

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

November, 2015

We had a fun-filled Stoic time (not an oxymoron) on Freethought Day (page 5) – and wish you *all* could have been there. Herein: we look at god belief from a few angles, including the mendacious; consider again why we live here; say goodbye to a couple of friends; salute a tough and classy young freethinker, and give a tough and sort-of-a-slob old one the sad last word on guns in America. But first, let's look at some advice on dealing with the season's first big holiday. – JR

THANKS TO ... WHOM?

John Rafferty

{Reprinted from *PIQUE*, November, 2003}

This month most American families will gather on the fourth Thursday to join in the uniquely American ritual of setting aside a whole day to eat themselves silly, watch football, and fight with their relatives. Tens of millions of those Americans will also, just before the eating-silly part, join in the only prayer they'll mutter all year, something (thankfully) short that usually begins, "Lord, we thank you for all ..."

Okay for them. But those of us who don't talk to imaginary friends have to ask, To whom do we talk? Most of us feel thankful, but whom do we thank?

This year at my family's table I think I'll thank Abe Lincoln for instituting the holiday in the first place. The 1621 Pilgrims-and-Indians affair was a one-day one-timer, as was Washington's in 1789, which was actually about our new nation's success in the late unpleasantness with England. Lincoln's Day of Thanksgiving, too, had more to do with politics and battlefield victories in the Civil War than about bountiful harvests and roasted turkeys. But then so did the Emancipation document, his other big Proclamation of 1863. I'll thank Lincoln for Thanksgiving.

While I'm at it, I'm going to thank those same god-obsessed Pilgrims, who would have created a theocracy here if they could, but who nonetheless conceived the idea of a country based not on geography, ethnicity or ancient hates, but on an ideal, a "city on a hill".

I'll thank the Founders, who risked their lives and fortunes to win a country for me, and made the Pilgrims' ideal a possibility. And I'll thank the tens of millions of Americans who have since served and defended my country – and me and mine.

I'll thank the generations of slaves on whose scarred

black backs so much of my country's wealth and power were built. Then I'll thank the hundred million or more of the "wretched refuse" – micks and dagoes, beaners and hebes and chinks – who have since stood in courtrooms to announce that they wanted to be Americans, swore allegiance to my country, and contributed their talents and their sweat to the building of our city on a hill.

No, it's not perfect, it's not "undimmed by human tears", but we're still building our city, all of us.

That's who I'm going to thank: all of us. I'm thankful not just that I'm an American – which is an accident of birth, and there's no one but my parents, who are gone, to thank for that – but that I live in this country with so many other Americans, millions of whom I disagree with about dozens of issues, but nearly all of whom share my ideals, nearly all of whom I can count on to return to me the respect I give them, and who count me their fellow-American. For which I thank them.

This Thanksgiving, I thank us.

BUT IF SOMEONE AT THE TABLE INSISTS ON SAYING "GRACE", OFFER "GREAT AGNOSTIC"

ROBERT INGERSOLL'S NON-THEIST GEM

The time to be happy is now.

The place to be happy is here.

The way to be happy is to make others happy.

And no head-bowing! Everyone look up and smile at
A loving friends and family.

(A slightly longer version of this ran originally in November, 2008 *PIQUE*. – JR)

OR BART SIMPSON'S ...

Dear God: We paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks
for nothing

BOARD OF DIRECTORS: John Rafferty, *Pres./Editor*; Robert A. Murtha, Jr., *V.P.*; Donna Marxer, *Treas.*; Brian Lemaire, *Secty*;

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SHSNY HELPS A BRAVE YOUNG HIGH SCHOOL ACTIVIST CREATE A SECULAR STUDENT ASSOCIATION

John Wagner

When Thomas Sheedy decided to start a Secular Student Club at the Ward Melville High School in East Setauket on Long Island, he didn't expect to have to wage an 18-month battle. There were already about 40 clubs, including a Christian club at the school. Why not a secular club? The school administration did not share his vision and refused to authorize the formation of the club, despite the interest of more than 45 students and a willing and enthusiastic faculty advisor.

Only after receiving letters of support from SHSNY and the Secular Coalition for New York (which I, a board member of SHSNY, chair) and legal arguments from the Freedom From Religion Foundation and the Secular Student Association did the Superintendent of the Three Village Central School District see fit to approve the formation of the club.

Thomas was rewarded doubly for his efforts. Not only is the WMHS Secular Student Alliance thriving (there are 59 members on its Facebook page), but Thomas was flown to join the FFRF's convention in Madison, where he received a \$5000 scholarship. The freethought movement is growing and is in good hands. SHSNY salutes Thomas for his vision and perseverance.

And, in what Hemant Mehta on his Friendly Atheist blog called a "classy speech", Thomas thanked the administrators for approving his club. Here's that speech ...

I THANK YOU

Thomas Sheedy

Since April, 2014, I've been working tirelessly to form a Secular Student Alliance at Ward Melville High School. Students have come up to me with a sense of relief, knowing that there will be a space for non-religious students to meet, socialize, and work together, to become an engaging partner in the Three Village community for charitable work and public service.



The Millennial generation is the least religious generation in American history. More than a third of Millennials – the "Nones" – have no religious affiliation and many of these secularists have begun to identify as atheists, agnostics, humanists, skeptics, and freethinkers. Yet there are minors in this category, too, including some who attend Ward Melville High School, who are afraid of coming out to their friends and family in fear of harassment, projection, losing funds for college, or even disownment. The Ward Melville Secular Student Alliance will be there to support these students.

I thank the Three Village Central School District for

choosing to promote diversity and equality. This is the true meaning of religious liberty. Madam Superintendent, I thank you for not succumbing to the banner of political correctness. You recognize the needs of your non-religious students. You recommended approval for the club, and that we be provided with equal provisions.

And I believe you made the decision not just because the law required you to do so, but because you knew it was the right thing to do.

