

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

June, 2016

“Oh, wonder!” says Miranda (*below*), while we worry “I wonder ...”. We also celebrate our Day of Reason celebration, sing the praises of the universe and of space travel, calculate what we pay for prayers we don’t want, nominate two worthy Dumbths, parse “Judeo-Christianity” and the anti-humanism of He Who Shall Not Be Named, and tour religious idiocy from Ecuador and Egypt to Iceland and Indonesia. – JR

Oh, wonder!

*How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in 't!*

The Tempest, Act V, Scene 1

BRAVE NEW WORLD – READY OR NOT, HERE WE COME!

Andrew Pollack

(Excerpted from “Scientists Hold Secret Meeting to Consider Creating a Synthetic Human Genome”, The New York Times, 5/13/2016)

Scientists are now contemplating the creation of a synthetic human genome, meaning they would use chemicals to manufacture all the DNA contained in human chromosomes.

The prospect is spurring both intrigue and concern in the life sciences community, because it might be possible – if someone were able to create a totally artificial genome – to implant that genome into embryos and create human beings without parents.

While the project is still in the idea phase, and also involves efforts to improve DNA synthesis in general, it was discussed at a closed-door meeting at Harvard Medical School in Boston [May 10]. The roughly 150 attendees were told not to contact the media or to tweet about the meeting.

Organizers said the project in some ways would be a follow-up to the original Human Genome Project, which was aimed at reading the sequence of the three billion chemical letters in the DNA blueprint of human life. The new project, by contrast, would involve not reading, but rather writing the human genome – synthesizing all three billion units from chemicals.

But such an attempt would raise numerous ethical issues. Could scientists create humans with certain kinds of

traits, perhaps people born and bred to be soldiers? Or might it be possible to make copies of specific people? ...

Scientists and ethicists are already raising concerns about using new gene-editing techniques that could change individual traits in embryos. But it would be possible to make much more extensive changes by synthesizing an entire genome. ...

Dr. George Church, a professor of genetics at Harvard Medical School, said the meeting was closed to the press, and people were asked not to tweet because the project organizers, in an attempt to be transparent, had submitted a paper to a scientific journal. They were therefore not supposed to discuss the idea publicly before publication. ...

Scientists and companies can now change the DNA in cells, for example by adding foreign genes or changing the letters in the existing genes. This technique is routinely used to make drugs, such as insulin for diabetes, inside genetically modified cells, as well as to make genetically modified crops.

But synthesizing a gene, or an entire genome, would provide the opportunity to make even more extensive changes in DNA. The idea is similar to changing a document. If only minor fixes are needed, it is easier to change a word here or there. But if extensive changes are needed, it becomes easier to create a new document from scratch.

Dr. Church said a group with which he is involved is close to synthesizing the entire four-million-base genome of the E. coli bacterium. He said it might be possible to synthesize an entire human genome within a decade, though that job at first would cost tens of thousands of dollars.

Dr. Endy of Stanford, who is an expert in synthetic biology, which involves engineering life, said the cost of synthesizing genes has plummeted from \$4 per base pair, or letter, in 2003 to 3 cents now, but even at that rate, the cost

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for 3 billion letters would be \$90 million. He said if costs continued to decline at the same pace, that figure could reach \$100,000 in 20 years.

Note: Read the full article at www.nytimes.com/2016/05/14/science/synthetic-human-genome.html?_r=0

NOTE: *The following is reprinted from the November, 2007 issue of PIQUE. Reader reaction to Watson's question filled four of PIQUE's then-eight pages in November, with more in December. This was mine. - JR*

WE WILL, WON'T WE?

John Rafferty

"If we could make better human beings by knowing how to add genes, why shouldn't we?" - James Watson, Nobel Prize-winning co-discoverer of the structure of DNA.

In October PIQUE, we called James Watson's question "perhaps the most important ethical question of the 21st century." And perhaps it is, but that opening phrase, "If we could ..." with its conditional future implication, is already outdated. The future is here.

Pre-marital couples now undergo genetic scans to locate problems lurking in their recessive genes. Obstetricians now routinely scan for Tay-Sachs, Down Syndrome, and other genetic glitches. Would we deny prospective parents the right to such knowledge and, as medical technology progresses, the right to manipulate fetal genes so as to avoid lifelong disability or disease?

Well, some people would – the intellectual descendants of the eighteenth-century know-nothings who decried Ben Franklin's invention of the lightning rod because it thwarted God's bolts sent to blast sinners. (By the same reasoning, Ben answered, roofs on houses thwart God's rain.) They have resisted every advance in Western medicine – vaccination, anesthesia, blood transfusion, organ transplants, in-vitro fertilization, stem-cell research – that subverted their view of the human body as the perfect mirror of God's own sacred image (while at the same time being the repository of dirty, disgusting sin), and therefore not to be tampered with in any way, even to alleviate pain and suffering.

Their main argument, that the human body is "sacred" and therefore immutable, doesn't hold up to any rational examination (start with, "What the hell does 'sacred' mean, anyhow?"). But they do have another.

Most of us would – already do – welcome "gene therapy" that eases prospective parents' anguish. But what about the baby step (pun intended) from "gene therapy" to "gene selection" and "designer babies" in the very near future? Is there something immoral, unethical, about the prospective parents who will try to produce the next Heifitz? Are we okay with that?

How about the next Mohammed Ali? *Hmm.*

The next Miss Teen America?

Getting queasy yet? Good, because it wouldn't be an ethical question if it didn't make people uncomfortable.

Yes, some people with far too much money will try to engineer "perfect" babies, and others will attempt to

eliminate "imperfections" (the "gay gene," should one ever be discovered, comes immediately to mind) – and there will ever be doctors to take their money.

But here's the hard fact: As with every other advance (heart transplants) and mistake (H-bombs) in human history, if we can do it, we will.

