

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

May, 2016

Day of Reason Brunch May 1 at Pete's Tavern - Quick - reserve today! - Page 7.

Herein we consider God as a microbe, the physics of time and risotto, and the dread gender pronoun. We parse "collateral damage" poetically, offer practical advice for your spiritual journey, protect Republicans from armed, um, Republicans, un-Pledge America, and detail the bigotry of the Day of Prayer. But first – we look bigotry full in the mirror. – JR

IN THESE UNITED STATES

John Rafferty

I stole the above headline from a regular feature I used to read in *The Reader's Digest* when I was a kid. "In These United States" was (still is, I just checked and found out) a collection of several anecdotes of the isn't-life-funny variety supposedly sent to the *Digest's* editors by readers in different parts of the country, and which runs the monthly gamut of amusement from mild to bland.

What brought that lower-middlebrow literary tradition to mind was the more-than-several stories about retrograde, even barbarian politics in these United States that I gleaned from the internet in preparation for this issue of PIQUE.

Yes, the Presidential race is in full circus mode, even if only two-ring. Out of one clown car stumbles a buffoon who threatens insurrection in the streets if he is thwarted by the machinations of his shut-down-the-government opponent who is a goosestep closer to fascism than ever were Huey Long, George Wallace or Pat Buchanan. In the other circle, an impeccably-qualified but baggage-burdened front-runner is despised by perhaps a majority of her party for not being as unelectably purist as her opponent, whose something-for-nothing promises are as wild as his hair.

For a better reveal on politics in the USA in 2016, look away from the center rings for a minute or two, and take in the sideshows in these united (but sovereign) states.

Behold the duly-elected freaks and geeks.

Leading the list – because of the media hoorah it created, of course – is **North Carolina**, whose governor, Pat McCrory, signed into law an anti-LGBT law banning transgender people from accessing public locker rooms and bathrooms (*why can't we say "toilet" in America?*), eliminates all existing LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination ordinances, and prohibits NC cities from adopting any new ones.

So the sky fell in: dozens of companies like Deutsche

Bank and PayPal cancelled or suspended expansions into the state; Bruce Springsteen, Ringo Starr and other entertainers cancelled concerts; and some states restricted taxpayer-paid travel to NC (*Good on you, Andrew Cuomo*).

But then, in a you-can't-make-these-things-up moment of ironic hilarity, McCrory announced that he might, maybe, modify the bill just a teensy bit. When? An hour or so after the pornography website *xHamster* began refusing service to anyone with a North Carolina IP address.

Not to be outdone in fueling the "Holy Trans-in-the-Toilets" hysteria, a putative lawmaker in **Virginia** has seriously proposed a law (House Bill 663) requiring schools to be certain that children use only the facilities corresponding to their "correct anatomical sex". "Require" how? By requiring adults (I guess teachers and other staff) to inspect children's genitals. Really. For teachers, worse than lunchroom duty.

But count on **Kansas** to get even crazier. The new "Student Physical Privacy Act" actually puts a bounty on trans kids, mandating that *any* student who witnesses a transgender schoolmate heading into the "wrong" facility can sue the school for \$2,500 for "potential embarrassment, shame, and psychological injury".

"Physical Privacy": Orwell would have loved that.

Have none of these idiot "lawmakers" ever *been* to high school, with its in/out groups, "cool kids" cafeteria tables, jocks and nerds and "mean girl" cliques? Take this prediction to the bank: the favorite new teenage nastiness in Virginia and Kansas will soon be phony and anonymous "outings" of supposed trans kids. What could be more fun than causing your homeroom nemesis to drop trou in the principal's office?

Change the subject. Working its way through the legislature in **South Carolina** is a bill that would make any bleeding-heart humanitarian who sponsors a refugee

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criminally liable if that refugee commits a crime.

But while refugees and trans people are the latest of the Religious Right's perceived threats to the safety of the republic, they aren't—not even close—the greatest. That honor still belongs to ... drumroll, please ... *slutty women!*

To punish the *putans* with public outing, the **Missouri** State Senate Committee on the Sanctity of Life is demanding that Planned Parenthood turn over its lists of women who have ever had an abortion. In **Indiana**, a new law outlaws abortion if the fetus has a defect or disability. **Utah** now requires women getting an abortion to receive unnecessary anesthesia, whether they want it or not. And in **Oklahoma**, Republican State Senator Joe Silk introduced a bill that criminalizes abortion as first degree murder.

Despite the facts that **Texas** has the third highest rate of HIV infection and third highest rate of teen pregnancy in the country, state House Republicans have voted to divert funds targeted for HIV screenings to abstinence-only education. (When bill sponsor Rep. Stuart Spitzer announced that his "goal is for everybody to be abstinent until they're married", and volunteered that he was a virgin when he married, at 29, Democrat Harold Dutton asked him if that had been completely his own choice.)

And despite the code of ethics of the American Counseling Association, last month the Republican-controlled **Tennessee** Senate voted 25-6 to pass a bill (previously approved by the state House) that allows mental health professionals, including therapists, to reject LGBT patients based on "sincerely held principles" - you know, "Religious Freedom".

You might expect better of the more-liberal-than-most state of **Wisconsin**, but that state's good people have just elected to a ten-year term on their supreme court a Catholic extremist who calls gays "degenerates", compares abortion to the Holocaust, and argues that women are responsible for date rape.

But, finally, you can't go wrong by expecting the worst of **Mississippi**, which celebrated "Confederate Heritage Month" in April without once officially mentioning slavery.

Worse? Ole Miss's newly-enacted "Religious Freedom" law promises that the state government will not punish anyone who refuses to provide services because of a religious opposition to same-sex marriage, extramarital sex or transgender people. It specifically allows state employees, corporations, healthcare providers, nonprofit organizations and private individuals (read: any and every bigot) to discriminate indiscriminately.