Thank you.

YOUR RELIGION? YOU ARE WHAT YOU SAY YOU ARE

Jonathan Engel

Apparently, Republicans do not believe that President Obama is a Christian. A recent Public Policy Polling (PPP) poll shows that 86 percent of Republicans either don't believe that Obama is a Christian (54%) or say they don't know (32%). And of course, there is the recent imbroglio over Donald Trump's failure to correct or challenge a questioner at a campaign event who stated that Obama is a Muslim (and it was pretty easy to tell from the rest of this "gentleman's" remarks that he didn't mean it as a compliment.) Personally, I do not regard the word "Muslim" as an insult, but apparently there are far too many Americans who do.

Now of course none of the claims are true, but in some ways the religion issue is a companion piece to claims that Mr. Obama wasn't born in this country; both are shameful efforts to tar our democratically-elected president as somehow "other" than a real American. But the two claims, though both are false and scurrilous, have an essential difference, because when it comes to religion, unlike place of birth, you are whatever you say you are.

Religion is neither in-born nor immutable. When a baby is born, it has no religion. In most instances, that baby will be raised in the religious tradition of his/her parents, and so will take on that religion as well. But this is not genetic, it's taught. Say a newborn, both of whose birth parents are Christian, is given up for adoption and raised in a family that practices the Hindu religion. In all probability that child will grow up to be a Hindu, and the fact that his/her birth parents (and their ancestors) were christened Christians will not matter one whit.

Religion, as distinct from ethnicity, is a belief. When it comes to religion, you are whatever you want to be, and therefore you are whatever you say you are.

Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio is an excellent example of this principle. He was born to Catholic parents, and initially raised as a Catholic. His family once switched to Mormonism, and then switched back to Catholicism. Now, as an adult, he sometimes worships at a Christ fellowship fundamentalist church and sometimes at a Catholic church.

So what religion is he? Whatever he wants to be and says he is. Just like all Americans, he has the right to choose

a religion (or not), and then he is whatever he happens to choose at any particular time.

Which brings us back to President Obama. His father was African, and so his race/ethnicity is one-half African; that fact is immutable. But the fact that Obama's father was a Muslim in no way determines the president's religious beliefs, past or present. He was raised almost exclusively by his non-theist mother and her Christian parents, and so, not surprisingly, he was raised as a Christian. Also not surprisingly, as an adult he has decided to remain a Christian, which is his right. Could he be a Muslim? Of course he could, just as anyone else could be, if they so chose. But Christianity is the religion he chooses, and so he is a Christian. The people who say he isn't have an ugly agenda of tarring our president with "otherness", and it is right and proper to call them out on this.

But my main point here is somewhat different. What I'm saying is that to accuse Obama of not being a Christian makes no sense in a land where the First Amendment gives everyone the right to choose their religious beliefs (or the lack thereof) for themselves.

DARWIN RELIGIOUS? NOT EVEN A LITTLE

(Excerpted from *finebooksmagazine.com*, and forwarded to *PIQUE* by the redoubtable *Richard Milner*)

(Editor: One of the stranger idiocies of religious fundamentalists, persistent ever since his death well over a century ago, is the claim that Charles Darwin, the man whose books they villify as godless atheism, was also – illogically – a believer at the end of his life. A newly discovered note, handwritten within two years of his death, proves otherwise. – JR)

A new world record at auction for a letter by Charles Darwin was set at Bonhams New York [September 21] at the History of Science and Technology sale. The highly personal and unusually pointed statement on Darwin's lack of belief in the Bible and in Jesus Christ as the son of God was sold for \$197,000.

Darwin's letter is a reply to a young barrister named Francis McDermott, who wrote on November 23, 1880, with a very unusual request: "... If I am to have pleasure in reading your books I must feel that at the end I shall not have lost my faith in the New Testament. My reason in writing to you therefore is to ask you to give me a Yes or No to the question Do you believe in the New Testament?"

McDermott continued by promising not to publicize Darwin's reply in the "theological papers".

Darwin responded the very next day:

Private

Nov. 24 1880

Dear Sir,

I am sorry to have to inform you that I do not believe in the Bible as a divine revelation & therefore not in Jesus Christ as the son of God.

Yours faithfully

Ch. Darwin

LIARS FOR JESUS

John Rafferty

Even as his jet zipped the Pope back to the relatively paparazzi-free privacy of the Vatican last month, and while Kim Davis played out the final seconds of her 15 minutes of fame, the media here twisted itself into fact-free contortions over what the events of the last couple of days of the Pontiff's visit "meant". Did his hug of his gay former student signal a change in Church attitudes toward homosexual unions? Was his "audience" with Ms. Davis an intrusion into American politics? Were American ultra-conservative Catholic bishops undermining Francis.

And, of course, who cares?

Even as it all played out, I couldn't help but flash back half a century to English 7 in college and *The Canterbury Tales* ("Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote ...") and to some present-day parallels to Chaucer's witty classic.

Here, as in the 14th century, was a cast of iconic characters: a Pope, a Clerk, a Lawyer, a Legate, and a Candidate, and all involved in a sort-of pilgrimage, the Pope's tour of America. But in today's iteration, instead of entertaining each other with fabulous tales to while away the slow hours of the journey, our characters recited their instantly-on-the-internet fables for a wider audience – us.

The Pope personally invited Ms. Davis for a "private audience", said the Lawyer, during which Francis assured his client of his support for her anti-gay bigotry. The Clerk herself, arms raised in triumph at a press conference after the interview, exulted in her "victory". And the Candidate, beaming at her side, predicted a new beginning in the War on Equality.

But a papal spokesman quickly said, No, the invitation had come from the Legate, the Vatican's nuncio in the U.S., who has a history of meddling in right-wing U.S. politics along with his right-wing buddy, the Lawyer. And subsequent testimony indicates that the Clerk was most likely just one of a shuffling line of ring-kissers.