NOTE: *In light of the latest news, reader opinions are again solicited. What do you think, humanists? - JR*

I like the scientific spirit – the holding off, the being sure but not too sure, the willingness to surrender ideas when the evidence is against them: this is ultimately fine – it always keeps the way beyond open – always gives life, thought, affection, the whole man, a chance to try over again after a mistake – after a wrong guess. – *Walt Whitman*

HOW I BECAME A 'NONE'

Martine Reed

In France in the mid-twentieth century, there was a convention that children should be raised in the father's religion. Perhaps there still is, I don't know. My father was Catholic, my mother Protestant. My siblings and I were therefore raised Catholic, which included going to a parochial school for the first six years or so of schooling.

My father's mother was a gentle and very pious woman. I remember some conversations with her about my mother's religion. Very gently and kindly, she told me that all Protestants, not being baptized in the true faith, would unfortunately go to hell after death. I must have looked crestfallen, because she amended her opinion to include the possibility of a long (very long) stay in purgatory, which might, perhaps, lead to a less dismal fate.

My mother's father was an outspoken man who counted several protestant ministers in his ancestry. He told me forcefully and unequivocally that most "papists" would go to hell. By the time I was eight or so, I had no respect for either religion. I did feel a certain preference for the Protestant side, though. They were in the minority, so that made them more appealing in my view. I had no choice, however, but to go to Catholic church every Sunday and to catechism classes.

In the third grade, in parochial school, I remember a fairly charismatic teacher. I must have had a brief bout of religiosity because I started feeling very sad for my poor mother, who was doomed to hellfire and damnation. I confided my feelings to the teacher. She suggested that I make the sacrifice to God of skipping recess and staying in the classroom to pray for my mother's salvation. So I did without fresh air and exercise and prayed very hard. For a few days. But I wanted to play with my classmates, so my efforts ended quickly. Anyway, my mother showed no inclination, ever, to convert to Catholicism. She was very fond of bringing into the conversation at dinner whatever priestly scandal she had read about. News about priests discovered having mistresses made her especially happy. (Please note I never ever saw or heard about priests molesting children, *that* did not make the news.).

Around age 11 I had to start preparing for the big event of the First Communion. I was looking forward to wearing a long white dress and to receiving lots of gifts. Before the big day, we had to do a “retreat”. Not in our usual church, but in a bigger one, Saint Augustin in Paris, which has a big beautiful dome. For some reason, I got awfully bored the very first day of retreat. I managed to sneak out of the classroom, and wandered around in the church. I spied a small door, tried it, found it unlocked. It led to a stairway. There was a long climb, ending at another small, unlocked door. And Lo!, having opened that door, I found myself outside, high above the streets, right at the base of the Dome, on a narrow path which went all around. I was exhilarated. Maybe that was a spiritual experience! But short-lived: the door was suddenly flung open by a very mad, very red-faced priest. I got roundly scolded, but I still think it had been a great adventure. And that’s all I remember about the retreat.

It was a short while later that my mother thought it time to tell me about “the facts of life”. After all, having had a First Communion, one is on the way to adulthood and must be prepared. Her instructions were not extremely detailed. What I did absorb, though, was some facts about female anatomy. (Male anatomy was not covered at all). The next time I was in catechism class, I had an epiphany. I raised my hand, interrupted the priest. How could Mary, the mother of God, be a virgin, I asked excitedly? Aren’t virgins supposed to have an intact membrane, the hymen? And didn’t she deliver a baby, Jesus, who obviously had to go through and break the hymen in order to be born? Therefore, I concluded triumphantly, she *could not* be a virgin! I swear to this day I was not trying to be nasty. I was just intrigued by the situation, that’s all. And proud of my new knowledge.

It did not go well. The priest threw me out of the classroom. He summoned my mother and went into a long tirade. I had to apologize and make many promises in order to be re-admitted. A bit later, I somehow won the right to stay out of catechism and the powers that be did not force the issue; they must have thought I was a pretty undesirable member of the religion class. I still had to go to church and take confession and communion every once in a while, but no one forced me very hard. I am pretty sure I dropped out of the whole religious insanity when I was 15 or so, and no one bothered me anymore, it was so obviously hopeless.

At age 18, I decided that I wanted to join the Communist party, but that’s another story entirely (hint: I did not join after all). At age 20, I married an American, who was then an Episcopalian. He is not much of one at this time. And I am, still, proudly, a *None*.

I AM A VALUES VOTER Jonathan Engel

Over the past several decades, there has been much talk in the political sphere of so-called “values voters”, which has coincided with the emergence of the politically potent religious right in America. “Wicktionary” defines a values voter as “one who

participates in elections and makes decisions based on issues such as religion, abortion, capital punishment, and same-sex marriage”. There is even an annual “Values Voters Summit” political conference for right-wingers sponsored by the arch-conservative Family Research Council.

I am troubled by this, because I very much consider myself to be a “values voter”, and yet in modern political parlance I would *never* be referred to as such. Why not? Because my values differ from those of the religious right. My values include equal rights, justice, concern for the environment, quality education and health care for all, the peaceful resolution of disputes (between both countries and individuals), the alleviation of poverty, and the use of science and reason in the political decision-making process. How are these not values? Why am I not considered a “values voter” when I vote regularly and decide for whom to vote largely on whether a candidate shares the values stated above? Why are only right-wing religious values considered to be “real values” in this context? And what of the supposed “real values” held by the religious right?

A news story from a few months ago got me to wondering whether right-wing values are truly sincerely held beliefs, or are merely politically useful shibboleths that can be used (or ignored) as convenient.