Not enough? Just over a month ago the state Senate voted 36-14 for the House-passed "Mississippi Church Protection Act", which, according to Michael Stone of Progressive Secular Humanist, empowers "places of worship ... to designate [church] members to undergo firearms training and carry guns to protect the congregation, and would legalize killing a person while acting as a participant of a church or place of worship security team, deeming the act a 'justifiable homicide'."

In other words, "shoot to kill" authority. For who

knows how many state-sanctioned armed Christian militias all across the state. (One wonders how the legislature will react if a Mississippi mosque starts arming and training its bearded and dark-skinned young men.)

The Secular Coalition for America calls this the worst state bill in the country, one which "puts 'Soldiers of God' above the law, allowing them to act as judge, jury, and executioner".

In these United States.

BATHROOM BREAK

The Atheist Pig

(Transcribed from theatheistpig.com/2016/04)

Bigot: It's disgusting that trans people want to use whatever bathroom they want.

Atheist Pig: They're not using whatever bathroom they want. They're using the bathroom that corresponds with their gender identity. Just like you. Besides, you've shared many a bathroom with trans people.

Bigot: Impossible. I've never noticed any trans people in the bathroom.

Atheist Pig: Bingo.

THIS CHURCH WANTS TO KNOW WAY TOO MUCH ABOUT MY PERSONAL LIFE



OF TIME, BUTTER, RISOTTO, AND THE HERE-AND-NOW

Carlo Rovelli

(Excerpted from Seven Brief Lessons on Physics)

(Editor: I have just discovered this outstanding little book (78 pages) by a theoretical physicist, currently directing the quantum gravity group at the Center for Theoretical Physics of the Aix-Marseille University, that collects seven plain-language essays – on general relativity, quantum mechanics, elementary particles, gravity, black holes, the architecture of the universe, and our place in it – that originally appeared in an Italian newspaper. – JR)

What exactly is the flow of time? The problem was already present in classical physics and was highlighted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by philosophers, but it becomes a great deal more acute in modern physics. Physics describes the world by means of formulas that tell how things vary as a function of "time". But we can write formulas that tell us how things vary in relation to their "position", or how the taste of a risotto varies as a function of the "variable quantity

of butter". Time seems to "flow", whereas the quantity of butter or location in space does not "flow". Where does the difference come from?

Another way of posing the problem is to ask oneself: what is the "present"? We say that only the things of the present exist: the past no longer exists and the future doesn't exist yet. But in physics there is nothing that corresponds to the notion of the "now". Compare "now" with "here". "Here" designates the place where a speaker is: for two different people "here" points to two different places. Consequently "here" is a word the meaning of which depends on where it is spoken. The technical term for this kind of utterance is "indexical". "Now" also points to the instant in which the word is uttered and is also classed as "indexical". But no one would dream of saying that things "here" exist, whereas things that are not "here" do not exist. So then why do we say that things that are "now" exist and that everything else doesn't? Is the present something that is objective in the world, that "flows", and that makes things "exist" one after the other, or is it only subjective, like "here"?

This may seem like an abstruse mental problem. But modern physics has made it into a burning issue, since special relativity has shown that the notion of the "present" is also subjective. Physicists and philosophers have come to the conclusion that the idea of a present that is common to the whole universe is an illusion and that the universal "flow" of time is a generalization that doesn't work. When his great Italian friend Michele Besso died, Einstein wrote a moving letter to Michele's sister: "Michele has left this strange world a little before me. This means nothing. People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction made between past, present and future is nothing more than a persistent, stubborn illusion."

Illusion or not, what explains the fact for us time "runs", "flows", "passes"? The passage of time is obvious to us all: our thoughts and our speech exist in time; the very structure of our language requires time – a thing "is" or "was" or "will be". It is possible to imagine a world without colors, without matter, even without space, but it's difficult to imagine one without time. ...

As vivid as it may appear to us, our experience of the passage of time does not need to reflect a fundamental aspect of reality. But if it is not fundamental, where does it come from, our vivid experience of the passage of time?

LOOKING FOR GOD THROUGH THE OTHER END OF THE TELE/MICRO-SCOPE

David Eagleman

(Reprinted from "Microbe", in Sum: forty tales from the afterlives)

There is no afterlife for us. Our bodies decompose upon death, and then the teeming floods of microbes living inside us move on to better places. This may lead you to assume that God doesn't exist – but you'd be wrong. It's simply that He doesn't know *we* exist. He is unaware of us because we are at the wrong spatial scale. God is the size of

a bacterium. He is not something outside and above us, but on the surface and in the cells of us.

God created life in His own image; his congregations are the microbes. The chronic warfare over host territory, the politics of symbiosis and infection, the ascendancy of strains: this is the chessboard of God, where good clashes with evil on the battleground of surface proteins and immunity and resistance.

Our presence in this picture is something of an anomaly. Since we—the backgrounds upon which they live—don't harm the life patterns of the microbes, we are unnoticed. We are neither selected out by evolution nor captured in the microdeific radar. God and His microbial constituents are unaware of the rich social life that we have developed, of our cities, circuses, and wars – they are as unaware of our level of interaction as we are of theirs. Even while we genuflect and pray, it is only the microbes who are in the running for eternal punishment or reward. Our death is unnoteworthy and unobserved by the microbes, who merely redistribute onto different food sources. So although we supposed ourselves to be the apex of evolution, we are merely the nutritional substrate.

But don't despair. We have great power to change the course of the world. Imagine that you choose to eat at a particular restaurant, where are you unwittingly pass a microbe from your fingers to the salt shaker to the next person sitting at the table, who happens to board an international flight and transport the microbe to Tunisia. To the microbes, who have lost a family member, these are the mystifying and often cruel ways in which the universe works. They look to God for answers. God attributes these events to statistical fluctuations over which He has no control and no understanding.

SHOULD WE HAVE A "YOUNG HUMANIST ESSAY COMPETITION"?

