.

See more at: <http://chrisstedman.religionnews.com/2014/12/01/philip-kitcher-new-atheism/#sthash.dIZot5HQ.dpuf>

AS ROBIN WILLIAMS SAID: "WOW – REALITY, WHAT A CONCEPT!"

Stephen Greenblatt

(Excerpted from The Swerve: How the World Became Modern, Mr. Greenblatt's Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the 15th Century re-discovery of On the Nature of Things [De rerum natura] by the 1st Century BCE Epicurean Roman poet-philosopher Lucretius)

*Understanding the nature of things
generates deep wonder.*

The realization that the universe consists of atoms and void and nothing else, that the world was not made for us by a providential creator, that we are not the center of the universe, that our emotional lives are no more distinct than our physical lives from those of all other creatures, that our souls are as material and as mortal as our bodies – all these things are not the cause for despair. On the contrary, grasping the way things really are is the crucial step toward the possibility of happiness. Human insignificance – the fact that it is not all about us and our faith – is, Lucretius insisted, the good news.

It is possible for human beings to live happy lives, but not because they think that they are the center of the universe or because they fear the gods or because they nobly sacrifice themselves for values that purport to transcend their mortal existence. Unappeasable desire and the fear of death are the principal obstacles to human happiness, but the obstacles can be surmounted through the exercise of reason.

The exercise of reason is not available only to specialists; it is accessible to everyone. What is needed is to refuse the lies proffered by priests and other fantasy mongers and to look squarely and calmly at the true nature of things. All speculation – all science, all morality, all attempts to fashion a life worth living – must start and end with a comprehension of the invisible seeds of things: atoms and the void and nothing else.

It might seem at first that this comprehension would inevitably bring with it a sense of cold emptiness, as if the universe had been robbed of its magic. Being liberated from harmful illusions is not the same as disillusionment. The origin of philosophy, it was often said in the ancient world, was wonder: surprise and bafflement led to a desire to know, and knowledge in turn laid the wonder to rest. But in Lucretius' account the process is something like the reverse: it is knowing the way things are that awakens the deepest wonder.

WTF?

John Rafferty

In the latest round of musical chairs in Amherst, NY, the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH) – the umbrella organization under which SHSNY was chartered in 1988 – has been "merged" into the Center for Inquiry (CFI), and is now a "program" of CFI (whatever the hell that means), along with the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI).

Um, why?

WHAT DOES “RELIGION” MEAN?

Karen Armstrong

(Excerpted from *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*, our February Book Club selection.)

Our modern Western conception of “religion” is idiosyncratic and eccentric. No other cultural tradition has anything like it, and even premodern European Christians would have found it reductive and alien. ...

For about fifty years now it has been clear [in academia] that there is no universal way to define religion. In the West we see “religion” as a coherent system of obligatory beliefs, institutions, and rituals, centering on a supernatural God, whose practice is essentially private and hermetically sealed off from all “secular” activities. But words in other languages that we translate as “religion” almost invariably refer to something larger, vaguer, and more encompassing. The Arabic *din* signifies an entire way of life. The Sanskrit *dharma* is also “a ‘total’ concept, untranslatable, which covers law, justice, morals, and social life”. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* firmly states: “No word in either Greek or Latin corresponds to the English ‘religion’ or ‘religious’.”

The idea of religion as an essentially personal and systematic pursuit was entirely absent from classical Greece, Japan, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Iran, China, and India. Nor does the Hebrew Bible have any abstract concept of religion; and the Talmudic rabbis would have found it impossible to express what they meant by faith in a single word or even in a formula, since the Talmud was expressly designed to bring the whole of human life into the ambit of the sacred.

The origins of the Latin *religio* are obscure. It was not “a great objective something” but had imprecise connotations of obligation and taboo; to say that a cultic observance, a family propriety, or keeping an oath was *religio* for you meant that it was incumbent on you to do it. The word acquired an important new meaning among early Christian theologians: an attitude of reverence toward God and the universe as a whole. For Saint Augustine (c. 354-430 CE), *religio* was neither a system of rituals and doctrines nor a historical institutionalized tradition, but a personal encounter with the transcendence that we call God, as well as the bond that unites us to the divine and to one another. In medieval Europe, *religio* came to refer to the monastic life and distinguished the monk from the “secular” priest, someone who lived and worked in the world (*saeculum*).

The only faith tradition that does fit the modern Western notion of religion as something codified and private is Protestant Christianity, which, like religion in this sense of the word, is also a product of the early modern period. At this time Europeans and Americans had begun to separate religion and politics, because they assumed, not altogether accurately, that the theological squabbles of the Reformation had been entirely responsible for the Thirty Years’ War.