What did the Pope say to the Clerk? He seems unwilling to say, and so seems the Legate, who will probably be (involuntarily) retired in January when he reaches 75. But the Clerk, the Lawyer and the Candidate are all quite willing to ignore facts and say whatever the hell will sell to their audience of bigots.

But, hey, it's only a little fibbing, and it's doing God's work – lying for Jesus.

THE LOGIC OF THEISM

Neil McKelvie

Let's suppose that God exists. What then can follow using logical thinking? Based on all present experimental evidence, the Universe as we know it came into existence 14.3 billion years ago, with an uncertainty of a few hundred million years. Yes, there was a creation. If it is stated that God performed this creation, we can not argue about it; we were not there to watch. And if God "said", "Let there be light!", just who was this being said to?

However, what are the considerations of the existence of God? Let us avoid using “he” (or she or it), because matter did not yet exist, let alone gender. At the beginning, entropy was, if not zero, certainly at its minimum value, because it has been increasing ever since. Thinking involves complexity of apparatus, whether biological or not. Our brains have limitations, including those of myself and all who may read this. Computers today have capabilities in many respects millions of times greater, although self-awareness as we experience it has yet to be made by us artificially. However, by present definition God must have infinitely greater intellectual ability. It then follows that no human, or artificial, brain can comprehend the mind of God.

Therefore, no one in the entire history of mankind has had the ability to understand God. No priest, minister, rabbi, guru, imam, pope (select your title) can pretend to speak for God. That so many millions believe that God has put all their beliefs into the minds of the makers of their religions is not supported by any evidence acceptable by scientific standards as this writer knows them.

Of course there are innumerable accounts of “miracles”. Every saint of the Catholic Church is claimed by them to have performed one miracle. Since “Science” has yet to verify any miracle, it follows that scientists are not saints. The thirst for the existence of miraculous events seems universal, and the contrary evidence documented in sources such as *Skeptical Inquirer* is accepted by a tiny fraction of humanity. Voices crying in the wilderness.

While respect, even veneration, is due for the great thinkers of human history, facts are usually necessary for clear thinking, and present knowledge of everything is now far greater, and increasing at a great rate. Why should the beliefs and ideas of past history be beyond question, or even beyond evolution, hopefully for the better.

As for the existence of other biological intelligences elsewhere, it took a considerable part of the 14.3 billion-year existence of the Universe for life of today’s complexity to evolve on Earth, because so many mutations of very low probability were necessary. Biological life anywhere must likely have taken as long. Considering the *size* of the Universe, both in age and in spatial extent, there is a high probability of other intelligence somewhere.

A theist could say that God has decreed that we must never know whether or not this is the case within any reasonable time, because the velocity of light at 186,000 miles per second is also the absolute limit of information transfer – except of course by God. Distance even to the nearest star is about 4 light *years*, or around 6×10^{12} miles. Stars elsewhere in our galaxy might be hundreds of thousands of light years distant. To *other* galaxies, and we can see light from billions of them, any information transfer can take literally billions of years.

The lifetime of humanity as a literate thinking species is perhaps 5000 years. Was all this “made” for us?

Are *we* the pinnacle of Creation?

THE UK IS FACING (AND FIGHTING) THE NEXT BIG ETHICAL ISSUE

John Adams

Chair of the North Yorkshire Humanists

(Editor’s note: North Yorkshire Humanists are our hands-across-the-pond-cousins in the UK, and John Adams entertained us with a short address here two years ago. Pay NYH a visit at <http://nyhg.humanist.org.uk/> — JR)

The defeat of the private members bill on assisted dying in the House of Commons on Friday was an undoubted blow to the efforts of the BHA [Ed: British Humanist Association] in getting legislation in this area. Notwithstanding the overwhelming support of the population for some legislation in this area, the dead hand of Parliament proved, once again, behind public opinion in ethical matters.

The Bill was defeated by 330 votes to 118 whereas a number of surveys have shown that more than 80 percent of the public are in favour of such legislation.

The BHA support had not been uncritical of the proposals, principally because they did not go far enough. The Bill, while including all the safeguards appropriate in terms of independent physicians and judicial approval, limited the possibility of assisted dying to those with less than six months to live. This seems counter-intuitive; if the objective is to alleviate suffering, those who have a year to live in pain and distress would seem just as worthy as those who have half that time to have the option of taking their own lives (and not have relatives or doctors face prosecution as a result). However the opposition to the Bill was not constructed on such rational terms. It was built principally on the “grannies put under threat to kill themselves by avaricious relatives” routine (they would not have been — there were clear safeguards in the Bill) and “we don’t pay doctors to kill people” (they would not have done so — the doctors’ role was to prescribe, not to administer, the appropriate drugs).

But all this was essentially bogus. The real opposition to the Bill was religious: god gives life and only god can take it away. Indeed the truth of this was revealed in an article in *The Lancet* on line, where opponents were recorded as believing that it was permissible to use scare tactics and bogus arguments because they were only “fibbing for god”. Apparently god approves of lying if it is in a good cause.

So the suffering of the terminally ill will continue; those who wish to end their lives will be able to do so if they have the money to fly to Switzerland; even then they will in all probability have to go before they wish so that they can make the journey; their relatives will continue to face the possibility of prosecution; doctors will continue to break the law by unspoken proscription of life-ending drugs, and so on and so on.

The BHA is committed to returning to the Supreme Court following successes in the Purdy case and the North Yorkshire Humanists will be inviting a member of the All Party Humanist Group to address us next year.

IT WAS FREETHOUGHT DAY, SO WE THOUGHT (AND ATE AND DRANK) FREELY FOR HOURS

A Report by John Rafferty

Fifty-two members, friends and freethought fellow-travelers filled the private upstairs room at Pete’s Tavern to overflowing on Sunday, October 11 (actually the day before “official” Freethought Day, but who wants to go to brunch on Monday?), and so apologies to the several more who had to be turned away (We *told* you to pre-pay!).