John Rafferty

Anote (and the following essay) from John Adams, Chair of the North Yorkshire (UK) Humanists, prompts the question of whether we (SHSNY) should promote humanism in these environs with an annual essay competition like North Yorkshire's, open to local students. Reader opinions are solicited: Yes or no? High School or College? Cash prizes? How much? What themes? Who judges?

Meanwhile, here's the £100-winning essay in this year's North Yorkshire competition.

CAN YOU BE GOOD WITHOUT GOD?

Nathan Jeffs

Of course you can. Ask Mark Zuckerberg, Warren Buffet or many of the other atheists, agnostics and secularists who have donated huge amounts of money and dedicated their lives to philanthropy. Perhaps, ask religious believers why they are good – why they do good deeds? Is it because of a desire to improve the lives of others? Or is it simply to earn themselves the reward of

Heaven, Paradise etc.?

What does it mean to be good? It can be defined as “possessing or displaying moral virtue” or “showing kindness”. But how do we interpret these definitions and who do we consider to be a “good” person? For most people “goodness” is equated with “selflessness”. Take this analogy: two people both do the same good deed; however, one did it for a monetary reward, whereas the other did it out of pure altruism. Which one is the “good” person? I would say the person without an incentive to be good.

Ask many people for an example of a good person and they would quote Mother Theresa, famed for her humanitarian work in the slums of Calcutta. Not least is there questionable motive behind why she did what she did, but there is suspicion as to whether she was much of a humanitarian figure at all. Theresa said herself “I think it is very beautiful for the poor to accept their lot, to share it with the passion of Christ. I think the world is being much helped by the suffering of the poor people.” Her motivation was purely Christ, purely the reward for her deeds in his eyes. She believed that the plight of the poor was to the benefit of the world via the opportunity to please God. But ignoring her motive, there is still an argument that the work she did made her a “good” person: Robin Fox, editor of *The Lancet*, described the conditions of the Home for Dying Destitutes (opened by Theresa) as “haphazard”. Academics described the set-up as “caring for the sick by glorifying their suffering instead of relieving it”. I do not see Mother Theresa as a good person. We should question the idea that you can be good *with* God, because were it not for the reward of Heaven or the punishments of Sharia or threat of breaking the Ten Commandments, how many religious people would continue with good deeds?

The question which needs to be answered, however, is can you be good *without* God? As I suggested before, surely, one can *only* be good without God. The world is awash with examples of good deeds with no reward: take the example of Mark Zuckerberg and the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative which plans to give away \$45 billion within the lifetime of the couple. Zuckerberg, who quite aptly listed his atheism on his Facebook profile, has no religious incentive but has still chosen to donate the majority of his personal fortune for the purpose of “advancing human potential and promoting equality for all children in the next generation”. Is advancing human potential good? Yes. Is promoting equality good? Yes. Does Mark Zuckerberg need God to be good? No.

However, Mark Zuckerberg isn’t the typical person. He’s a college dropout turned billionaire by his mid-twenties. Many people would be inclined to suggest that more “typical” people wouldn’t be as generous or good unless they had some form of divine influence. But in everyday life we see small-scale examples of atheists doing good deeds: the group Foundation Beyond Belief co-ordinates many atheist volunteering projects around the world, improving lives whether that be through disaster recovery and support or through the Dudley Street Neighbourhood Initiative to bring communities together. These are all amazing deeds, all done without God.

Everyone is capable of being good, and everyone should take every opportunity to be good. To say it should be limited exclusively to those who believe in a God simply devalues the thousands of amazing actions done by non-religious people every day. Yes, we can be good without God, and I’ll conclude with a quote from Humanist [and SHSNY Honorary Member – JR] Kurt Vonnegut:

“I am a humanist, which means, in part, that I have tried to behave decently without expectations of rewards or punishments after I am dead.”

HOIST ON THEIR OWN AK-47

Anonymous

(Editor: I pulled this from somewhere on the internet, but have since lost its provenance. If anyone knows where it came from, tell me at editor@shsny.org, please, and I’ll be glad to post credit in the June issue. – JR)

Those of us who accept the common-sense idea that everyone having guns is a good way to insure that a lot of people die from gunshots were first in despair at, and then darkly amused by, the success of a recent petition demanding “open carry” at this summer’s Republican National Convention in Cleveland.

The petition, which gained more than fifty thousand signatures, turned out to be something of a Dada joke; an attempt, on the part of a gun-control enthusiast, to force gun fetishists to confront the logic, or illogic, of their own position. If guns bring order, why not bring them to a Cleveland delegate floor fight?

But then the people at the Quicken Loans Arena, where the Convention will be held, announced, rather alarmed, that their rule against heavily armed spectators was fixed. The Secret Service, which is, of course, in charge of protecting the candidates, also stated firmly that no one exercising a patriot’s right to take guns wherever a patriot likes would be allowed to get anywhere near the Convention floor.

What was funny and ultimately telling was the minor uproar the petition set off in respectable conservative circles. The same gun-rights absolutists who talk about the importance of Americans having all the weapons they want in order to protect themselves against as-yet-unknown threats (the self-defense position) or to threaten tyrannical mayors and governors and park rangers (the Second Amendment is the pro-sedition amendment position) suddenly got religion when it came to armed delegates in a convention hall in Cleveland. They know their own base well enough to know how *that* would end up, apparently.

Schools, playgrounds, colleges—fine to have heavily armed patriots there. In a convention of conservative true believers, probably a bad idea.

OVERHEARD (CAUGHT ON VIDEO) AT THE CPAC CONFERENCE IN MARCH

Christian to an American Atheists rep who was distributing literature: “I’ll pray for you.”

Atheist: “I’ll think for you.”