The conviction that religion must be rigorously excluded from political life has been called the charter myth

of the sovereign nation-state. The philosophers and statesmen who pioneered this dogma believed that they were returning to a more satisfactory state of affairs that had existed before ambitious Catholic clerics had confused two utterly distinct realms. But in fact their secular ideology was as radical an innovation as the modern market economy that the West was concurrently devising. To non-Westerners, who had not been through this particular modernizing process, both these innovations would seem unnatural and even incomprehensible. The habit of separating religion and politics is now so routine in the West that it is difficult for us to appreciate how thoroughly the two co-inherited in the past. It was never simply a question of the state “using” religion; the two were indivisible. Dissociating them would have seemed like trying to extract the gin from a cocktail.

The purpose of separation of church and state is to keep forever from these shores the ceaseless strife that has soaked the soil of Europe in blood for centuries. – James Madison, 4th President of the United States.

ON MEETING GOD

Stephen Fry

(“What would you say to God (or St. Peter)?” seems to be a favorite of TV interviewers everywhere. One Brit got this astounding response from actor/writer/director Stephen Fry. The video – it’s at www.vubblepop.com – has gone hugely viral, and was forwarded here by Mike Tuchman, Rebecca Kelly, Deeya Pavelle, Marjorie Vai, and others – JR)

Interviewer: Suppose it’s all true, and you walk up to the Pearly Gates, and you are confronted by God. What would Stephen Fry say to Him, Her or It?

Stephen Fry: I think it’s basically the question of theodicy. I’d say “Bone cancer in children? What’s that about? How dare you? How dare you create a world in which there is so much misery that is not our fault? It’s not right. It’s utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid god who creates a world which is so full of injustice and pain?” That’s what I’d say.

Interviewer: And you think you’re going to get in?

Stephen Fry: Oh, no, and I wouldn’t want to. I wouldn’t want to get in on his terms – they’re wrong. Because the god who created this universe, if it was created by a god, is quite clearly a maniac, utter maniac, totally selfish, totally. We have to spend our life on our knees, thanking him? What kind of god would do that?

Yes, the world is splendid, but it also has in it insects whose whole life cycle is to burrow into the eyes of children and blind them, to eat outwards from the eyes. “Why? Why did you do that to us? You could easily have made it a creation in which that didn’t exist. It is simply not acceptable.”

So, you know, it’s not simply about not believing there is a god but, on the assumption there is one, what kind of god is he? It’s perfectly apparent. He’s monstrous, utterly monstrous, and deserving of no respect whatsoever. The moment you banish him, your life becomes simpler, purer, cleaner, more worth living, in my opinion.

TORTURE: IT'S THE CHRISTIAN THING TO DO

(Excerpted from *This Week in God*, on *The Rachel Maddow Show*, 12/20/14, by Steve Benen, and forwarded by Massimo Pigliucci on Facebook)

A new Washington Post/ABC News poll finds that Americans, by a 59-31 percent margin, believe that CIA "treatment of suspected terrorists" in detention was justified. A plurality deemed that "treatment" to be "torture", by a 49-38 percent margin.

Remarkably, the gap between torture supporters and opponents widens between voters who are Christian and those who are not religious.

Right. While many might assume that the faithful would be morally repulsed by torture, the reality is the opposite. When poll respondents were asked, "Do you personally think the CIA treatment of suspected terrorists amounted to torture, or not?" most Americans said the abuses did not constitute torture.

But it was non-religious Americans who were easily the most convinced that the "enhanced interrogation techniques" were, in fact, torture.

Were CIA Torture Tactics Justified?

	Yes	No
All Adults	59%	31%
White Evangelical Protestant	69%	20%
White Non-Evangelical Protestant	74%	21%
White Catholic	66%	22%
No Religion	41%	52%

WE HAVE OUR FIRST 2015 DUMBTH CANDIDATE John Rafferty

[Pic of Schlafly]

How has anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly escaped our clutches all these years of Dumbth? However she has avoided the horse's-ass trophy in the past, she makes a strong opening-round bid for the 2015 dis-honors.

Addressing the problem of sexual assaults on college campuses in a column on the right-wing World Net Daily website last month, the Eagle Forum founder and leader of the successful 1973 campaign to kill the Equal Rights Amendment has a simple solution: Get rid of the women.

Oh, and college loans. Lose them, too.

"The imbalance of far more women than men at colleges has been a factor in the various sex scandals that have made news in the last couple of years. ... One solution might be to impose the duty on admissions officers to arbitrarily admit only half women and half men. ... Another solution might be to stop granting college loans, thereby forcing students to take jobs to pay for their tuition and eliminate time for parties."

Schlafly, an attorney, has a BA and a JD from Washington University, and an MA from Radcliffe. Our guess is that she was not much of a party animal on any of those campuses.

READERS REPLY TO FEBRUARY PIQUE

To the Editor: Another excellent PIQUE. My compliments once again.