City College Professor of Philosophy (and SHSNY member) Massimo Pigliucci was the headliner of our celebration, and delivered a fascinating presentation on “Stoicism Today”. Stoicism is, he says, “a philosophy highly suitable to the complexities of life in the 21st century, perhaps even a good complement to secular humanism”.

In fact, Massimo suggested five daily Stoic “spiritual exercises” to help us get through the day better organized and, eventually, happier.

1. Morning Meditation – Prepare for the day by visualizing all you expect to encounter, in order to avoid unpleasant surprises. Marcus Aurelius, the most famous Stoic of all, wrote: “Begin each day by telling yourself: ‘Today I shall be meeting with interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill-will, and selfishness – all of them due to the offenders’ ignorance of what is good or evil.’” And he was an *emperor!*

2. Take the View from Above – Try always to see yourself from “above”, i.e., as others see you, aiming for objective analysis of yourself in the here-and-now.

3. The *premeditatio malorum* – Visualize the worst when thinking about challenges, to put the contemplation (worry) of them behind us. By thinking of the worst, we can put the worrisome in perspective and get on with it all.

4. Be Mindful Always, especially about (moral) choices, even seemingly minor choices, e.g., where you bank, where you shop, what you eat, who you associate with.

5. Evening Meditation – keep a philosophical diary (like Marcus), the opposite of the morning’s, going over the day, evaluating, what did I do right, wrong – not to beat yourself up, because the past is gone, but to learn from the day.



Success? The following Q&A session was so lively that our brunch pushed toward the four-hour mark, and the couple of dozen follow-up comments on Twitter and Facebook can be boiled down to what one “newbie” posted: “I loved it!”

SHSNY CALENDAR: NOVEMBER 2015 - JANUARY 2016

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, NOV 5, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK
40 East 35 St. (basement)
We'll discuss
BIGGER THAN PHIL
Adam Gopnik

When faux-interviewer Carl Reiner asked comedian Mel Brooks' 2000-Year-Old-Man character how religion began, Brooks replied, "We worshipped Phil."



Why Phil? Because he was bigger, stronger and meaner than anyone else in the cave. But then one day lightning struck and killed Phil, "... and we thought, 'Oh-oh, there's something bigger than Phil.'"

So, when did we — in the real world and time — lose our fear of our various Phils? When did faith start to fade? Adam Gopnik asks in this *New Yorker* essay from 2014. When did the burden of proof pass from atheists to believers? For some answers, Gopnik takes us on a grand and witty tour of modern unbelief, from the *philosophes* of 18th century France to today's New Atheists.

Find — and spend a delightful half-hour or so reading — *Bigger Than Phil* on our web site at www.meetup.com/shsny-org/files/ as a Word file ... or at <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/02/17/bigger-phil>

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

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, DEC 3, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
THE SHAPE OF THE NEW:
Four Big Ideas and How They
Made the Modern World
Scott L. Montgomery and
Daniel Chirot

This panoramic book tells the story of how revolutionary ideas from the Enlightenment about freedom, equality, evolution, and democracy have reverberated through modern history and shaped the world as we know it today. A testament to the enduring power of ideas. — *Hardcover, Kindle*

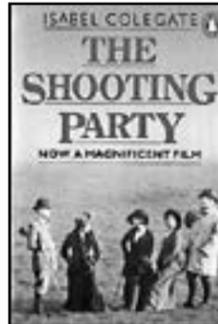
SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, JAN 7, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
NONZERO
The Logic of Human Destiny
Robert Wright

Evolution meets game theory in this follow-up to Wright's *The Moral Animal*. Wright contends that history progresses in a predictable direction and points toward a certain end: a world of increasing human cooperation where greed and hatred have outlived their usefulness. — *All formats.*

PLANNING AHEAD
The usual SHSNY schedule is ...
Book Club: First Thursday
 at the Community Church of NY
Movie Night: Second Monday
 at Stone Creek Lounge.
Brunch: Third Sunday
 at Stone Creek Lounge
Great Lectures: 4th Wednesday
 at Stone Creek Lounge.
Studying Humanism: Last Monday
 at the Community Church of NY
 More info: www.shsny.org,
 and/or 646-922-73

SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
MON, NOV 9, 6:30 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
THE SHOOTING PARTY

We sort-of celebrate Armistice Day with this fascinating 1985 look at the class privileges and prejudices of pre-World War I English society. James Mason stars as the shooting weekend's host, heading a stellar cast that includes James Fox, John Gielgud, Cheryl Campbell and Gordon Jackson.



Intrigue! Conflict! Adultery! — watch the Edwardian social structure crack before your eyes.

After-Film Discussion:
"Why are we fascinated by an era that's better long gone?"
SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.
(But put something on the bar besides your elbow.)

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION
SUN, NOV 8, 11:30 am
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

We gather in the saloon's back room, where we have enough privacy to have different conversations around the several large tables, as well as the big one led by Dorothy Kahn.

The expanded pub-grub menu has been enhanced with an \$11 breakfast special, the Bloody Marys are hot, the beer is cold, and conversation sparkles.

Come join 20 or more freethinkers for food, fun and conversation.

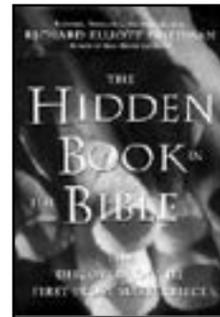
Discussion:
The Trump Phenomenon:
Wherefore and Why?

SHSNY CALENDAR: NOVEMBER 2015 - JANUARY 2016

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
WED, DEC 9, 7 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
THE HIDDEN BOOK
IN THE BIBLE

Dr. Richard Elliott Friedman
(Note: Because of Thanksgiving holiday scheduling complications, November Great Lectures on DVD will actually take place in early December — see you all then!)