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE GOVERNMENT SPONSORED "NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER" JONATHON ENGEL

The "official" government-sponsored "National Day of Prayer" was first established by Congress in 1952. But now there appears to be a bit of controversy over the event. The National Day of Prayer Task Force, which coordinates the event, is an Evangelical Christian organization led by Shirley Dobson, wife of "Focus on the Family" founder James Dobson. The Task Force's website says that the purpose of the day is "to communicate with every individual the need for personal repentance and prayer ... and to mobilize the Christian community to intercede for America's leaders and its families".

The prayer the organization promulgated for this year's event both starts and ends with a mention of Jesus. Therefore, some are saying that the National Day of Prayer (NDOP) needs to be more inclusive of other religions. For example, the advocacy group JewsOnFirst (as an Abbott and Costello fan, I love that name) has been calling for a more inclusive NDOP for years. That organization argues that the NDOP Task Force excludes Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Catholics, and mainline Protestants from participation in NDOP events held around the country. JewsOnFirst and other critics of the Task Force appear to mean well, but they are wrong. The NDOP doesn't need to be changed; it needs to be ended, at least as a government-sponsored event. As a private event, fine; but government needs to stay out of it.

The National Day of Prayer, and the controversy it has engendered, is precisely why the framers of the Constitution placed the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion ...". For those who don't think the Establishment Clause was intended to separate church from state, look at the words of James Madison, the Constitution's primary author: "During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial, what have been its fruits? More or less, in all places, pride and indolence in the clergy; ignorance and servility in the laity; in both, superstition, bigotry, and persecution". Or Thomas Jefferson: "Religious institutions that use government power in support of themselves and force their views on persons of other faiths, or of no faith, undermine all our civil rights".

The Founding Fathers knew the importance of separating church and state, but we seem to have forgotten it. If we allow government to get involved with religion, it will inevitably lead to conflict and strife over just whose religion will predominate. In appointing an Evangelical Christian group as custodian of the NDOP, the government has favored one religious sect over all others, which is strictly forbidden. Yes, it would be better if the NDOP Task Force were more inclusive, but this wouldn't solve the basic problem. But even if the Task Force included Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Catholics, and mainline Protestants, it would still be excluding Mormons, Buddhists, Wiccans, Scientologists, Satanists, Rastafarians, Pastafarians (worshippers of the Flying Spaghetti Monster) and many others. Should

some of these groups be omitted in favor of including only "mainstream" religions? If so, who would decide what is "mainstream" and what isn't? It would have to be government that decides, and that is precisely the problem.

It is no place of our government to favor some religions over others, or even to favor religion over non-religion. Do we really want to go back to the way Europe was before the Enlightenment, when Protestants and Catholics slaughtered each other by the thousands in wars fought over whose religion should predominate in government and society? Look how well that's still working out for Shiites and Sunnis in the Middle East. As Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor said, "Those who would renegotiate the boundaries between church and state must therefore answer a difficult question: why would we abandon a system that has served us so well for one that has served others so poorly?" Or to return to that drafter of the Constitution, James Madison, "The purpose of separation of church and state is to keep forever from these shores the ceaseless strife that has soaked the soil of Europe in blood for centuries."

It is a truism that almost any sect, cult, or religion will legislate its creed into law if it acquires the political power to do so. — *Robert A. Heinlein*

I think everyone should treat one another in a Christian manner. I will not, however, be responsible for the consequences. — *George Carlin*.

A FOUNDING FATHER DEMOLISHES "STRICT CONSTRUCTIONISM" Thomas Jefferson

Some men look at constitutions with sanctimonious reverence, and deem them like the arc of the covenant, too sacred to be touched. They ascribe to the men of the preceding age a wisdom more than human, and suppose what they did to be beyond amendment. I knew that age well; I belonged to it, and labored with it. It deserved well of its country. It was very like the present, but without the experience of the present; and forty years of experience in government is worth a century of book-reading; and this they would say themselves, were they to rise from the dead.

I am certainly not an advocate for frequent and untried changes in laws and constitutions. I think moderate imperfections had better be borne with; because, when once known, we accommodate ourselves to them, and find practical means of correcting their ill effects.

But I know also, that laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed, and manners and opinions change with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy, as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.

SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY - JULY 2016

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

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

28 East 35 St. (front lounge)

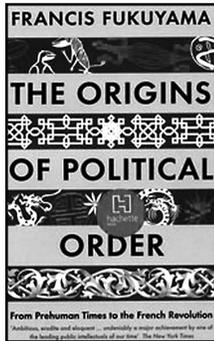
We'll discuss

**THE ORIGINS OF
POLITICAL ORDER:**

**From Prehistoric Times to the
French Revolution
PART 2**

Francis Fukuyama

Bestseller Fukuyama provides a sweeping account of how today's basic political institutions developed, beginning with politics among our primate ancestors, and follows the story through the emergence of tribal societies, the growth of the first modern state in China, the beginning of the rule of law in India and the Middle East, and the development of political accountability in Europe up until the eve of the French Revolution.



Drawing on a vast body of knowledge, history, evolutionary biology, archaeology, and economics, Fukuyama has produced a brilliant, provocative work that offers fresh insights on the origins of democratic societies and raises essential questions about the nature of politics and its discontents. from tribes to national governments.

We discussed the first half of this blockbuster (Chaps 1-15) in April, and will now conclude our discussions. — Paperback

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

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, JUNE 2, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York

**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 from the French Revolution to the so-called Arab Spring and the deep dysfunctions of contemporary American politics. — Paperback

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.

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.shsn.org,

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MEET US ON MEETUP

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SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

MON, MAY 9, 6:30 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

ALL THE KING'S MEN

A movie—just now—about a rabble-rousing politician who gets more popular as he gets more outrageous. Coincidence? Mm-hmm, sure.



Based on a Pulitzer-winning novel, our film for May won the 1949 Best Picture Oscar, and includes the performance of a lifetime by Broderick Crawford.

After-Film Discussion:

Why do we love demagogues?

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.

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

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, MAY 15, 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 great conversation.



Discussion:

"Promoting Humanism or Social Justice: Which comes first?"

SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY - JULY 2016

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

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

**THE COSMIC COCKTAIL:
Three Parts Dark Matter
Dr. Katherine Freese**



The ordinary atoms that make up the known universe constitute only 5 percent of all matter and energy in the cosmos. The

rest is known as dark matter and dark energy, because their precise identities are unknown. Theorists contend that dark matter consists of fundamental particles known as WIMPs, or weakly interacting massive particles. Billions of them pass through our bodies every second without us realizing it, yet their gravitational pull is capable of whirling stars and gas at break-neck speeds around the centers of galaxies, and bending light.

The Cosmic Cocktail is the inside story of the epic quest to solve one of the most compelling enigmas of modern science – what is the universe made of? – told by one of today’s foremost pioneers in the study of dark matter, acclaimed University of Michigan theoretical physicist Katherine Freese.

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

MEMBERS ALSO ...

Sunday, June 5, 6:45pm – Rebecca Kelly Ballet hosts an intimate evening of dance (ballets *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)

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**

Our May meeting is put off to June 6 because May 30 is Memorial Day. So ... Sidney Finehirsh will follow up on his very successful evening re Islam last Fall with “Islam and Enlightenment” on June 6.

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!

**Join us at NECSS 2016
May 12-15, at the
Fashion Institute of
Technology**

Don’t miss one of the best freethought gatherings of the year – the Northeast Conference on Science and Skepticism. Join Bill Nye “The Science Guy”, George Hrab, Richard Wiseman, Deborah Berebichez, the Skeptics’ Guide to the Universe Rogues, and more distinguished speakers and panelists for three days of science and fun, including a May 15 8pm *free* performance (for paid NECSS attendees) of Baba Brinkman’s hilarious “Rap Guide to Religion”.

Full info at necss.org.

Book now - the room is almost full!

SUNDAY, MAY 1, NOON
SHSNY’s 9th Annual
DAY OF REASON BRUNCH
at PETE’S TAVERN
129 East 18 Street

Our speaker will be:
DAVID ORENSTEIN
(*The Paleolibrarian*)
“**Godless Grace:**

**How Non-Believers are
Making the World Safer,
Richer and Kinder”**

Can we be good without god? According to their new book, *Godless Grace: How Non-Believers are Making the World Safer, Richer and Kinder*, not only do authors David Orenstein and Linda Ford Blaikie show through example that we can act morally and ethically without god belief, but with interviews of humanist boots-on-the-ground non-believer activists.



David’s fast-paced PowerPoint presentation will also discuss the history of skepticism and the current political battles the freethought movement is waging to ensure all secularists have the legal right to be free of god belief.

BRUNCH IS JUST \$20 ...

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Join up to 50 of your fellow and sororal freethinkers for one of SHSNY’s best annual get-togethers. Meet old friends, make new ones, schmooze, network and discuss ideas (what we do best).

But don’t wait. Our upstairs private room at Pete’s only seats 50. So guarantee your place by booking now, at www.shsny.org, using your credit card or PayPal.

WE'RE NUMBER 16! OR, HOW TO REALLY MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN

Part 2

Phil Torres

(Reprinted from "We're No. 16! Why Donald Trump's boorish American exceptionalism is so wrong", *salon.com*, 1/30/2016)

(In Part 1 of this essay (April PIQUE), Mr. Torres cited stark statistics to show that American triumphalism – the never-ending chant of "We're Number One!" – has little basis in reality. Let's pick up where we left off. – JR)

The point is that ... there's an unequivocal pattern of American inferiority when our country's performance is juxtaposed with the rest of the developed world's.

Indeed, in many categories, such as childhood poverty, income inequality and family paid leave, we're just barely a developed country, if even that. The result of these failures is that our collective quality of life is not nearly as high as it ought to be. Here it's worth turning to the Mercer Quality of Life Survey, since it attempts to quantify the livability of some 221 cities around the world. And guess what it finds? The U.S. has only a single city in the top 30 – and it happens to be the ultra-progressive den of liberal debauchery called San Francisco. At the pinnacle of Mercer's list are cities like Vienna, Zurich, Auckland, Munich and Vancouver. In fact, of all the cities in the North American continent, the top four are all in Canada. Now that's just embarrassing, eh?

Quality-of-life rankings such as Mercer's have obvious implications for where one might want to settle down and start a family. Fortunately, there are reports concerned with precisely this question: Where's the best place to be born in the world? Consider the 2013 Economist Intelligence Unit's "where-to-be-born index", a ranking system that "attempts to measure which country will provide the best opportunities for a healthy, safe and prosperous life in the years ahead". According to their criteria, the U.S. ranks as the 16th best place to be born. At the top of the list are (once again) countries like Switzerland, Australia, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Canada and Finland. Again, Western Europe, our friendly northern neighbor and the Land Down Under beat us.

So, perhaps the myth of American exceptionalism isn't so much wrong as it is misunderstood: we are quite exceptional within the developed world. The phrase "Only in America" does capture something uniquely true. The problem is that this phrase doesn't capture what most of us would like it to. There are so many ways in which our country could – and should – be better off than it is. We're so rich, yet so poor when compared to other neighborhoods in the global village. This leads to an important question about causation: Why exactly are we ranked low in terms of opportunity and flourishing? What's behind our middling performance compared to the world? Is it because our country is too progressive? Too socialist? Too secular? Too crowded with atheists?

The unambiguous answer to these questions is a

resounding No! For example, the U.S. turns out to be among the most religious countries in the developed world. According to a 2014 Gallup poll, "nearly four in 10 Americans report that they attended religious services in the past seven days." In contrast, only about 2 percent of Norwegians attend church on a weekly basis, as of 2009. Along these very lines, a 2011 study reported that religion is tumbling toward "extinction" in nine developed countries, namely Australia, Austria, Canada, the Czech Republic, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Switzerland – all of which are doing just fine. And whereas a U.S. politician could hardly dream of running for president as an out-of-the-closet atheist, many other countries have had atheist leaders in the past. As the former Prime Minister of Australia – a progressive woman who doesn't believe in God – said to the *Washington Post*, "I think it would be inconceivable for me if I were an American to have turned up at the highest echelon of American politics being an atheist, single and childless." Yet the empirical fact is that secular people are "markedly less nationalistic, less prejudiced, less anti-Semitic, less racist, less dogmatic, less ethnocentric, less close-minded, and less authoritarian" than religious folks. So it's not that our country is too Godless.