The star of this "galaxy" was Dr. Phillip Kitcher and his creatively named book, *Life After Faith: The Case For Secular Humanism*. He clearly and eloquently frames both religion and secular humanism in their spectrums from "worst" to "best", which I believe recognizes their dimensionality. I have close friends who, whenever they move, research the Protestant churches in their new town and join only those that have strong, active programs of real social service to others. Indeed, that is the best of religion and, certainly, their behavior is as humanistic as I would aspire to practice.

Kitcher's approach to religions is neither timid nor aggressive, but is "value based", which is the crux of the matter and which is why it's a more justifiable approach than that of the "New Atheists".

As a Jew who believes in secular humanism, I don't have any problems in discussing my belief system with my religious, theistic Jewish friends. Nor do I want to put them down in the interaction. My explanations for transitioning to secular humanistic Judaism describe *my* journey and the reasons for it. They usually are surprised by the fullness of my beliefs because their views of atheists are of people without faith and without replacements for it.

And that is the major challenge for secular humanists, about which Kitcher speaks so eloquently. I have already ordered his book and look forward to reading it.

– Stan Friedland, ED.D.

To the Editor: Just finished February PIQUE. Probing, provocative, pointed articles as always. PIQUE educates us to think better and know what secular humanism is and isn't.

I particularly liked the Philip Kitcher interview, though I stop before crossing the divide and narrowing the gulf between humanism and religion. We may learn or study religions for their contribution to human values and community; there it stops: Humanism is not a religion.

– Remo Cosentino

To the Editor: Let me take this opportunity to say how great PIQUE is, and especially this issue. – Jack Herschlag

WALTER BALCERAK HAS PUBLISHED THE VIEW FROM BROOKLYN

Longtime SHSNY member (and prolific Letter-to-the-Editor writer) Walter has, after a long writing career, published his first (and one hopes not his last) book: *The View From Brooklyn*.

The titular novella – about "a crusading editor of a union newspaper who braves danger as he tries to rid the union of a corrupt official" – is accompanied by "A Collection of Stories, Poems, Memoirs and Essays", on subjects as diverse as the summertime streets of his childhood to his first "great meal" (in Paris, of course) – all worth any reader's time and the modest online cost of \$14.95 at Amazon or Barnes & Nobel. – JR

SHSNY CALENDAR: MARCH - MAY 2015

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, MAR 5, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

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

We'll discuss

DOUBT: A HISTORY

The Great Doubters and
Their Legacy of Innovation
Part 3

Jennifer Michael Hecht

[book cover]

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.

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 The Winslow Public House
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, 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*

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, MAY 7, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
ROGER WILLIAMS AND THE
CREATION OF THE AMERICAN SOUL: Church, State
and the Birth of Liberty

John M. Barry

For 400 years, Americans have wrestled with two concepts that define the nature of the nation: the proper relation between church and state and between a free individual and the state.

Here's a revelatory look, by a distinguished historian, at how Roger Williams shaped the nature of religion, political power, and individual rights in America. - *All formats, incl Amazon Bargain Book.*

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MEET US ON MEETUP

www.meetup.com/shsny-org/

TEXT US ON TWITTER

@NY_Sec_Humanist

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, MAR 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 thewinslownyc.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: Is "American Exceptionalism" real?

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

[movie poster]

Based on a true story! A group of inmates in Auschwitz, realizing that their extermination is imminent, attempt to make sense of their fate by putting God on trial. As the sound of prisoners being marched to the gas chambers drifts hauntingly through the walls, and as the hour draws near when they, too, will face death at the hands of the Nazis, the thoughtful prisoners finally reach a verdict.

After-Film Discussion:

God: Guilty, or Not Culpable by Reason of Insanity?

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.
 (But put something on the bar beside your elbow.)

SHSNY CALENDAR: MARCH - MAY 2015

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, MAR 25, 7:00 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

DR. PAUL ZAK:

**“THE MORAL MOLECULE:
The Source of Love
and Prosperity”**

[pic Zak]

Why do some people give freely while others are tight bastards? Why do some people cheat and steal while there are others you can trust with your life? Why are some husbands more faithful than others, and why do women tend to be more generous than men? Might the key to moral behavior lie within a single molecule?

From the bucolic English countryside to the highlands of Papua-New Guinea, from labs in Switzerland to his campus in Southern California, Dr. Zak recounts extraordinary stories and sets out, for the first time, his revolutionary theory of moral behavior – a revolution in the scientific study of good and evil.

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

ARE YOU FUNNY? WANT TO GET PAID FOR IT?

New York Society for Ethical Culture is sponsoring a four-night “Introduction to Stand-Up Comedy”, led by comedy pro Leighann Lord.

A serious course about being funny, Tuesdays, March 3, 10, 17 and 24, 7:00-9:00 pm. \$150 for NYSEC members, \$250 for guests.

Info at ygarcia@nysec.org or 212-874-5210, ext 117.