As all biblical scholars know, the Bible was written by a number of authors over a long period of time and then edited down into the work with which we are all familiar (more or less; mostly less).



But now the renowned biblical sleuth and scholar, Dr. Richard Elliott Friedman, a professor at the University of California, San Diego, reveals for the first time his most startling and revolutionary discovery: buried within the Bible is a continuous narrative, a 3000-year-old epic of love, deception, war, and redemption, written by a single, masterful author but subsequently sliced apart by ancient editors who interlaced it with other stories, laws and poetry.

Using a creative blend of scholarship and detective work, Dr. Friedman has joined together this story from the dawn of written history into the extraordinary form in which it was originally written, what he calls it "the first prose masterpiece".

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

STUDYING HUMANISM
MON, NOV 30, 6:30 – 8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
40 East 35 St. (basement)
2015-16 Meeting/Discussion #3
THE ENLIGHTENMENT
AND ROMANTICISM:
Foundations of Modern
Thought and Sensibility

Scholar Mike Orzechowski will lead the discussion of our short online readings, which are:

- *What is Enlightenment?*, Immanuel Kant — <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>
- *The Oath Against Modernism* (A traditionalist stand against Enlightenment and Romantic ideals) <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10moath.htm>
- *The Sublime and Romanticism* http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/engl_258/Lecture%20Notes/sublime.htm

AND for those wishing to browse a bit further, check the library for *Introducing Romanticism* by Heath and Boreham. Light-hearted snippets with illustrations about the main figures, ideas, and varieties of Romanticism. Easy reading, fun. **NOTE:** Studying Humanism is a study group. If you have not done the reading, you may audit the discussion. All are welcome, definitely including newcomers! **Bonus:** Massimo Pigliucci's Freethought Day "Stoicism Today" talk is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLLptUkKw&feature=youtu.be>

LIKE SHSNY ON FACEBOOK
<https://www.facebook.com/SHSofNY>
MEET US ON MEETUP
www.meetup.com/shsny-org/
TEXT US ON TWITTER
 @NY_Sec_Humanist

OUR MEMBERS ARE ALSO ...
 • *Thurs, Nov 5, 7pm* — Jonathan Engel will give his presentation, "Engel v. Vitale and the Separation of Church and State", to the Delaware Valley Chapter of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. At the Free Library of Philadelphia, 1901 Vine Street (corner of 19 St.) Admission is free. For more info: janicerael@hotmail.com

OTHER NYC
FREETHOUGHT EVENTS
New York Philosophy: Monthly Cocktails & Conversation at 49 Grove in the Village. Free admission. Date and details, www.meetup.com/New-York-Philosophy/
New York City Skeptics
 • Nov date and place TBD, Niki Athanasiadou on "How to Think Like A Scientist". For info: www.nycskeptics.org

NY Society for Ethical Culture:
 • Sun, Nov 1, 2pm, Sunday Assembly NYC - speakers, songs, socializing, coffee and cookies.
 • Fri, Nov 6, 7 pm, Ethics in Film: *Lord of the Flies* (1963). Snacks/bevs, \$5 suggested
 • Fri, Nov 13, 7 pm, Ethics and the Theater: *The Collection* by Harold Pinter. 6:30 reception, light refreshments, \$10 suggested.

All NYSEC events at 2 West 64 St.

AND ... SAVE THE DATES
 • Sat, Dec 19 at Ethical Culture:
Reasonable New York 4th Annual Winter Solstice Party
 Info soon at www.reasonablynyc.com
 • Fri, Feb 12, 2016, 7pm at Byblos Rest, 80 Madison (28 St.)
SHSNY 8th Annual Darwin Day Celebration
 Details next month right here.

**IRV MILLMAN
1926-2015**



Long-time SHSNY member Irv Millman, whose warmth and wit delighted everyone who met him even once, died peacefully, surrounded by family and friends, on October 10. An active and vital member of the SHSNY Board of Directors (our resident restaurant expert and Darwin Day organizer) for the past eight years, Irv's quiet generosity several times financed the memberships or subscriptions of others.

At his funeral*, SHSNY President John Rafferty eulogized Irv as a *boulevardier*, an elegant and sophisticated "man of the city" who loved New York passionately. "He was my great good friend of 51 years, and I shall miss him every day of the rest of my life."

**You have to go to other people's funerals, or they won't go to yours. – Yogi Berra, one of Irv's favorite philosophers.*

**MARY ELLEN GOODMAN
1924-2015**

We mourn, too, the passing of Mary Ellen Goodman, whose smiling charm graced many of our social events during the past eight years. She was also a member of the New York Society for Ethical Culture, where she spent forty-five active years as a sometime group discussion leader. To see a NYSEC interview of Mary Ellen, go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2h6LCpsNzE



A memorial service will be held at NYSEC, 2 West 64 Street, Saturday, November 14, at 4:00 pm.

THE SANSKRIT SALUTATION TO THE DAWN

Kalidasa

Look to this day!

For it is life, the very life of life.

In its brief course

Lie all the verities and realities of your existence:

The bliss of growth;

The glory of action;

The splendor of achievement;

For yesterday is but a dream,

And tomorrow is only a vision;

But today, well lived, makes every yesterday

a dream of happiness,

And every tomorrow a vision of hope.

AND FROM THE RUBIYAT ...

Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,

Before we too into dust descend.

Dust into dust, and under dust to lie,

Sans wine, sans song, sans singer, and sans end.

How I became a None ...

LEAVING THE CHURCH

Remo Cosentino

Lawrence Kraus (PIQUE, September, 2015) presents research that "... children who attend religious schools [show] a significant difference in the ability of children as young as five and six years old to distinguish fact from fantasy". Up to my eighth year I was on my way to becoming, perhaps, one of those children: a timid and obedient Catholic child given to fantasy.