Back in February, *The New York Times* published a brief article stating that the governor of Idaho had expressed concern regarding the number of children who had died in his state because their parents (for religious reasons) had chosen faith-healing over medical care for their seriously ill children. (Well, nobody would do that for medical reasons, would they?). The article prodded me to ruminate on the phrase “pro-life” and its meaning to supposed “values voters”. Why haven’t we heard from the “pro-life” people on the issue of providing needed medical care to seriously ill children? After all, so-called pro-lifers seem omnipresent when the issue concerns abortion or contraception. Don’t they believe that all children, from the moment of conception, have the “right to life”? Does not the right to life, by any reasonable definition, include the right to life-saving medical care? I think so, but then again, that’s one of my values. But it seems that for many people who take the mantle “right to life” that right ends at birth, and after that they become raging libertarians who basically take the attitude, “Kid, you’re on your own.”

Look, people have the right to be hypocrites, I suppose, but why does society at large enable such people by giving them the labels they want (such as “value voters” or “right-to-life”), as opposed to the labels they deserve? We should, we must, call them out on their hypocrisy, instead of accepting the idea that all religious right-wingers have “values” that somehow elude the rest of us.

When a religion is good, I conceive it will support itself; and when it does not support itself, and God does not take care to support it so that its professors are obligated to call for help of the civil power, it’s a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one. — *Benjamin Franklin*

SPACE EXPLORATION NOW

Paul Forcella

I am very concerned that as of now the U.S. has nothing to replace the space shuttle. Many things take the front pages of newspapers, but space exploration, with respect to manned missions, is not one of them. Other countries may outdistance the U.S. if we don't get moving on this matter.

Humanity must get off Earth and develop manned bases on Earth's moon, which is rich in heavy metals and has some ice water, as well. Mars is a good planet to explore, and should have manned bases once we determine how to deal with the hazards of cold, radiation and other safety problems.

Exploration to other solar systems is the next needed step for humanity. This will require a huge ship, with artificial gravity, that is self-sustaining, with farming, manufacturing, etc., as needed. It would take hundreds of years or more to get to a desirable star – a good place for a destination would have to be found. Doctors, farmers, manufacturers, scientists of all kinds, psychologists, etc., would be needed.

We must eventually leave the Earth and explore the Milky Way galaxy. Every year new planets are being discovered beyond the solar system we are bound to. Most planets are poor candidates for colonization, but a few are Earth-like*. We must head to these good spots in the universe. We will have to take our own food – our destination may have no life, or the food there if, if there is any, could be poison to us. We would have to check for dangerous life on such an Earth-like planet, from dangerous bacteria to dangerous plants or animals. Robotic probes could go on ahead of our interstellar ship and give us a report of such a planet.

Eventually, the entire Milky Way Galaxy could be colonized by humanity. But humankind must start moving on this matter without delay.

Therefore, we need something to replace the space shuttle. We need to get moving. Now.

**From The New York Times, May 11:*

Astronomers operating NASA's planet-finding spacecraft announced [May 10] that they had validated the planethood of 1,284 new candidates from Kepler's voluminous catalog of potential exoplanets, the largest collection of new planets announced at one time. It brings the total of actual planets Kepler has discovered to more than 2,000. ...

Extrapolating these results to the entire galaxy, Natalie Batalha, Kepler mission scientist from the Ames research Center, said there could be 10 billion roughly earth-size planets in the galaxy within their stars' habitable zones. The nearest habitable planet, she estimated, could be as close as 11 light-years. ...

Last month, scientists announced a plan to try to send smartphone-like spacecraft to Alpha Centauri, which is 4.4 light-years away.

Comment: Great! The Alpha Centurians can learn all about us via Angry Birds, Grand Theft Auto and Plants vs. Zombies.

THE GALAXY SONG

(Bugger all down here on Earth)

Eric Idle

Just remember that you're standing
on a planet that's evolving,
Revolving at 900 miles an hour.

It's orbiting at 19 miles a second, so it's reckoned,
A sun that is the source of all our power.

The Sun and you and me and all the stars that we can see
Are moving at a million miles a day,

In an outer spiral orb, at 40,000 miles an hour,
Of the galaxy we call the Milky Way.

Our galaxy itself contains a hundred billion stars;
It's a 100,000 light years side to side.

It bulges in the middle, 16,000 light years thick,
But out by us it's just 3,000 light years wide.

We're 30,000 light years from the galactic central point
We go round every 200,000,000 years,

And our galaxy is only one of millions of billions
In this amazing and expanding universe.

Our universe itself keeps on expanding and expanding
In all of the directions it can whiz

As fast as it can go, the speed of light you know,
12,000,000 miles a minute; that's the fastest speed there is.

So, remember when you're feeling very small and insecure
How amazingly unlikely is your birth,

And pray that there's intelligent life
somewhere up in space

'Cause there's bugger all right down here on Earth.

CARL SAGAN HAD A FEW THINGS TO SAY ABOUT OUR PLACE IN THE UNIVERSE

We live on a hunk of rock and metal that circles a humdrum star that is one of 400 billion other stars that make up the Milky Way Galaxy which is one of billions of other galaxies which make up a universe which may be one of a very large number, perhaps an infinite number, of other universes. That is a perspective on human life and our culture that is well worth pondering.

A religion that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by traditional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge.

Who are we? We find that we live on an insignificant planet of a humdrum star lost in a galaxy tucked away in some forgotten corner of a universe in which there are far more galaxies than people.

AND H.L. MENCKEN SUMS IT ALL UP

To sum up: 1. The cosmos is a gigantic fly-wheel making 10,000 revolutions a minute. 2. Man is a sick fly taking a dizzy ride on it. 3. Religion is the theory that the wheel was designed and set spinning to give him the ride.