STUDYING HUMANISM

MON, MAR 30, 6:30-8:30
Community Church of New York
40 East 35 St (church basement)
2014-15 Meeting/Discussion #4

Is there an

“American Humanism”?

YES, THIS IS A REPEAT OF THE LISTING FOR JANUARY, WHICH MEETING WAS CANCELLED BY A BLIZZARD. OUR CALENDAR IS MOVED AHEAD A MONTH.

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

- Preamble to the *Declaration of Independence*
- Emerson: Summaries of his essays, “Nature” and “The American Scholar”
- pbs.org: “The American Renaissance & Transcendentalism”
- Excerpts from “The Great Agnostic and the Golden Age of Freethought”, Chap 6 of *Freethinkers*, by Susan Jacoby (Read all of Chap 6 if you have the book)
- Excerpts from “The Substance of Humanism”, Chapter 4 of *American Humanism*, by Howard Mumford Jones

Note: All of the above 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!*

THERE'S A NEW PHILOSOPHY GROUP IN TOWN

John Wagner has discovered Gotham Philosophical Society (Wisdom in the City). “GPS is a perfect acronym for this group,” he says.

Check them out at http://gothamphilosophicalsociety.org/?page_id=429 and/or <https://www.facebook.com/philosophynyc>

OTHER REASONABLE NEW YORK EVENTS

Feminist Freethinkers of NY:
Check feministfreethinkers.org for March schedule.

New York Philosophy: Friday, Mar 6, 6-11pm at 49 Grove, *Cocktails & Conversation: “Living in NYC”*. Free admission, 100 expected. www.nyphilosophy.com

NY Society for Ethical Culture:

- Sun, Mar 1, 2 pm, *Sunday Assembly-NYC* - Free.
- Fri, Mar 6, 7 pm, *Ethics in Film: Juno* (2007). Snacks/bevs, \$5 suggest. Doors open 6:30.
- Fri, Mar 13, 7pm, *Ethics and the Theater: Reading of the play Burn This* by Lanford Wilson. 6:30 reception, snacks/bevs, \$10 suggested.

See the full RNY calendar at www.reasonablenewyork.org

PLUS

Agnostic A.A.: Fifteen weekly AA-endorsed meetings in four boros (not Queens). Info at agnosticAAnyc.org/meetings.html
Atheism History Week – With SHSNY’s John Rafferty for NYC Atheists, 5:30 p.m. every Wed, MNN Ch. 1997 in Manhattan, and live streaming anywhere at www.mnn.org.

Drinking With Atheists: Every Friday, fun and conversation. meetup.com/GothamAtheists/ManhattanHistoryBuffs: Every 2d Tues, 6:00, dinner/talk at Lili’s rest, 83-84th/3rd. 212-802-7427. March 10: “The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople.”

SAVE THE DATE!
DAY OF REASON BRUNCH,
at PETE'S TAVERN,
SUNDAY, MAY 3 at NOON!
Fun, food & drink, and an interesting Guest Speaker!

THE CHARLIE HEBDO SHOOTINGS

Robert A. Murtha, Jr.

The Massacre

At about 11:30 on the morning of January 7, 2015, two young men, armed with assault rifles and other ordnance, burst into the office of *Charlie Hebdo*, a weekly “satirical” magazine published in Paris. In the ensuing explosion of violence they killed eleven people, mostly cartoonists and editorial staff, and wounded eleven others. As they left shouting “*Allahu Akbar*” (God is the greatest) and “We have avenged the prophet Muhammad. We have killed *Charlie Hebdo*”, they gratuitously murdered a French policeman.

The massive mobilization and manhunt which followed ended two days later when the suspects, Chérif and Saïd Kouachi (who had proclaimed their desire to die as martyrs), were gunned down. While all of this was going on, in separate incidents, Amedy Coulibaly murdered a Paris policewoman and four patrons at a kosher *Hypercacher* (supermarket). A few hours later, Coulibaly, possibly unarmed, died in a hail of bullets fired by a platoon of obviously frightened police officers.

Starting on the evening after the attack, hundreds of thousands came out to demonstrate against the shootings. The slogan “*Je suis Charlie*” (I am Charlie) descended from the internet and was adopted worldwide as a sign of solidarity with the victims and in defense of freedom of expression.

It is hard for me to detect a freedom of expression issue here. The French government censored nothing and exercised no prior restraint. Nevertheless, even if *Charlie Hebdo*’s right to publish anti-Islamic cartoons is defensible, it is an uncomfortable thing to hold up as a symbol of freedom of expression. There is a line between freedom of expression and incitement to racial or religious hatred that *Charlie Hebdo* crossed regularly for years. Incitement to religious hatred is ugly. At Nuremberg Julius Streicher was acquitted of crimes against peace but his antisemitic articles and speeches were so incendiary that he was adjudged to be an accessory to murder and hanged.

