

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

November, 2010

Poetry this month, plus reports from our social scenes. We award ourselves an “A” in Religion, expose gay homophobes in Georgia and sympathize with gay criminals in Montana. We consider “miracles” in Chile, fun funeral music in Australia and pancakes on Second Avenue. But first, it’s election season again, and while we take seriously issues of church-and-state, the subversion of American history and the rising of a new Christian fascism, we start with a (nervous) laugh. – JR

ELECT THE WILLFULLY IGNORANT! THE 2010 ALL-PURPOSE, ANY-CANDIDATE POLITICAL TV COMMERCIAL

*(Transcribed from “Elect the Willfully Ignorant” by UCB Comedy (Babelgum) on HuffingtoPost.com, October 18)
(Onscreen, a background of an idyllic-looking farm, complete with barn and silo. As a handsome man in blue suit and red tie walks into frame, a title appears: Elect the Willfully Ignorant.)*

Hi, I’m Michael Sharp, and I’m running for United States Senate on the platform of Willful Ignorance. I strongly believe Americans want and need a candidate who refuses to be swayed by information. The times for career politicians are over. We need a candidate who will let emotion and inexperience guide every decision – just like the voters he represents.

I know my opponent has said some ignorant things on occasion, but only I have a proven track record of complete and utter disregard for knowledge on every issue since before I was born.

For instance, when I say, “Taxes are bad,” I’m honestly saying everything I know about that subject.

I oppose any issue that is complex, like the Ground Zero mosque, gay marriage, the economy, and photosynthesis. And I won’t back down, like some Washington crony, who learns things. Hmph, everything I know comes from friends who know just as much as me, the movie “Independence Day,” and Jay Leno monologues.

I’ll cut taxes, increase spending, and eliminate the deficit. I’ll remove all the troops from Afghanistan and catch Osama bin Laden in my first five days in office. I’ll make free trade easier, and I’ll keep our kids’ toys safe.

How will I do all that?

My strong set of Willful Ignorance principles will guide my vision. I won’t read any bill – details are for elitists. I will discover all my opinions as I say them, not like those Capitol Hill fat cats with their staffs and briefings.

I promise, if elected, I will never learn anything that challenges what you and I already think, just like American conformists George Washington, Lincoln Abraham and Martin Luther King, Jr.

I’m just like you, completely unqualified for the job, but passionate that I will do it right.

I’m Michael Sharp, and I approve this message.

Whatever that means.



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SHSNY is an Affiliated Local Group of the Council for Secular Humanism, and a Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association.

THE NEWEST (AND ODDS-ON FAVORITE) 2010 DUMBTH-AWARD CANDIDATE

Most candidates for SHSNY's annual Dumbth Award are nominated on the basis of some one thing they've said during the year that is spectacularly stupid – not just ignorant of fact or irrational, but willfully ignorant and/or anti-rational.

But where to begin with Christine O'Donnell? The "witchcraft-dabbling," anti-masturbation, anti-condom, Bibles-in-the-schools-crusading, Tea-Party-takeover, Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate from Delaware is almost too easy a target. But here goes:

"Creationism, in essence, is believing that the world began as the Bible in Genesis says, that God created the Earth in six days, six twenty-four hour periods. And there is just as much, if not more, evidence supporting that."

Get that? It's not just the dumb creationist belief that gets Ms. O'Donnell the nomination, but the counter-factual, anti-rational, based-on-nothing, hare-brained assertion that there is "more evidence" for creationism than for science.

Of course, if you don't believe in creationism, it's probably because you've forsaken Bible-based truth for "physics." And yes, she thinks physics is a plural noun.

"Physics put people in spiritual harm, the same way pimps put people in physical harm."

And, of course ...

"Evolution is a myth. Why aren't monkeys evolving into people?"

Update, October 19:

Christine is the gift of dumbth that just keeps on giving. In a videotaped October 18 debate before an audience of legal scholars and law students at Widener University Law School, O'Donnell criticized Democratic nominee Chris Coons' position that teaching creationism in public school would violate the First Amendment by promoting religious doctrine.

Coons said private and parochial schools are free to teach creationism but that "religious doctrine doesn't belong in our public schools." O'Donnell challenged:

"Where in the Constitution is the separation of church and state?"

The audience erupted in laughter (which O'Donnell clearly thought was *with* her), and when Coons answered that the First Amendment bars Congress from making laws respecting the establishment of religion, she was incredulous:

"You're telling me that's in the First Amendment?"