**WE FILLED THE ROOM AT PETE'S
FOR "DAY OF REASON"
(and had better than a reasonably good time)**



Bernard Alston
Scott Arnold
Giddian Beer
Wally Berliner
Barbara Bernstein
Kiwi Callahan
Deborah Cardille
Bill Carter
Miron Dion-Arivas
Jonathan Engel
Karen Engel
Mark Esposito
Edith Finell
Ron Finell
Peter Flom

Ben Forman
Joel Galker
Leah Gitter
Jocelyn Gonzalez
Steve Green
Elaine Heller
Dorothy Kahn
Sharon Krutzel
Brian Lemaire
Pedro Lujans
David Madison
Carl Marxer
Donna Marxer
Claire Miller

Carlos Mora
Bob Mundy
Bob Murtha
Bernard O'Brien
David Orenstein
Kathleen Walsh Penn
Charlotte Pomerantz
John Rafferty
Martine Reed
Bill Ross
Judy Segal
Larry Shaw
Margo Smiley
John Wagner
Mike Weiss



Thank you, David Orenstein, the Paleolibrarian

SHSNY CALENDAR: JUNE - AUGUST 2016

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, JUNE 2, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

28 East 35 St. (front lounge)
We'll discuss

**POLITICAL ORDER AND
POLITICAL DECAY: From the
Industrial Revolution to the
Globalization of Democracy
PARTS 1 & 2**

Francis Fukuyama

Taking up the essential question of how societies develop strong, impersonal, and accountable political institutions, Fukuyama follows the story begun in *The Origins of*



Political Order [our April and May book] from the French Revolution to the so-called Arab Spring and the deep dysfunctions of contemporary American politics. He examines the effects of corruption on governance, and why some societies have been successful at rooting it out.

Fukuyama, author also of the best-selling and prize-winning *The End of History and the Last Man*, explores the different legacies of colonialism in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, and offers a clear-eyed account of why some regions have thrived and developed more quickly than others. And he boldly reckons with the future of democracy in the face of a rising global middle class and entrenched political paralysis in the West.

– Paperback & Kindle available

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

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, JULY 7, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
**POLITICAL ORDER AND
POLITICAL DECAY**

(Conclusion)

We'll conclude our reading and our discussion.

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, AUG 4, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
**ISLAM AND THE FUTURE OF
TOLERANCE: A DIALOGUE**
Sam Harris & Maajid Nawaz

In this short book, Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz invite us to join an urgently needed conversation: Is Islam a religion of peace or war? Is it amenable to reform? What do words like *Islamism*, *jihadism*, and *fundamentalism* mean in today's world? This dialogue between a famous atheist and a former radical is startling for the actual progress they make.

PLANNING AHEAD

The usual SHSNY schedule is ...

Book Club: First Thursday
at the Community Church of NY
Movie Night: Second Monday
at Stone Creek Lounge.

Brunch: Third Sunday
at Stone Creek Lounge
Great Lectures: 4th Wednesday
at Stone Creek Lounge.

Studying Humanism: Last Monday
at the Community Church of NY

More info: www.shsny.org
and/or 646-922-7389
(leave a call-back number)

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MEET US ON MEETUP

www.meetup.com/shsny-org/

TEXT US ON TWITTER

@SHS_NewYork

SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

MON, JUNE 13, 6:30 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

PARTICLE FEVER

As the Large Hadron Collider is about to be launched for the first time, physicists are on the cusp of the greatest scientific discovery of all time – or perhaps their greatest failure.



The creation of the Higgs boson particle, an elusive key to unlocking secrets of the universe, unfolds on camera in this award-winning documentary.

After-Film Discussion:

Should there be limits on scientific experimentation?

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

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, JUNE 19, 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 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 great conversation.

SHSNY CALENDAR: JUNE - AUGUST 2016

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, JUNE 22, 7 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

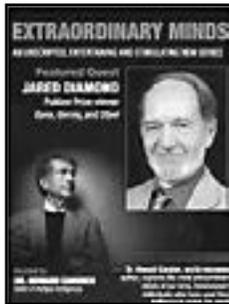
EXTRAORDINARY MINDS

Jared Diamond

in conversation with

Dr. Howard Gardner

Dr. Diamond, a professor of geography and physiology at UCLA, is well known for his work in the fields of ecology and evolutionary biology. and



as the author of eight books, including *The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee*; *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which won the Pulitzer Prize and has been translated into 36 languages, and the best-selling *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Succeed*.

The ease with which Diamond can explain major patterns in human history has made him a popular draw for lecture audiences and the international media.

Dr. Gardner is Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, an influential public intellectual and the author of 25 books that have been translated into 29 languages, including *Multiple Intelligences*; *New Horizons*; and *Five Minds for the Future*.

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

CALVIN'S PROOF OF GOD

Hobbes (Six-year-old cartoon-character Calvin's real-to-him stuffed tiger):

Do you believe in God?

Calvin: Well, somebody's out to get me.

STUDYING HUMANISM

MON, JUNE 6, 6:30-8:30 pm
Community Church of NY
28 East 35 St. (Gallery)

2015-16 Meeting/Discussion #7

ISLAM AND ENLIGHTENMENT

Sidney Finehirsh will follow up on his very successful evening re Islam last Fall with "Islam and Enlightenment".

Sid has put together a reading list entirely online (*no book to buy!*). It's on the Calendar page (June 6) of the website (www.shsny.org): a 3-page essay on "How Muslims Made Europe" by Kwame Appiah, and links to six short essays, all of which you can (*should!*) read in about an hour.

NOTE: Studying Humanism is a *study* group. If you have *not* done the reading, you may still *audit* the discussion — all are welcome, definitely including newcomers!

STUDYING HUMANISM

MON, JUNE 27, 6:30-8:30 pm
2015-16 Meeting/Discussion #8
STUDENTS' CHOICE

Come to the June 6 discussion and help decide the topic of the final meeting of the 2015-16 "semester".

REASONABLE NEW YORK SUMMER SOLSTICE PARTY

SAT, JUNE 18, 12-4 pm

Ellington in the Park

Park Entrance at 103 St & Riverside Drive

Celebrate our hemisphere's longest and sunniest (we hope) day with dozens of your fellow reasonable New Yorkers in lovely Riverside Park. Meet, greet, make new friends and feast on Ellington's grill menu and full bar.