No one can reasonably doubt the sincerity of those who gathered at the Place de la Republique on the evening of January 7 or the hypocrisy of the forty or so world leaders who gathered at the official free speech march and rally held in Paris on January 11. These included:

- King Abdullah of Jordan, where a Palestinian journalist was recently sentenced to 15 years at hard labor.
- Ahmet Davutoglu, Prime Minister of Turkey, (which imprisons more journalists than any other country in the world).
- Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel, whose forces killed seven journalists in Gaza last year (only Syria killed more).
- Foreign Minister Sammy Shoukreh of Egypt (which routinely detains and/or expels journalists).
- Sergey Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister, (beatings, murders, trumped up charges)
- Ramtane Lamamra, Algerian Foreign Minister (journalists

detained without charges)

- Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan, UAE Foreign Minister (journalist Anas Fouda held incommunicado).
- Mehdi Jomaa, Tunisian Prime Minister (jailed bloggers were “defaming” the army).
- Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary General of NATO, which deliberately bombed and killed sixteen Serbian journalists in 1999.
- Ibrahim B. Keita, President of Mali (expelled journalists. The army did it. Keita doesn’t really control them).
- Sheikh Khalid al Khalifa, Foreign Minister of Bahrain (journalists jailed and tortured – and that isn’t even the half of it).
- Dr. Muhammad al Sheikh, Saudi Arabian Ambassador to France (floggings, amputations, decapitations, etc.)

With this collection of democrats in attendance, one wonders why Bashar-al-Assad and Kim Jong-un were not invited.

Cui Bono?

Not the Kouachi brothers or Amedy Coulibaly. They are dead and reviled. In a few months, they will be forgotten. *Charlie Hebdo* will continue to publish scabrous cartoons.

Not French Muslims. They are being harassed on the street and threatened. Their mosques are being targeted by armed racists. Their youth still suffer the burdens of 40 percent unemployment and mediocre schools. And millions of them are stuck living in *banlieus* (suburban slums). They are still routinely profiled and harassed by the police. The French Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, recently referred to them as living in a state of apartheid. Most French don’t even consider them French. Not even when they were born there and speak only French. They are like a lump in France’s throat that cannot be swallowed and assimilated. The French have brought a huge problem on themselves and only the French can fix it. (We’ve done better but it’s not too late to screw it up.)

Not Muhammad. His reputation has suffered.

Not Islam. Its reputation has been trashed.

“Benefit”, however, does accrue to:

- “National Security” freaks. They want to read our mail (e and snail), eavesdrop on our conversations and steal democracy from us.
- Neocons in the US and elsewhere. They want us to send in even more troops. Where? *Quien sabe?* Exit Strategy? It will work out somehow. Pay for it all? Get rid of expensive entitlements.
- The Likud gang. They used the Paris demonstration to boost Netanyahu’s reelection campaign and promote Islamophobia. The longer the delays, the bigger those settlements are going to get.
- Islamophobes and Wing Nuts everywhere (and God protect Obama from them now the he has pointed out that Christianity also has dirty hands).
- The antediluvian rulers of Arabia are benefitting big time. They even seized the moment in Paris to pretend that they are friends of free expression.

- Al Qaeda in Al Yaman (Yemen) has claimed “credit” for the attack. Maybe they really are guilty. But we’ll never really know. France didn’t even try to capture the perpetrators alive. Dead men tell no tales.
- ISIS. The spotlight shown on Western evils obscures their own. Jihadists are lining up to join. Saudi donors will pay for everything.

Is Muslim Anger Justified?

Yes, it is. We must look at our own madness and admit to ourselves that the issues here are not freedom of expression and radical Islam. For at least the last hundred years, the governments of the core economies have sought to dominate, control and exploit the Middle East. After WWI, the Sykes-Picot agreement sought to divvy up the Middle East into British and French spheres of influence. In 1953, the US/CIA coup purged Iran of democracy and made it possible for the Ayatollahs to take power a quarter century later. France’s effort to suppress Algeria and make it a part of metropolitan France claimed over a million victims during an eight-year orgy of torture and mass murder.

Countless Iraqis, whose government (as bad as it was) had nothing to do with the WTC attacks, have died as a result of America’s violent assault. In Afghanistan and NW Pakistan, drones patrol what amounts to a free fire zone and deliberately misconstrue any gathering of people. Weddings and funerals are deemed to be terrorist gatherings and attacked with Hellfire missiles. The body count has long since convinced Muslims that the US has declared war on Islam.

Quo Vadimus?

It isn’t enough to understand that the Muslim world is suffering under a sustained assault which aims to preserve our domination and control of them and their natural resources. This is not happening because we are bad people; it is because our rulers believe (or act as if they believe) that their own future depends on controlling and exploiting the Muslim world. It must be stopped. We must organize and demand that new policies be adopted and that our domination and exploitation of the Muslim world end.