The U.S. also turns out to be quite conservative by comparative standards. I find it hard to even map right-left American politics onto the political spectrum of European countries. On many issues, for example, the right-wing Tories in the UK are left of the Democrats. And Sweden, whose "thriving economy and society [are] based on a government of socialist principles, higher taxes, and healthy regulations", has a tax rate that's nearly double America's. As an article in *Forbes* notes, the common thread that weaves together the tapestry of happiest countries is that "they are all borderline socialist states, with generous welfare benefits and lots of redistribution of wealth". In these countries, civil liberties are taken seriously (some even permit prostitution and drug use), and everyone has a robust safety net to fall back on in tough times. So it's also not that our country is too progressive.

I would argue that our country lags behind the developed world precisely because of how religious and conservative we are. As Bertrand Russell correctly observed way back in 1927, "I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world." As a matter of fact, religious conservatives in America have consistently opposed attempts to implement equal pay for women legislation, universal health care and stricter environmental regulations. For reasons that continue to baffle me, many middle-class people still vote for Republicans, even though the effect of Republican policies has been to knock us out of the top bracket with respect to nearly every metric of life-quality.

It doesn't have to be this way. But until people become aware of just how much better other corners of civilization are, we're doomed to stagnate in mediocrity.

ARE WE GOING TO GET WHAT WE DESERVE?

John Rafferty

Eew, “torture”? What was Abu Ghraib, like 2004? Really? Do we have to still talk about torture? And didn’t we stop waterboarding? I mean, why do we have to keep harping on one mistake by a few bad apples? Can’t we agree that America is better than that?

Well, no, we can’t.

We could, once. Right from the beginning, and through most of American history, we were guided by ideals of decency and humanitarianism, even when we didn’t live up to our own highest standards. As David Hackett Fischer wrote in *Washington’s Crossing* about the forming of the American army – and mind – in the infant country’s darkest days of 1776-77:

Always [in 1776] some dark spirits wished to visit the same cruelties on the British and Hessians that had been inflicted on American captives. But Washington’s example carried growing weight, more so than his written orders and prohibitions. He often reminded his men that they were an army of liberty and freedom, and that the rights of humanity for which they were fighting should extend even to their enemies. ... Even in the most urgent moments of the war, these men were concerned about ethical questions in the Revolution. ...

In 1776, American leaders believed that it was not enough to win the war. They also had to win in a way that was consistent with the values of their society and the principles of their cause. One of their greatest achievements in the winter campaign of 1776-77 was to manage the war in a manner that was true to the expanding humanitarian ideals of the American Revolution. It happened in a way that was different from the ordinary course of wars in general. In Congress and the army, American leaders resolved that the War of Independence would be conducted with a respect for human rights, even of the enemy. This idea grew stronger during the campaign of 1776-77, not weaker as is commonly the case in war.

Today, according to a band-new Reuters/Ipsos poll, nearly two-thirds of Americans believe torture can be justified to extract information from suspected terrorists. The March 22-28 online poll asked respondents if torture can be justified “against suspected terrorists to obtain information about terrorism”. Only 15 percent said torture should never be used.

Republicans are more in favor than Democrats: 82 percent of Republicans said torture is “often” or “sometimes” justified, compared with 53 percent of Democrats. And the man in the lead for the Republican nomination for president, Donald Trump, says that not only will he, if elected, roll back President Obama’s ban on waterboarding, but that he will “bring back a hell of a lot worse”.

From Washington to – even if only possibly – Trump?

If so, it will underscore the truism that we get the leadership we deserve.

As democracy is perfected, the office of president represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. On some great and glorious day, the plain folks of the land will reach their heart’s desire at last and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.

– H.L. Mencken

THE PLEDGE IS UN-AMERICAN

Dennis Middlebrooks

(Dennis sent the following e-mail to New York Post reporter Beckie Strum in response to her article on the New Paltz, New York town council’s rejection of a request to start meetings with the Pledge of Allegiance. She had stated in her un-objective coverage that one of the dissenters had “bizarrely” claimed that the Pledge was contrary to America’s founding principles.)

Dear Ms. Strum:

While I recognize that the Pledge has sadly become Holy Writ in the USA, I applaud the folks in New Paltz who voted against it. Loyalty oaths are a characteristic of totalitarian societies like North Korea and Nazi Germany, and have no place in a democratic society. It is not “bizarre” to say that the Pledge is contrary to the principles this nation was founded on.

There was no Pledge of Allegiance until a socialist minister wrote it in 1892 to generate publicity for the 500th anniversary of Columbus’ bogus “discovery of America”, and on behalf of flag manufacturers. None of the Founding Fathers ever conceived of a daily recital of a loyalty oath for school children or citizens attending government meetings. Lincoln and the men who fought for the Union in the Civil War never recited it either. Moreover, when “under God” was added to the Pledge in 1954, it became a religious oath as well, offensive to millions of atheists and agnostics.

The powers that be in the USA have long had a paranoid distrust of the American people, and the Pledge became mandatory for school children in the early 20th century at a time of unwelcome mass immigration of Jews and Catholics from southern and eastern Europe, which was also a period of widespread labor unrest across the country. That was no coincidence.

To question the Pledge is to challenge that bigoted fear held by those who hold the real power in this country.