MEMBERS ALSO ...

Saturday, June 4, Sunday June 5 (12-6pm) and Monday June 6 (2-8pm), Marilyn Henrion hosts

Open Studio days featuring the works of long-time SHSNY



member and

artist **Edward Henrion** (1928-2016), at her home, 505 Laguardia Place, #23D.

RSVP helpful but not required: contact marilynhenrion@mac.com, or 917-359-4621. (See Ed's work at www.edwardhenrion.com)

Sunday, June 5, 6:45pm — **Rebecca Kelly** Ballet hosts an intimate evening of dance (bal-



lets *Desire*, *Soft Moon*, an excerpt from *Cascade*) and conversation, followed by a reception. RSVP required: 212-431-8489. \$40 contribution. City Center Studios, 130 W. 56 St (B'way - 6th)

GOING TO REASON RALLY 2016 ON JUNE 4?

If you're going to see/hear Baba Brinkman, Richard Dawkins, Johnny Depp, Bill Nye, James Randi, Julia Sweeney, Margaret Cho and tens of thousands of your fellow freethinkers ... and want to pool a ride, share a bus or train trip, go halves on a hotel room, arrange a meetup? Contact the SHSNY Reason Rally Committee (Maria Astifidis, Claire Miller, Carl Marxer, Brian Lemaire) at mariaastifidi@netzero.net.

CRYBABY CHRISTIANS

Luis Granados

(Excerpted from “Rules Are for Schmucks: Do Christians Complain Too Much?” on *thehumanist.com*, 4/21/2016)

This just in: a rapidly growing number of Americans think that Christians complain too much. Lifeway Research, an evangelical research firm, just released a study showing that 43 percent of those surveyed agree that “American Christians complain too much about how they are treated.” This figure is up sharply from the 34 percent who agreed with the same statement two years earlier.

A large majority of (59 percent) of religious “Nones” agrees with the statement, as does another majority of (53 percent) who rarely or never attend worship.

Really? How can this be?

One of the pleasantest parts of this time of year is that we’re as far removed from Christian whining about the “War on Christmas” as we can ever be. It doesn’t matter that no such war exists, as David Kyle Johnson demonstrated so thoroughly in *The Myths That Stole Christmas*. Or, more precisely, that it exists solely in the minds of those who make tons of money “defending” Christmas against the imagined humanist onslaught, as Cathy Lynn Grossman described last year. But a mere calendar can’t keep a good Christian complainer down. Their latest grumble: “chocolate eggs”.

What’s wrong with chocolate eggs, you ask? Apparently it’s the fact that they’re not called “Easter eggs” instead. Having a candy manufacturer call its product a chocolate egg rather than an Easter egg is “deeply disappointing and shameful”, says David Marshall, CEO of the UK-based Meaningful Chocolate Co. He also contends it “shows they’re insensitive and uncomfortable with the Christian faith”.

As pernicious as the “War on Easter” is the one on Thanksgiving. Christian gripemaster Paul Kengor reviewed several books describing Thanksgiving for school children that did not, in his view, properly associate the holiday with God: “The Creator even gets trumped by cranberry sauce.” Movies and television are another huge source of Christian complaint. “The Golden Compass” of 2007, for example, was supposed to be the first of a three-film trilogy based on Philip Pullman’s wildly popular *His Dark Materials* trilogy. It cost \$180 million to make and took in \$380 million at the box office. By my math, that ain’t bad. So where are the next two films? Scuttled, that’s where; it seems the studio couldn’t deal with all the complaining from the Catholic Church, which was concerned that the evil “Magisterium” seemed too Vatican-esque.

Christians have lately been getting “religious liberty” laws passed right and left to allow them to discriminate against people they don’t like, especially LGBTQ individuals (though most of the laws are not limited to that). The latest, in Tennessee, is a “right to dodge work” law that allows counselors, many of them government employees, to continue getting paid while refusing to provide services to people who don’t appeal to them. This follows in the footsteps of “Kim Davis” laws like the one in North

Carolina allowing Christian government clerks to continue getting paid even when they refuse to do the part of their jobs involving issuing marriage licenses. Yet despite all this upheaval, 60 percent of Christians on the Lifeway survey believe that “religious liberty is on the decline in America”.

Leading Southern Baptist apologist Dr. Richard (The Plagiarist) Land describes the notion that government employees should do their jobs as “an intolerant totalitarianism that seeks to punish any variance to its Orwellian groupthink”. Any guesses what kind of brainwashing results in that 60-percent poll result?

It’s hard to imagine what Christians are complaining about. Already this month, which is barely half over, we have a state legislature (Tennessee again) passing a law to make the Bible the “official state book”. (Given the Tennessee location of the Scopes Trial, some of us think *On the Origin of Species* might have been a better choice.) The governor, who consulted a lawyer, decided to veto a law in such direct contradiction of the First Amendment—generating yet more Christian complaints (and lawmakers plan to hold a vote to override the veto). We have a federal judge in New Jersey ruling that a Christian school, unlike a public school and a nonreligious private school, doesn’t have to go to the (enormous) expense of providing services to special needs and other types of disabled students—despite the fact that the Quaker school in question happily accepts tuition from parents of lots of different faiths. We have twenty-five states piling on with an amicus brief to defend the government’s right to use humanist taxpayers’ money to maintain a forty-foot high crucifix in Bladensburg, Maryland. We have a report from North Carolina about the use of \$12 million of state tax money—provided by Christians and non-Christians alike—to support state “scholarships” to private schools, \$11 million of which goes to Christian schools. Maybe all the complaints are about the million that got away?