WANTED AND NEEDED: A MUSLIM ENLIGHTENMENT

Jonathan Engel

January’s terrorist attack against the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo, which left twelve people dead, has inspired much commentary, as would be expected. Many (e.g. Nicholas Kristof in *The New York Times*) have stressed the need to resist the urge to blame all Muslims for this terrible crime, and, in Mr. Kristof’s words “be careful not to respond to terrorists’ intolerance with our own”.

I agree wholeheartedly with such sentiments, but I don’t think that they should prevent us from looking carefully at the problem of Muslim intolerance, fanaticism and resultant terrorism. Are all Muslims fanatical terrorists? Absolutely not, and, just like all people, individual Muslims

should be judged on their individual characters, and we should refrain from group blame. Are all terrorists Muslims? Again, of course not. But these facts should not blind us to the fact that the Muslim world has a tendency, in far higher percentages than other religions (not to mention atheists and agnostics) to harbor, engender and excuse intolerance, fanaticism, misogyny, and, yes, terrorism. We should tread carefully to avoid tarring all Muslims with these attributes, but we should not shy away from a careful analysis of the circumstances that have led to this state of affairs and what, if anything, we can and should do about it.

I believe that what the Muslim world has lacked, and sorely needs, is an Enlightenment along the lines of the European Enlightenment that occurred from the mid-17th through the end of the 18th Century. It was an era in which cultural and intellectual forces in Western Europe emphasized reason, analysis, and individualism rather than traditional lines of authority. It challenged the authority of institutions that were deeply rooted in society, such as the Catholic Church; there was much talk of ways to reform society with toleration, science, and skepticism.

In his essay *What is Enlightenment?* (1784), Immanuel Kant described it simply as freedom to use one’s own intelligence. The Enlightenment was the source of ideas that are critical to western society today, including the scientific method, religious tolerance, and the organization of states into self-governing republics through democratic means. (Credit to Wikipedia for this concise definition of the Enlightenment). Its influence on the creation of our own republic cannot be overstated. Which is not to say that the West has always lived up to Enlightenment ideals, far from it, but these ideals have shaped us, and for the better.

I do not believe that there is anything inherent in Islam, the Koran, or Muslims themselves that inhibits their ability to act in enlightened ways. While the Koran does contain some nasty stuff about slaying heretics, etc., so does the Old Testament. It is not the specific religion that is the problem here, it is how seriously and literally the religion is taken by its adherents. One of the important facets of the European Enlightenment was that people stopped taking religion so seriously and literally. This helped to facilitate scientific advancement. Without the Enlightenment, it is doubtful that people would have been as open to Darwin’s revolutionary ideas concerning evolution as they were.

After the Enlightenment, European Catholics and Protestants stopped killing each other (at least in such large numbers) and there were no more Crusades to drive the infidels out of the Holy Land. Now look at the Islamic world, especially the Arab world, which is where Islam originated. Before the coming of Islam, the Arab world was a great source of scientific and mathematic knowledge and learning. Remember, the numeric system still in use in the West and elsewhere is made up of Arabic numerals. But since the coming of Islam there has been precious little scientific innovation coming from Arab countries.

It is often said that Muslims harbor deep resentment of western domination of the world. But for Muslims, the

only way to effectively counter western hegemony is by competing effectively in the marketplace of ideas and innovation. The random killing of western civilians will not win anything for Muslims. They can't compete if they don't accept science and reject superstition. They can't compete if they take half of their brain power (i.e., women) and say that they're not allowed to be educated. They can't compete if their schools teach unbending obedience to a book that was written by people who didn't know that the earth revolves around the sun instead of fostering the scientific method and free inquiry, even if such free inquiry compels them to relinquish some long-held beliefs. In short, the Muslim world needs its own enlightenment. And it cannot be imposed from without; it must come from within. It is long past the time that influential Muslim leaders realized this. It is the only way forward for their people.

ARE WE IN A RELIGIOUS WAR?

Giles Kelly

Are we in a religious war? Are the recent *Charlie Hebdo* murders in Paris another attack out of Islam in the name of God "in revenge" for Western incursions in the Middle East. If so, to what end?

Many Arabs have emigrated to the West because they are attracted to Western culture, yet many condemn Western ways and wish to maintain their religious customs. Do they come to join a liberal society or to take us back to their Middle Ages ways?

If the point of the *Charlie* massacre was to frighten us about the vulnerability of the West, it worked. If it was to give vent to Arab frustration, it worked. If it was to create martyrs (aka heroes) for doing God's work, it worked. It was cleverly done and has created much apprehension.

But even as we are told the Koran does not encourage such behavior; that murder is not in the philosophy of Mohammed, yet we have come to feel violence and repression is the way of Islam, if not its soul.

So where is the powerful clergy of Islam? I cannot hear their voices. Do they condone or condemn the murders by Islamic extremists? What are the Imams saying to their flocks about extremists and terrorists? Are they advocates of peace? How influential are they today?