BEGINNING MY SEVENTY-FIRST ORBIT

AS A NONE

Sidney Finehirsh

As of today (March 21) I have ridden the earth seventy times around the sun. All in all, it has been a pretty good trip. And even if it has been just going around in circles – or more accurately, ellipses – there have been some interesting and pleasant ports of call. Of course, I had the good luck to embark on this voyage from Brooklyn, NY, rather than Aleppo, Syria, which was a big plus.

I have reached the point on this past revolution of being able to fully enjoy the well-deserved title of curmudgeon. Having achieved that exalted place in life, I do think of

Robert Frost, who has been my favorite poet for the *longue durée*, but never gave me cause to worry that some of his words would apply to me: "I never dared," said Frost, "be radical when young for fear it would make me conservative when old." Rather, I found guidance in the example of that little-known American revolutionary, James P. Cannon, who sought to be always true to his rebel youth. My constant Cannonite compass for navigating the surface of this revolving sphere – or more accurately this revolving oblate spheroid – from early in life is that "The status is not forever quo."

I really liked life as a sexagenarian, but now I have traded "sex" for "sep" as in septuagenarian, which I hope is not really the case. But I have to admit that it has been my practice for some time now to not only read obituaries, but immediately skip to the second paragraph to find the cause of death.

And as I contemplate my remaining trips around the sun, I often consider not the lilies of the field, as suggested by that apocalyptic preacher of the first century, but those hardy stubbles of trees growing on the narrow meridian strip of the Major Deegan Expressway and I marvel at the tenacity of life on this planet.

Myself, I am an Epicurean via Epicurus' Roman disciple Lucretius. For the ancient rabbis, the word was *Epikoros*, with the modern meaning of heretic.

"And these are the ones who do not have a portion in the world to come: He who maintains that there is no resurrection of the dead ... an Epikoros." – The Mishnah

I'm OK with that, believing that life is good, death is OK, dying sucks. I will take as my tombstone epitaph, "I was, I ain't, I don't give a fuck."

I can't finish this trip report of my seventy revolutions around the sun without mentioning the most rewarding experience of my recent orbits – my puppy Sylvie. She has taught me why dog spelled backwards is ...

MEMBERS: TELL US YOUR "NONE" STORY.

And if it's selected for PIQUE, choose one of these books by SHSNY members as our Thank-you gift:

Philip Appleman: *The Labyrinth: God, Darwin, and the Meaning of Life*; Giddian Beer: *Kouken: Jewels, Jolts & Jeremiaids*; Jennifer Michael Hecht: *Stay: A History of Suicide and the Philosophies Against It*; Philip Kitcher: *Life After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism*; David Orenstein: *Godless Grace: How Non-Believers are Making the World Safer, Richer and Kinder*; Massimo Pigliucci: *Answers for Aristotle: How Science and Philosophy Can Lead Us to A More Meaningful Life*; John Rafferty: *A Fit of Pique: Dispatches from the Culture Wars*.

ON YOUR "SPIRITUAL JOURNEY"

Neil deGrasse Tyson

(attributed to him, anyway)

1. Follow your own path.
2. Let your heart lead.
3. Try not to step in anything.

TO THEY OR NOT TO THEY

John Rafferty

He, she, s/he, they, ve, xe, ze – what's an editor supposed to do, to use, when, happily two-finger tapping out an essay for a liberal, social-justice-conscious and LGBTQ-supportive newsletter, he (*s/he? xe? ze?*) finds himself (*themselves? hir? zir?*) smack up against the dreaded third-person singular?

"What English lacks is a gender-neutral singular personal pronoun," writes Tom Flynn, in the current *Secular Humanist Bulletin*. English is "one pronoun short".

Just a usage problem, and who cares? Not in contemporary America, where even the way one speaks – perhaps especially the way one speaks – signifies not just one's geographic origins and level of education, but one's politics and social consciousness.

Still not using "Ms"? You're a Trump Republican. Use "queer" as a judgment-free descriptive? Sanders socialist.

"We are witnessing a great explosion in the way that human beings are allowed to express their gender identities," wrote Amanda Hess recently in *The New York Times Magazine*. "We are also hearing a lot of awkward conversations. What are we supposed to ... call everyone?"

"They" seems to be the default solution, and in fact was the American Dialect Society's 2015 Word of the Year, which noted its "emerging use as a pronoun [to reject] the traditional gender binary of he and she". It's already in the *Washington Post* style book, and is approved by *The Economist*. With the august *Times* soon to follow? Ms* Hess seems to think so, and to be herself qualifiedly in favor of "they", pointing out that it's already "often deployed unconsciously ... You might refer to a hypothetical person who, say, goes to the store and forgets 'their' wallet."

"Ze, Not They" thunders Tom Flynn in the headline of his *Secular Humanist Bulletin* article. The executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism and editor of *Free Inquiry* laments that *The Chicago Manual of Style*, on which all the Council's publications rely, while still banning "the singular *they* as a usage error" has not caught up with the idea of an entirely new pronoun – the *ze* of his title.

"The singular *they* is unnecessary; better solutions already exist," he writes. "Examples include (in place of he/him or she/her) *ey/em, ne/nem, ve/vir, xe/xem, ze/hir, and ze/zir*. *Ze/zir* is probably the best known, if not by a huge margin. ... A culture that can handle *Ms.* and *Mx.* [a new one to replace both *Mr.* and *Ms.* – JR] can handle *ze* and *zir*. And it had better, unless English users want to resign themselves to a future of perplexing sentences such as "They punched them in the nose."

My suggestion? Scan back to the third paragraph, above, and note the long-in-use, gender-neutral pronoun "one". Why not "one"? Reader opinions are solicited.

*John Arents, the conservative previous Editor of this newsletter, approved of the logic of "Ms", but not of "Ms." with a period, because the 1970s neologism was not an abbreviation of anything, as "Mr." is of Mister and "Mrs." of Mistress. Logical. – JR

JESUS AND MO OPEN UP THEIR DISCUSSION OF FEMINISM TO A BROADER PERSPECTIVE

(From www.jesusandmo.net/2016/04/13/range/)

Jesus: We're organizing an academic debate about feminism.