Christians moan and groan when Celebrity Cruise Lines stops giving priests free cruises. When a sobriety check point gets set up by traffic cops near a church. When ostentatious prayer-maven Tim Tebow, who had the lowest pass completion rate of any NFL quarterback, gets cut by his team. When the US Agency for International Development has the chutzpah to require condom distribution in the anti-HIV programs it funds with taxpayer money. When science, of all things, is taught in our schools. When a newspaper says that maybe, just maybe, something more than prayer is needed to stop the wave of mass shootings. Christians even complain, all the way to the Supreme Court, when they have to fill out a form to qualify for special exemptions from the laws that apply to everyone else.

Ted Cruz complains about a girl being threatened with jail for saying a prayer—a claim that turns out to be completely fabricated. Donald Trump complains that the IRS audits him because of his “strong Christian beliefs”. Now, armed with the just-released Lifeway research, Christians have a new complaint: being viewed, terribly unfairly, as people who complain too much.

AMERICA'S CHRISTIAN TALIBAN WILL "SAVE" CHILDREN BY MARRYING THEM

Michael Stone

(Excerpted from "Conference Will Arrange Child Marriages for Christian Homeschoolers" on *ProgressiveSecularHumanist.com*, 5/5/2016)

Fundamentalist and conservative evangelical parents will meet in Wichita, Kansas, this November to arrange marriages for their teen daughters. Quiverfull guru Vaughn Ohlman, who runs a website promoting early, "fruitful" marriage for Christian children, has announced plans for a "Get Them Married!" retreat where parents can arrange suitable marriages for their teen children.

According to the website's FAQ pages, marriage is appropriate between the ages of 13-20, but no later, because: "delayed/denied marriages cause the Word of God to be blasphemed, and turn our young people over to Satan".

The website explains how a parent will know when their child is ready for marriage:

"The 'youth' ready for marriage has breasts. A woman who is to be married is one who has breasts; breasts which signal her readiness for marriage, and breasts who promise enjoyment for her husband."

UPDATE: Via *Amanda Marcotte on Salon.com*

The Salvation Army has denied a request by the Let Them Marry organization to conduct its event at Camp Hiawatha," the Salvation Army explained in a statement. "Our decision is based upon our long-standing concern for the welfare of children." ...

In the state of Kansas, there is no age requirement to marry if your parents give you permission to do so. So if the folks in his Quiverfull cult want to marry a 14-year-old to an 18-year-old, so long as the parents of the 14-year-old give "permission", then it's legal.

(Kansas needs to fix that, I'm thinking.)

The cancellation of this event is a victory, but sadly, it's a small one. The sad truth is there are not enough safeguards in place to keep abusive religious fundamentalists like Ohlman and his followers from treating children like this. Yes, forced marriage is illegal, but we're talking about minor adolescents here. The fact that they formally "consent" means little, when they know that saying no is not an option.

These are kids who are usually homeschooled and kept separate from the rest of the world. They don't have a lot of options if they reject their parents' teachings: Few places to go, no real way to make a living. This event should be a wake-up call about how serious this situation is, and there needs to be more direct interference to keep these folks from pushing underage teenagers into arranged marriages.

Moral living is possible only to people who have the freedom to initiate behavior. Without autonomy, individuals have no capacity for living a moral life, because to be moral, an action must be performed by free will. Actions we are forced to perform cannot be considered moral. – *Mason Old*

THE STRANGE, SHORT CAREER OF "JUDEO-CHRISTIANITY"

Gene Zubovich

(Excerpted from *aeon.co*, 4/13/2016)

The phrase "Judeo-Christian" first became popular in the late 1930s, when President Franklin Roosevelt began trying to mobilize Americans against Nazism. So Judeo-Christianity was actually popularized to oppose the anti-Semitism of another predominantly Christian nation. Roosevelt worked in concert with the National Council of Christians and Jews, for example, an organization that fought popular anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism. Roosevelt and other liberal Protestants took the lead in promoting Judeo-Christianity. In the works of liberal Protestant theologians, the term Judeo-Christianity began to appear here and there without a thorough defense or justification. During the Second World War, a spirit of national unity finally made the notion of Judeo-Christianity common, as Jews and Catholics were publically welcomed as junior partners in the country's national life.

Only following the Second World War did someone stop to try to elaborate what "Judeo-Christian" might actually mean. In his book *Protestant - Catholic - Jew* (1955), the sociologist Will Herberg extolled the virtues of Judeo-Christianity. He argued that Judeo-Christianity stemmed from "the collapse of all secular securities in the historical crisis of our time [and] the quest for a recovery of authenticity". ... As Herberg saw it, Judeo-Christianity arose because secularism had failed and three vibrant faiths stepped in to fill that vacuum.

Evangelicals, meanwhile, resisted the encroaching pluralism. In 1947, and again in 1954, working with political allies, the National Association of Evangelicals introduced the Christian amendment into Congress: "This nation devoutly recognizes the authority and law of Jesus Christ, Savior and Ruler of all nations, through whom are bestowed the blessings of Almighty God." Out of step with the burgeoning postwar pluralism, the Christian amendment was not passed. ...

Some theologians in the 1960s began going beyond religious pluralism and encouraged Protestants to embrace secularism. In the process, they left Judeo-Christianity behind. But others, who emphasized Judeo-Christianity's anti-secularism, rededicated themselves to the term. Herberg's insistence that secular thought was bankrupt led him to align himself with the burgeoning conservative movement. He joined the conservative journal *National Review* in 1961 as its religion editor. ... Abandoning their earlier commitment to a "Christian Nation", evangelicals now accepted Catholics and Jews as important allies in the fight against abortion, feminism and gay rights.

In its very brief history, the concept of Judeo-Christianity has taken on several meanings. Originally it denoted a cultural and theological pluralism, meant to unite Americans against Nazism. For this reason, it was widely celebrated by liberal advocates, many of whom ignored

Judeo-Christianity's anti-secular implications, and gave little thought to their relation with Islam and other world religions. Once the implications became clear, many liberals abandoned the term.