Indoctrination in the small hill town in Southern Italy, where I was born, began early. It was either Catholic catechism or Fascist ideology. My mother, an anti-Fascist, preferred the Church. In my seventh year, I was Confirmed as a Catholic. Wearing a white linen suit, with short trousers and a top emblazoned with a bright red cross, I was now a soldier in Christ's Army. Later that year Mussolini's *Ballila* (the Fascist Cub Scouts) claimed me. My uniform was black short trousers with a white shirt, a blue kerchief tied in a fancy knot around my collar. My black cap had a Fascist *fasci* symbol – a bundle of rods tied around an axe – instead of a cross. I did not suffer from any conflicting emotions from the dichotomy in dress and symbolism of my uniforms. On both occasions we celebrated with sweets.

Destiny rescued me from any future conflict with my dual roles. It was the last straw for my mother when Mussolini's thugs confiscated her gold wedding band. She finally acceded to my father's strong urging to come join him in America, which she had resisted to that point. On my eighth birthday we set off for America.

Once in America, I was no longer a scout in Mussolini's army; nor was I much of a Catholic. I could not understand or participate in Church rituals. More essential, I had to learn a new language. Acquiring a new language involves asking a lot of questions and the brain thinks differently. In this new world my mother expected me to continue my religious duties. But it was public school that threw me again into the arms of the Church: religious instruction was mandatory in New York's public schools in the 1940s. A school afternoon was set aside for religious instructions in the local parish school. I would troop off to be re-indoctrinated in Catholic dogma.

Perhaps the nuns who ministered to us were not as patient as they should have been. I was not a cooperative student. Their frustration with me resulted in many knuckle raps on my head. Neither nuns nor the doctrine captivated me.

Other factors contributed to my saying No, not only to the Church, but to received opinion. I did not know my father prior to our arrival in America. He did visit when I was four. Still, he remained a shadowy figure. When my mother sought backing to limit what I could do, go and say, my father was asked to decide. This did not sit well with me. I had been without his guidance up to then, and did not welcome his involvement. If I rebelled against authority, it was a quiet rebellion.

Once I started college I sought my own way without

the authority of the Church or that of my parents. Mass and confession became anathema. I came to see the process of confession and forgiveness as a con game. A stinging lecture from a priest when I confessed that I had petted a girl in her private parts made that my last confession. If petting was a sin and not acceptable, abstinence was not an alternative. I would not be miserable and denied pleasures that seemed normal and that pleased me.

At college I met and fell in love with a woman who, though Jewish, was not observant. She was more of a skeptic than I, and she had an inquiring mind. She encouraged my independence from religion and received opinion. We were married a few years later in a civil ceremony. The road was now clear: I chose to be an ex-Catholic. It didn't take much of a move to become a "None".

EXTREME COMPARTMENTALIZATION

Harvey Wachtel

I was more astounded than dismayed to read in a recent *Time* Magazine article that Stephen Colbert was and still is "seriously Catholic". The article even quoted him as spouting the theological premise that "Hell was created by Satan's disobedience to God and his purposeful removal from God's love, which is what Hell is ...", suggesting that he seriously believes that the present world is a result of a schoolyard fight between two supernatural belligerents:

"I'm not doing what you say – I'm not your friend anymore."

"Go to Hell!"

I can't believe this is coming from Colbert, the person who has consistently displayed what may be the most finely-tuned bullshit detector (BSD) in the human race.

This is compartmentalization to an extreme I never imagined possible. I guess BSDs are like the computers in those Volkswagen diesel cars. Someone or something (indoctrination or evolution?) has tampered with them to make them behave completely differently in isolated religious environments than they do in normal on-the-road life.

REFLECTIONS ON ROADS THAT DIVERGE

David Orenstein (Paleolibrarian)

(Excerpted from his blog post of 10/1/2015)

An important question concerning the formation of religious belief has been frequently asked and now scientifically studied, that is: is religious spirituality systemized via nature or nurture? This remains a central issue regarding a biological and thus an evolutionary basis for god belief. The answers to the question have implications for believers and non-believers alike. Is it that old story, "our genes made us do it?" and if that's the case, and as many suspect, then free will is non-existent.

In the book *The God Gene*, author Gene Hamer looked at how spirituality may have a genetic basis and even claimed that atheism is itself an anomaly. Religious behavior, Hamer says, is stamped into our DNA and enforced by community

and cultural mores and values. Thus, the combined forces of breeding and sociology work in tandem to maintain god belief in succeeding generations.

There are holes in this idea, to be sure, since there are 1.2 billion people (and the number is growing) on the planet who do not share spirituality or god belief with any group. You really need an awful lot of data to conclude that 1.2 billion of 7.3 billion is an "anomaly". But could the rise of the Nones indeed be part of a greater trend like that cool Peppercorn Moth example which occurred during England's industrialization? You know the story, it showed in real time how rapid changes in the environment could select and de-select traits which could favor some breeding populations over others in the same or similar groups. If so, what has changed in the global environment to allow for such growth in nonbelief, and what does that say about the future of our species and our humanity?

From a morphologic and biochemical view, research has found that there are indeed chemical changes in the believing and non-believing brain. In other studies, it appears that different regions of the believing and non-believing brain even communicate differently when exposed to spiritual situations. While one can self-stimulate a religious experience (as schizophrenics do, or those who place themselves in a trance-like state), most of the stimulation that leads to god belief comes from the external – like reading the bible, attending prayer groups, going to houses of worship, and so on.

So perhaps Ben Carson's ability to be a superb medical doctor and pediatric neurosurgeon while also believing that evolution is a lie created by Satan, or Dr. Francis Collins' ability to be a devout Christian and be the Director of the NIH and also lead the Human Genome Project, is not just simple self-aware cognitive dissonance. But perhaps this bifurcation is based on the troika of genetic inheritance, brain chemistry and immersed sociological belief in supernatural forces.