Barmaid: Who's speaking?

Mohammed: We are.

Barmaid: What? Two *men* talking about feminism? Don't you think that's just a bit unbalanced – that there might be some important voices missing from this “debate” of yours?

Jesus (as they leave the bar): She has a point.

Mo: Yeah, we need a more diverse range of perspectives on this. (Picks up phone) Hey, Moses, want to take part in a debate about feminism?

Moses: Sure. Will there be segregated seating?

THE ATHEIST PIG EXPLAINS LIBERALS TO A JIHADIST

(Transcribed from *The Atheist Pig* cartoon reprinted in thehumanist.com, 4/8/2016)

Jihadist (with his sword by his side): I've noticed a lot of liberals are squeamish about criticizing Islam. We're grateful for the cover it gives us, but curious as to why.

Atheist Pig: I think it's because they associate Islam with brown people and they think criticizing brown people makes them racist.

Jihadist: Interesting. Because we totally want to behead them, too.

Pig: Somehow, I think they'd be OK with that.

SAEEDA Charlotte Pomerantz

My parents named me Saeeda.

Saeeda means *lucky* in Arabic.

I am 14 years old.

Today I was unlucky.

Today a bomb destroyed my school.

It killed the headmistress, my teacher, twelve of my classmates.

It also killed the classroom rabbit I took care of on holidays and weekends.

Its blood spilled all over the lettuce leaves.

I do not know what happened to my wounded classmates.

They were carried out on stretchers, screaming in pain.

That evening, the people from the village came to the school courtyard.

They brought flowers, gifts, letters, drawings, soft animals.

My mother took my little brother to the school.

He brought his favorite soft bear to give me.

My father stayed home and wept.

People lit candles and prayed.

The Elder of the village stood silent with the others.

Then she shook her fist, tears running down her cheeks, and cried out,

Enough!

Enough of weeping

Enough of flowers and candles and prayers.

Wipe away your tears. Hold hands.

Embrace one another

Stand strong against the voices that would divide us.

As a great man said:

“We shall overcome

because the arc of the moral universe

bends slowly, but it bends towards justice.”

I, too, wanted to cry out,

tell them how much I missed

my beautiful loving mother.

My handsome, warm hearted father

My funny mischievous little brother

my friends and neighbors

I wanted to cry out

How much I miss

my home, my bed, my soft pillow,

my books and toys and games.

The moon that shines through my bedroom window

onto the little courtyard

My street

The market

The Mosque

The street musicians

The shop keepers

I miss the baker and his daughter who gave hot bread to the hungry.

The head mistress, who read us beautiful poetry by Yunus:

“Let us make peace,” he wrote

“Let us not be strangers to one another.”

The young doctors at the free clinic who cared for us.

The gentle imam who gave shelter in the mosque to those who had no place to sleep.

I miss my cousins

who live in terrible refugee camps,

without enough food or water or blankets.

I miss my uncle and his children who drowned at sea in an old wooden boat,

trying to get to a better place.

Sometimes in the dark and endless night,

I wonder what it would have been like to grow up,

develop breasts, become a woman,

study, become a teacher, fall in love, have a child,

travel to places my teacher told us about.

I try to imagine a life where people are like the people in my village:

brothers and sisters who help each other

Wondering about all this, I think what I will miss

most are

the singing, the dancing,

the laughter of friends and family,

the funny hats, the presents,

the 15 candles on my birthday cake.

But this will never happen.

I will be fourteen forever.

My name is no longer Saeeda.

My new name is Collateral Damage.

**HELP WANTED:
BE THE SHSNY CHAIR OF FUN**

SHSNY stages between four and eight major events a year (besides our regular, something-every-week-of-the-month get-togethers), and we are constantly in need of venues in which to hold those lectures, roundtables, book-signings, parties and banquets.

Because of the recent death of Irv Millman, our resident Restaurant Maven and Go-To Guy for finding and negotiating venues, SHSNY needs a new Events Organizer.

More than just finding and booking places, we need someone to suggest, plan and supervise *new* events as well as established ones, finding speakers, panelists and entertainers – coordinating with and assisted by your fellow directors of the SHSNY Board, of course.

In other words, someone who can actually make an impact on and a difference in the freethought scene and community in New York.

Requirements: A willingness to work, stamina.

Salary: Don't be silly.

Perks: Membership on the SHSNY Board, cool "Events Chair" business cards, fun and satisfaction.

Contact: email editor@shsn.org

Question: How would you make God laugh? Answer: Tell him your plans. – *John Cleese*

**GOING TO
REASON RALLY 2016 IN WASHINGTON?
(or planning/hoping/thinking about going?)
GO WITH SHSNY JUNE 4.**

It's going to be the biggest get-together of humanists, rationalists, atheists and agnostics ever, and—just as if you'd been to Woodstock—you're going to want to tell your grandchildren, "I was there."

Get the basic facts by Googling "Reason Rally 2016". But then plan on making the most of the day by sharing and celebrating it with your fellow and sororal secular humanists of New York.

Want to pool a ride, share a bus or train trip, go halvie on a hotel room, agree on where and when to meet at the Rally, or just get some info?

Contact the SHSNY Reason Rally Committee.

Maria Astifidis, Claire Miller, Carl Marxer and Brian Lemaire are handling our plans and gathering information; let them help you. Contact Maria at mariaasti@netzero.net.

Simple as that. Have a great (and reasonable) day in Washington.

Or here. Or anywhere.

Every day.

I've tried atheism, and I can't stick at it. I keep having doubts. – *Ian Hislop, Editor of Private Eye.*

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Going to the Reason Rally?

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Help Wanted

What's wrong with the
"National Day of Prayer"?

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Bigotry in America

See Page 7
Day of Reason Brunch!
Quick: Just days left to book

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