No wonder, then, that today Judeo-Christianity has few defenders apart from the Christian right, who use it to undermine the legitimacy of Muslims and the rapidly growing body of religiously unaffiliated Americans. The short career of Judeo-Christianity has already lasted too long

\$66,000 OF YOUR TAX DOLLARS PER HOUR OF PRAYER Michael Stone

(Excerpted from "Report: Congress Pays Clergy \$66,000 An Hour To Pray", on Patheos.com, 4/29/2016)

Separation of church and state? A new report documenting wasteful spending shows congress spends \$66,000 an hour for prayers. According to the report, Congress has spent more than \$10 million on prayers since 2000. Adding insult to injury, when expenses are accounted for, the U.S. House and Senate is spending \$800,000 a year on opening prayers.

According to the Congressional Research Service, in 2011 the House Chaplain earned \$172,500 and the Senate Chaplain earned \$155,500. ... The chaplain has only one duty according to House rules: to "offer a prayer at the commencement of each day's sitting of the House." The same goes for the Senate. That's it. They may do more, but their only job is to kick off the morning with an invocation.

The report also notes that more than 96 percent of prayers in the House were Christian prayers ... an insult to the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. If 96 percent of the prayers offered by the House and Senate chaplains are Christian prayers, one must wonder, is not Congress establishing Christianity as the de facto national religion, and in so doing, violating the constitution they swore to uphold?

525 PEOPLE DIE IN ECUADOR EARTHQUAKE ...

(Excerpted from theatlantic.com, by Alan Taylor)

Government officials in Ecuador are now reporting 525 deaths were caused by the 7.8-magnitude earthquake that struck off the Pacific coast on April 16—but they fear the tally could climb much higher, since as many as 1,700 are still listed as missing, and recovery efforts have just begun.

... BUT THE STATUE IS SAFE, THANK GOD!

(Excerpted from "Virgin Mary Statue, Intact Among Ecuador's Quake Ruins, Becomes a Beacon of Hope", by Nicholas Casey, 4/21/2016)

Amid the wreckage of the Montecristi, Ecuador, basilica, one object remained untouched: *Our Mother of Monserrate*, the statue of the Virgin Mary for which the church was named. Dressed in gold robes and wearing a tiny crown, she is only about three feet tall.

"She is the mother who has taken care of us through

this earthquake," said the Rev. Ángel Toaquiza, the priest who looks after the broken church. "And I think a sign of this is that she suffered no damage that day."

Eight people from Montecristi were among the more than 570 who have died. Four days [after the quake] Father Toaquiza gathered with a group of about 200 to celebrate the evening Mass. ... "I have been asked by people how we have been affected by this earthquake," he began. "Do we still believe in Our Mother?"

"Yes," said the crowd.

Update: On April 18, the official death toll was updated to 654.

TEN MILLION GLIMMERS OF HOPE Michael Stone

(Excerpted from "Arabic Translation of The God Delusion Goes Viral on ProgressiveSecularHumanist.com, 5/12/2016)

Friendly Atheist reports that an unauthorized Arabic-language PDF of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, translated by Iraqi Bassam Al-Baghdadi, who lives in Sweden, has been downloaded ten million times.

30 percent of the translations have gone to Saudi Arabia. Bassam Al-Baghdadi, the translator, said that there were over 1,000 downloads on the very first day. On HuffPost, Kacem El Ghazzali notes: "The translator received death threats and accusations of conspiring with Zionists to corrupt youth. ... Futile attempts have been made to resist the waves of reason reaching Arab shores, through toothless apologetic articles and books [like] *The Atheism Delusion*."

Bottom line: This is good news, and demonstrates the power of the internet. While books promoting atheism and freethought are banned in most Islamic countries, the fact remains that many living in the Arab and Islamic worlds reject religious superstition.

VIOLENCE IN THE ARAB WORLD? NOW WE NOW WHY

Salah Abdel Sadeq, head of Egypt's State Information Service, has identified the source of the violence and extremism in the Arab world. At the "Media and Culture of Violence" conference at Cairo University, he explained that TV is to blame — specifically "Tom and Jerry" cartoons, which condone violence and other bad habits for its viewers.

MO INSTRUCTS JESUS IN ISLAM'S "REVERENCE AND RESPECT" FOR WOMEN

(Transcribed from jesusandmo.net/2016/05/04/gaze/)

Mohammed: Women in the West are objectified and sexualized from an early age. Islam, however, treats women with reverence and respect. The niqab, for instance, frees a woman from the objectifying gaze of men, and allows her to be truly herself. Therefore, it is not an oppressive garment — it is liberating.

Jesus: But isn't it true that in some countries women aren't allowed out without covering up from head to toe?

Mo: Yeah, well, if they refuse to be liberated they can damn well stay indoors.

WAIT, I THOUGHT THOR* WAS PITCHING FOR THE METS

Orion Jones

(Excerpted from "Iceland Is Officially Worshiping Norse Gods Again", on bigthink.com, 1/24/2016)

For the first time since the Vikings sailed, the Icelandic public are worshiping classical Norse gods like Odin, Thor, and Frigg at a public temple built in their honor. The worship of the gods of the old Norse pantheon became an officially recognized religion exactly 973 years after Iceland's official conversion to Christianity.

An association called *Asatruarfelagid*, which promotes faith in the Norse gods and is headed by high-priest Hilmar Orn Hilmarsson, raised funds and received permission from the government to construct the first such temple in 1,000 years. Iceland's Norse temple will host official ceremonies like weddings and funerals and be dug 13 feet down into a hill that overlooks Iceland's capital, Reykjavik. Hilmarsson said his organization's purpose is not to dispute any Christian traditions, but simply reflect Iceland's complex spiritual history.