Of course, the hole in this theory remains the fact that there are people of equal brilliance, like more than seventy percent of all scientists and most Noble laureates in science, even with the same genetic, morphological and social variables in place, consciously choose to be non-believers. Or, the fact that many people have had strong personal and community connections to god belief, but later in life have become atheists.

When we enter the area of humanist philosophy, we find that spirituality can be defined as not needing deity belief at all. After four thousand years of intellectual objection and skepticism towards religion, modern atheists who practice meditation (and those who don't practice), do have spiritual feelings, they're just not related to a particular god or theology. They are perhaps more emotionally moved by the wind and the stars – and the idea that the gods' humans have created are too small and petty – while at the same time they feel fully connected to the natural world, other humans and the universe.

These many ideas end in one suggested outcome. A

global understanding if you will. Both religious belief and lack of religious belief are equal human contrivances, and they are essentially based on brain chemistry, personal history and group solidarity. This equality when consciously expressed offers believers and non-believers access and denial of access to social options (communities, breeding) and to traditions, beliefs and social networks.

However, belief in god by itself is not equal to non-belief or atheism. Once an individual accepts god belief they enter a world, based on their own creation, which is founded on magic and delusion. This delusion then offers the subject and their same-believing community self-imposed legal and social rights to subjugate others for their lack of belief in the same deity. This usually leads to violence, prejudice, unequal treatment and in extreme cases ethnocide or genocide. All because one's brain chemistry, enforced by the accepted beliefs and actions of fellow members of the same community, allow for such violence against select groups that include women, children, and ethnic and religious minorities, as well as the secular.

The light then shines on the non-believing brain quite differently. Here, based on rejection of deity belief, the individual and community sets standards that are more open to ideas, individuals, and communities. Not in a utopian fashion but based on a historical tradition of reason and an openness of acceptance of others, while at the same time encompassing the Golden Rule, to do no (or less) harm than our religious brethren have committed over time. Evidence, reason, acceptance of science and a love of the enjoyment of living – rejecting the idea we are born sinners – leads to a less stressed and in turn a happier life.

Finally, and perhaps just in time, as we make ourselves in our own image we are growing as a movement for all the right and peaceful reasons that our social contract demands of us. Thus impacting our morphology and brain chemistry in the process to further build on secular success, which benefits successive generations and keeps the genetic/social momentum for non-belief prospering.

SALMAN RUSHDIE ON INVENTED GOD

There's all this science fiction about people inventing computers that then become hostile to the people who created them. I think of God as an idea that was developed at a time when human beings understood much less about the world we're in. And then God became a useful way of putting together a moral code, the commandments and so on.

And now, speaking for myself, I don't need God to explain the question of origin. And I don't want God to determine what my commandments should be. I find God to be an irrelevant idea. But on the other hand, there he is in the middle of the room, completely out of control.

It may be that ministers really think their prayers do good, and it may be that frogs imagine that their croaking brings spring. – Robert Green Ingersoll

MENCKEN ON SACRED IMBECILITIES

Even a superstitious man has certain inalienable rights. He has a right to harbor and indulge his imbecilities as long as he pleases, provided only he does not try to inflict them upon other men by force. He has a right to argue for them as eloquently as he can, in season and out of season. He has a right to teach them to his children. But certainly he has no right to be protected against the free criticism of those who do not hold them. He has no right to demand that they be treated as sacred. He has no right to preach them without challenge. – H.L. Mencken

READERS RESPOND TO PIQUE

To the Editor: PIQUE continues to impress this retired editor. The October issue was one of the best in my experience: compulsively readable and fascinating from start to finish. Of course, I think my piece therein was pretty damn good, too. – Walter Balcerak

To the Editor: I enjoyed reading "The Meaning of Life? It Has None, Mostly", by Walter Balcerak in October PIQUE. Upon roaming Stewart-Williams' bleak wasteland of the meaninglessness of life, Balcerak suddenly beams with life when he concludes that human existence is indeed extremely meaningful.

I've just come back from a nearby park where I saw a huge full-circle moon hanging in our everyday sky. The light emanating from that majestic moon filled me with immense joy, which I think is the real meaning of life. Life is indeed so full of meanings. – Minhaz Parvez

To the Editor: I like Dennis Middlebrook's and John Rafferty's comments on the Hasidim and politicians in New York. Keep hammering them. – Edd Doerr

To the Editor: Another great issue, thanks. – Phil Appleman

GUN LOGIC

Mark Fiore

(Reprinted from *dailykos.com*, 10/9/2015)

Welcome to Gun Logic, where everything makes sense all of the time because it just does! Gun Logic is now spreading to other parts of society with impressive results!

Laws governing everything from traffic to banking to murder are stripped away. Because, after all, if murder is outlawed, only outlaws will murder. Similarly, only law-abiding citizens obey laws about fraud, racketeering and cruelty, so clearly we don't need those freedom-killing laws either. In fact, numerous studies prove that only law-abiding citizens abide by laws, so why do we even need the tyrannical oppression of laws anyway? *Freedom!*

Gun Logic dictates that the Second Amendment refers to "arms" not "guns", therefore nuclear arms are indeed protected by our Founding Fathers. And if, in the unlikely event a dark and twisted individual uses nuclear arms for evil, the answer is to solve all of the nation's mental health problems, not infringe on the rights of law-abiding nuclear arms enthusiasts.

Remember, law-abiding people don't need laws! And if it works on a bumper sticker, it's a great way to run the country! Gun Logic – it just makes sense! And now that there are no laws, tyrannical or otherwise, you must buy more guns to protect yourself from lawlessness.

If a pre-school child hits another child with a rock, the solution is not for every pre-school child to have a rock. – Anonymous on the internet.