God may not exist, but belief in Him does exist, and—over and over, again and again—religion is a power for both good and evil.

What action should we atheists advocate today?

HELP THE MODERATES BE HEARD

Martine B. Reed

When I first heard of the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre on January 7, I contacted a dear Algerian friend, who now lives in the U.S. with his wife, a Frenchwoman of Algerian descent. He is a Muslim. Certainly not a radical Muslim. He studied in France, lived with his wife-to-be before they married, is proud of his wife being a physician, even drinks wine.

I was immediately worried about these friends because so many highly-publicized killings in recent years have been perpetrated by radical Muslims. Too many people lump all Muslims together, as backward, fanatic, savage and dangerous. When something bad happens at the hand of jihadists, all Muslims have cause to fear opprobrium and retaliation directed at them indiscriminately.

Not enough publicity is given to Muslims who disapprove of terrorism. The attack on *Charlie Hebdo* was immediately denounced by the director of the Grande Mosque de Paris. Some of the victims of the attack were Muslims themselves. A French-born policeman named Ahmed was killed by the assassins on January 7; his family pronounced their horror of the motives leading to the massacre. These people feel that "their" Islam, which they practice as a religion of peace, has been "hijacked" by the extremists.

In 2012 a fanatic Muslim attacked a Jewish school in Toulouse. He killed several people, including children, and a policeman named Imad. Since then, Imad's mother, a Muslim who wears a headscarf, has been going around predominantly Muslim neighborhoods to address especially the young people and tell them that no one has the right to invoke Islam as a justification for killing. She says "*On peut ne pas apprecier les caricatures de Charlie Hebdo, mais c'est bien d'etre dans un pays ou elles peuvent exister*". ("You might not like the cartoons in *Charlie Hebdo*, but it's great to live in a country where they have a right to exist.")

Although one rarely hears about them, there are also secular Muslims. A French weekly newspaper, *Le Nouvel Obs*, recently published a declaration signed by more than a hundred "secular" Muslims. They start their declaration by acknowledging that the sacred texts of Islam, like those of other religions, indeed contain appeals to violence and intolerance. They beg all to renounce those "obsolete" texts. They entreat all schools to teach and emphasize ideals of civil rights and freedom, especially "*liberte de conscience*" (freedom of thought).

It is good to know that there are people "inside" Islam who refuse a use it as a justification for barbarism. I am not sure how to go about it, but I think all of us secular humanists should try to reach out to moderate Muslims, to acknowledge their existence, encourage their moderation, and help them to be heard.

WHY IT'S WISE NOT TO RIDICULE FAITH

Walter Balcerak

The massacres committed by Islamist extremists present a difficult problem for members of the secular humanist community. Because many of us are atheists, and virtually all are skeptical about religion, we feel free to analyze and criticize theism and its trappings.

But such criticism can go too far. After all, it is one thing to question religion, but it is quite another to attack and insult things believers hold sacred. While this perspective in

no way excuses the atrocities at *Charlie Hebdo* and elsewhere, it makes them more understandable.

Steven Pinker, in his book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, explains with great cogency why people may react with violence when their deepest beliefs are ridiculed.

“Challenge a person’s beliefs,” he writes, “and you challenge his dignity, standing, and power. And when those beliefs are based on nothing but faith, they are chronically fragile... Since one cannot defend a belief based on faith by persuading skeptics it is true, the faithful are apt to react to unbelief with rage, and may try to eliminate that affront to everything that makes their life meaningful.”

As humanists, we seek to create a world in which human beings (and other species) will flourish. Wounding people, obviously, does not foster flourishing. We know it is not humane to falsely shout “Fire!” in a crowded theater. For the same reason, it is not only inhumane but dangerous to mock or besmirch deeply held faith.

Besides, most of us are believers, too. We have boundless faith in science and reason.

Comment: We don't have "faith" in science and reason; we observe and conclude that they work. – JR

NEVER SURRENDER THE PEN OR THE IDEAS BEHIND IT

David Orenstein

(Excerpted from his “Paleolibrarian” blog 1/20/2015)

As I read about the reactionary anti-*Charlie Hebdo* demonstrations across the Middle and Far East, and look on dumbstruck by Pope Francis’ “blame the victim” comments concerning the artists’ deaths, I am more grounded than ever in the conclusion that the most radical to the most liberal faith traditions have the sad potential to be anti-humanistic. Each is perhaps antithetical to peace.

Surrendering free speech and secular democracy is not an option. And while I understand the images are insulting to those who feel their faith is being disparaged, the answer is not to kill people with automatic weapons or innocents in supermarkets. The appropriate response is to write an angry letter to the editor, acquire signatures for a petition to ask for editorial change or even take up non-violent picketing of newspaper offices. These actions are considered acceptable, and since they each recall a right to free expression and free assembly, they actually build bridges between people and communities rather than harm people and property.