"I don't believe anyone believes in a one-eyed man who is riding about on a horse with eight feet. We see the stories as poetic metaphors and a manifestation of the forces of nature and human psychology." Membership in *Asatruarfelagid* has tripled in Iceland to 2,400 members, out of a total population of 330,000.

**For the baseball deprived, young NY Mets pitching phenomenon Noah Syndergaard owes his "Thor" soubriquet to an imposing 6'6" physique, his Danish heritage, shoulder-length blond hair, and a 100-mph fastball that will do nicely for a hammer. – JR*

AND ANOTHER NEW RELIGION IS BORN

John Rafferty

(Based on "Indonesian Village Mistakes Sex Doll for 'Angel from Heaven'", on progressivesecularhumanist.com by Michael Stone, 5/3/2016)

So, right after a solar eclipse—an event with spiritual significance for many Muslims—engulfed Indonesia a month or so ago, a 21-year-old fisherman found a life-size inflatable sex doll on a beach in Bangaii, thought it was a "bidadari", "an angel from heaven", and brought it home.

Where his parents changed the "angel's" clothes every day and made a special hijab for her. And where talk in the village spread about how the angel had been found "stranded and crying". Since no one had internet access and so knew nothing of sex toys, they were quite happy tending to and praying over their "angel".

Until the story of the miraculous event spread far enough to reach the area police—who of course knew all about such matters. BBC reports that the Indonesian police have confiscated the sex toy "angel". No word yet on how the villagers are dealing with their loss.

Question: Easy to laugh, but exactly how is this more idiotic than the zombie carpenter, the prophet on a flying white horse, the talking snake, or the golden tablets read through a hat?

HOW TO IDENTIFY AN ANTI-HUMANIST IN THIS YEAR'S ELECTION

John Rafferty

As we have stated previously in these election-year pages (February, March, April), SHSNY may not, as a 501(c)3 tax-exempt, make political endorsements.

We may, however, help our readers make their electoral choices by comparing excerpts from some of the Council for Secular Humanism's (our Vatican) twenty-one "Affirmations of Humanism" (read them all at shsny.org/about) with one presidential candidate's Anti-Humanist remarks.

Readers are invited to try to guess the identity of Candidate X.

□ *Affirmation:* We are concerned with ... eliminating discrimination and intolerance.

Candidate X: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending the best. ... They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists."

□ *Affirmation:* We are skeptical of untested claims ...

Candidate X: "There is certainly a chance that [Barack Obama] was not born in this country."

□ *Affirmation:* We want to protect and enhance the earth, to preserve it for future generations ...

Candidate X: "Is our country still spending money on the global warming hoax?"

□ *Affirmation:* We attempt to transcend divisive parochial loyalties based on race, religion, gender ...

Candidate X: "Women, you have to treat 'em like shit."

□ *Affirmation:* We are deeply concerned with the moral education of our children.

Candidate X: "I like kids. I mean, I won't do anything to take care of them. I'll supply funds ..."

□ *Affirmation:* We believe in an open, pluralistic society ...

Candidate X: "[I am] calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States."

□ *Affirmation:* We believe in supporting the disadvantaged and the handicapped ...

Candidate X: "Now, the poor guy [a reporter disabled with arthrogryposis] — you've got to see this guy [jerking his arms in imitation], 'Ah, ah, I don't know what I said! Ah, ah, I don't remember!'"

□ *Affirmation:* We deplore efforts ... to explain the world in supernatural terms ...

Candidate X: "The Bible. Nothing beats the Bible, not even close."

□ *Affirmation:* We affirm humanism as a realistic alternative to ... ideologies of violence ...

Candidate X: "The guards are very gentle with him [a protester]. I'd like to punch him in the face, I'll tell you."

□ *Affirmation:* We believe in the fullest realization of the best and noblest that we are capable of as human beings.

Candidate X: "You bet your ass I would! [Waterboarding] works. ... If it doesn't work they deserve it anyway ..."

**DUMBTH KEN HAM SAYS GAY DINOSAURS
DESERVED EXTINCTION, AND
SCIENCE IS PRETTY GOOD AFTER ALL**

John Rafferty

Remember Ken Ham? The founder of Answers in Genesis? The guy who was "Science Guy" Bill Nye's punching bag in a series of debates on evolution?

Yeah, that Ken Ham. In April, while being quizzed about the new Glendive Dinosaur & Fossil Museum in Montana, by a reporter for the *Great Falls Tribune*, Ham explained why there were no dinosaurs on Noah's Ark.



"God had seen the atrocities dinosaurs were doing to each other, like gangbanging and raping other members of their kind. And ... they were doing it to the male members of their species. So, in fact, it was the dinosaurs who invented homosexuality for reasons that still remain unknown." So "God decided to cleanse the Earth But we are certain that the dinosaurs perished in the flood after Noah refused to let them board his Ark. That's where it all began, that's the origin of gay people today. And now we have both scientific and Biblical confirmation of that. Hurray for science!"

**DUMBTH MISSOURI REP SAYS PREGNANCY
FROM RAPE IS "GOD'S SILVER LINING"**

John Rafferty

(Based on and excerpted from "Missouri Rep. Calls Pregnancy by Rape God's 'Silver Lining', by Michael Stone on ProgressiveSecularHum-anist.com, 5/5/2016)

Meet Tila Hubrecht (R-151) of the Missouri House of Representatives. While speaking on proposed legislation that would grant fetuses – hell, even blastocytes – the same constitutional rights enjoyed by, you know, actual human beings, she called pregnancy that results from rape "a gift from God", while arguing that abortion should be illegal, even in the case of rape and incest.



"It is not up to us to say 'no just because there was a rape, they cannot exist.' Sometimes bad things happen – horrible things, but sometimes God can give us a silver lining through the birth of a child."

To the best of our knowledge, our Dumbth nominee has not specified what kind of God-given gift the rape itself is.

The proposed bill, by the way, passed 110-37.

Another 110 reasons why we live in New York.

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