GUNS DON'T KILL PEOPLE, AMERICANS KILL PEOPLE.

Michael Moore

(Excerpted from *DailyKos*, 10/3/2015)

(Editor: After every mass murder in America the media scramble for reactions from Michael Moore, the filmmaker whose "Bowling for Columbine" is perhaps the most important-ever statement about U.S. gun violence. The following is the I-think definitive statement he made in 2014. – JR)

With due respect to those who are asking me to comment on last night's tragic mass shooting – I no longer have anything to say about what is now part of normal American life. Everything I have to say about this, I said it 12 years ago:

We are a people easily manipulated by fear, which causes us to arm ourselves with a quarter billion guns in our homes that are often easily accessible to young people, burglars, the mentally ill and anyone who momentarily snaps. We are a nation founded in violence, grew our borders through violence, and allow men in power to use violence around the world to further our so-called American (corporate) "interests". The gun, not the eagle, is our true national symbol.

While other countries have more violent pasts (Germany, Japan), more guns per capita in their homes (Canada [mostly hunting guns]), and the kids in most other countries watch the same violent movies and play the same violent video games that our kids play, no one even comes close to killing as many of its own citizens on a daily basis as we do, and yet we don't seem to want to ask ourselves this simple question: "Why us? What is it about us?"

Nearly all of our mass shootings are by angry or disturbed white males. None of them are committed by the majority gender, women. Hmmm, why is that?

Even when 90 percent of the American public calls for stronger gun laws, Congress refuses, and then we the people refuse to remove them from office.

So the onus is on us, all of us. We won't pass the necessary laws, but more importantly we won't consider why this happens here all the time. When the NRA says, "Guns don't kill people – people kill people," they've got it half-right. Except I would amend it to this: "Guns don't kill people – Americans kill people."

Enjoy the rest of your day, and rest assured this will all happen again very soon.

Why We Live in New York #122

WHERE ELSE BUT MISSISSIPPI?

Neil Carter

(Excerpted from "Football Team Runs Out Brandishing the Christian Flag", on *Patheos.com* 10/4/2015)

Did you even know there is a "Christian flag"? Anyone from Mississippi knows this because growing up Baptist we saw it marched into the sanctuary on special occasions. It's even got its own pledge. *I pledge allegiance to the Christian flag and to the Savior for whose kingdom it stands; one brotherhood, uniting all mankind in service and in love.*

Accustomed as I am to seeing it in church, I'm not so familiar with seeing it marched out onto the field at a public high school football game.

This past Friday night, Tishomingo County's high school football team carried the flag out onto the field in a dramatic display of ignorance of the Establishment Clause, which many Mississippians believe only favors Christianity.



The coaches can play dumb if they like ("Hey, this was all them, I didn't put them up to it.") but once they suit up and go out onto the field like this during a school-sanctioned game, I'm pretty sure the rules become a good bit stricter.

My school district, which is determined to become famous for its flagrant disregard for the separation of church and state, waited until the night before the first game of the season to announce that the local band could not in fact perform their rendition of the Christian hymn "How Great Thou Art" during halftime, especially once they had learned that the band was at one point going to form into a cross formation and then end the number with the band on one knee, heads bowed in reverence.

This, they said, had nothing to do with religion. But they didn't want to get sued by the American Humanist Association, which has already taken them to task over multiple previous demonstrations of religious hegemony.

The locals were furious, of course, and since that time several weeks ago a large number of vehicles in my area have sported white shoe polish on their windows spelling out "How Great Thou Art". Soon it began to appear on shirts, hats, and auto decals, which you can pick up at a number of area retail outlets.

Why We Live in New York #204

MAINE WILL NOW LIKELY BECOME AS DUMB AS IT IS COLD

In Maine, Republican Governor and tea party darling Paul LePage has appointed Bill Beardsley as Maine's acting education commissioner. Beardsley is a creationist who believes Biblical creationism should be taught in the public school science classroom.

And by the way, so does LePage.

**NOVEMBER 8 IS CARL SAGAN DAY.
HEREWITH, A SAGAN SAMPLER:**

The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be. Our feeblest contemplations of the cosmos stir us — there is a tingling in the spine, a catch in the voice, a faint sensation as if a distant memory, of falling from a height. We know we are approaching the greatest of mysteries. — *Cosmos*

The cosmos is within us. We are made of star-stuff. We are a way for the universe to know itself. — *Cosmos*

We embarked on our journey to the stars with a question first framed in the childhood of our species and in each generation asked anew with undiminished wonder: What are the stars? Exploration is in our nature. We began as wanderers, and we are wanderers still. We have lingered long enough on the shores of the cosmic ocean. We are ready at last to set sail for the stars. — *Cosmos*

In the last few millennia we have made the most astonishing and unexpected discoveries about the cosmos and our place within it, explorations that are exhilarating to consider. They remind us that humans have evolved to wonder, that understanding is a joy, that knowledge is prerequisite to



survival. I believe our future depends powerfully on how well we understand this cosmos in which we float like a mote of dust in the morning sky. — *Cosmos*

In science it often happens that scientists say, “You know that’s a really good argument; my position is mistaken,” and then they actually change their minds and you never hear that old view from them again. They really do it. It doesn’t happen as often as it should, because scientists are human and change is sometimes painful. But it happens every day. I cannot recall the last time something like that happened in politics or religion. — 1987 CSICOP keynote address

One of the saddest lessons of history is this: If we’ve been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle. We’re no longer interested in finding out the truth. The bamboozle has captured us. It is simply too painful to acknowledge — even to ourselves — that we’ve been so credulous. So the old bamboozles tend to persist as the new bamboozles rise. — *The Fine Art of Baloney Detection*

The candle flame gutters. Its little pool of light trembles. Darkness gathers. The demons begin to stir. — *The Demon-Haunted World: Science As a Candle in the Dark*

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