You can’t kill ideas. You can only create situations where people are afraid to express them openly and honestly. That is the goal of religious terrorism: to essentially coerce and violently stifle all people from enjoying freedoms guaranteed to us just on the basis of being born.

The religious fundamentalist nations and their related pseudo-military thugs (ISIL, Boko Haram) are certainly trying to bend reality away from free expression. But they can’t win. They can’t win because freedom isn’t owned by and given to others by religious bodies. Religious ideas can

inform our lives but they cannot alone make us choose who we will become. Other philosophies, such as humanism, can inform our moral and ethical ideas and actions that have nothing to do with religion and which allow people to live good, happy and peaceful lives.

We are born free and it is the role of family, the wider commitment of community and government that either dampens or enlivens our fundamental rights to love who we wish, write and think as we wish, to gather and learn as we can and to live as equals regardless of where we happen to sit on this rock floating in space-time. This is modernity. This is the life we have consciously developed and it is the freely secular and democratic choice which works best. A gift we can and must give to future generations.

The Marxists tried to kill freedom and they failed. Not because Marxism as a theory is wrong but as a practice it is impossible to actualize and thus has always lead to totalitarianism. So, too, is it the case for those who take the might of their faith and try to bend everyone to their ideas and beliefs, which are actually stipulated and controlled by individual and mass delusion.

Inter-faith dialog may bring people together for a common purpose but it doesn’t solve the central problem: antagonisms and power relationships that exist and will exist simply because each faith group will disagree about whose god and magical beliefs are truly divine. So sure, you may get Muslims, Jews and Christians together for a march, but that won’t mean when the protest is over that the individuals will go back to their communities without the same personal prejudices they had before the gathering began. Religion, as Christopher Hitchens so aptly pointed out, really does poison everything.

ONE THING I DON’T UNDERSTAND ABOUT ISLAM Jack Herschlag

We read constantly about the mistreatment of women by Islamic extremists in the Middle East: denying them education, forbidding them to be seen in public without face covering and without an accompanying male family member, forbidding them to drive cars, punishing them with extreme torture or execution for sexual “offenses” such as premarital sex, even including punishment for being raped.

I assumed that this behavior traced back to early Islam, perhaps connected with the founding of the religion. Then I started reading a book titled *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, a translation written by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, a Muslim, with the assistance of a great number of Muslim scholars. It was published as a Mentor Book in 1953. The book’s introduction is a brief biography of Muhammad.

Muhammad was born in Mecca, and orphaned at an early age. He was “protected” first by his grandfather, and then by an uncle, with whom he travelled with the merchant’s caravan to Syria. Some years later he made the same journey in the service of a wealthy widow named Khadijah. His service was so excellent, and the report of his behavior by her old servant was so favorable, that she

married Muhammad, although she was fifteen years his senior. They were happily married until her death 26 years later.

During their marriage, Khadijah noticed Muhammad's increasing spirituality and his time spent in meditation, and listened to his description of visits to him by angels. She encouraged him to reach out to the public and to become the Prophet Muhammad, which he was reluctant to do. At last she prevailed, and she actively recruited disciples, becoming herself his first disciple.

With a matriarch in their history like Khadijah, one would think that Muslim women would have a respected status, as they do in many other religions, and of course among many who espouse no religion, but somehow this history, and its guiding lesson, have not only been lost, but totally perverted among Islamic extremists. Why?

AND ANOTHER "WHY?"

John Rafferty

Human rights activists in Saudi Arabia (the ones not in jail, anyway) have been trying to end the barbarity of child marriage in that benighted country by raising the legal age to 15.

Forget about it, announced the Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz Al al-Sheikh, Saudi Arabia's most senior religious authority. He issued a fatwa asserting that sharia law posits no minimum age for marriage and that girls can be married "even if they are in the cradle".

DOROTHY KAHN IS ELECTED TO THE SHSNY BOARD

[pic]

At a January 22 meeting of the Board of Directors of the Secular Humanist Society of New York, Dorothy Kahn was nominated to Board membership, and elected unanimously.

Our self-described "Englishwoman in New York" was born in Liverpool "with a skeptical attitude. I grew up reading everything I could lay my hands on, and soon became impressed with the nastiness of basic Christian doctrine, beginning a journey that led to my rejecting religion and the very idea of an immanent god."

Resident in New York since 1974 (and in Manhattan since 1985) - and after earning a midlife MA in Early Modern European History - Dorothy has continued her "lifelong omnivorous but critical reading", has been an active member of the city's freethought community, a member of SHSNY since 2012, and has recently taken over the planning and running of SHSNY's monthly Casual Sunday Brunch.

Welcome aboard, Dorothy. - JR

ON THE OTHER HAND ...

I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man. She must be quiet. - 1 Timothy 2: 12

Murtha, Engel, Kelly, Reed,
Balcerak, Orenstein and
Herschlag on *Charlie
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Will Secular Humanism
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