Ms. O'Donnell joins seven other distinguished 2010 Dumbth nominees: 1) Fox News' **Brit Hume**, who

blamed Tiger Woods's marital-infidelity problems on his Buddhism; 2) Christian Broadcaster (and Lifetime-Achievement-in-Dumbth winner) **Pat Robertson**, who blamed the Haitians themselves for last January's earthquake because their ancestors "swore a pact to the Devil"; 3) actor **Danny Glover**, who blamed the same earthquake on global warming; 4) actor **Craig T. Nelson**, who said of government bailouts, "I've been on welfare and food stamps ... did anyone help me?"; 5) Democratic Congressman **Hank Johnson**, who worried that sending more sailors to Guam might cause that small island to tip

over; 6) California Republican senate hopeful (he lost) **Chuck DeVore**, who advertised that "Jack Bauer," the fictional hero of the TV show "24," would endorse him; and 7) perennial Dumbth hopeful **Newt Gingrich**, who asserted that "secularists" (us) represent a greater threat to America than "Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union."

A CHRISTIAN MINISTER MAKES THE CASE FOR SEPARATION

Joseph. L. Conn

(Reprinted from "Jimi Jobin's Credo: Liberty U. Grad Makes The Conservative Christian Case For Separation," on *The Wall of Separation*, the official blog of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, July 8.)

It's not every day that I find myself in agreement with a Liberty University graduate on the proper relationship between religion and government.

OK. It's probably not even every decade – or maybe even every century. Students at Jerry Falwell, Jr.'s school tend to fall on the other end of the theocratic spectrum from me. Today, however, is a most unusual day.

In an essay at Religion Dispatches, Pastor Jimi Jobin, a Las Vegas preacher and Liberty alum, argues for a healthy distance between religion and government and against partisan politics in the pulpit. Jobin's essay, headlined "The Conservative Christian Case for Separation of Church and State," is an open letter to H. Wayne Williams [who] endorsed a Republican gubernatorial candidate from his tax-exempt South Dakota pulpit recently. Americans United filed a complaint with the IRS about that blatant violation of federal tax law.

Jobin takes issue with Williams from both a religious and a pragmatic perspective. "For the historically minded among us," Jobin says, "the reasons for not bringing our spiritual authority into political campaigns are blood red. For nearly 2,000 years our faith forefathers were persecuted and oppressed, not always by the irreligious, but more often by competing tribes within Christianity. Clerics would jockey for favor in the kingdoms of men, then use any clout gained to suppress the views of their theological enemies."



And that religious-political relationship had truly dire results—religious war and persecution—until Americans figured out a better way.

Observes Jobin, “For almost 1,500 years Christians wielded political power to slay one another, until the founding of America. America was the first country without a designated faith; here was the only place in the world where Catholics and Protestants, Radical Reformationists and Orthodox (not to mention Jews, Muslims, nonbelievers and others) could live as neighbors. An accomplishment not won by better theology nor a love of peace, but because each lacked the ability to oppress one another by controlling the government.

“We have created a land,” he continues, “where church and state are separated to protect them from one another, not to diminish the role of either. The integrity of the church is jeopardized when politicians can appeal to spiritual leaders and gain their endorsement because the opportunities for abuse and ambition are too rampant. The same quid pro quo corruption that taints those tempted by lobbyists will await pastors when their support can yield inexhaustible American power. This is why America has passed laws to preserve the dignity and purity of the pastoral office, exchanging tax exemption (unique in the world) with the trust that the nation’s charitable goodwill can’t be used as a political force. ...

“It desecrates our pulpit to yield it to politics,” he asserts. “We are called to something higher than to meddle in the affairs of ambitious men. We are not so holy that we can merely baptize a candidate, and never drink the poison of his words. We do not stump for Senators, we do not campaign for Congressman, we do not preach for Presidents, because the name of Christ is too precious to risk on a common election, no matter how important the issues at stake may seem.

“We cannot allow Jesus to become a political puppet, a sock on the arm of the statesman. Our role is to translate the values of scripture into the hearts and minds of every American, not to rule those Americans or force our values on them by manipulating the vote. The humble witness of Jesus is weakened when it is communicated through the edicts of rulers rather than the powerful persuasion of changed lives, hearts, and minds. The Kingdom of God cannot be voted into existence.”

Powerful words. Jobin concludes the essay with an appeal to political pastor Williams to take his “opinion to the poll and not the pulpit. Encourage your church to lobby their convictions, but don’t let a lobbyist lead your church. Your vote belongs to a candidate, but your pulpit belongs to Christ, so ‘give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and give unto God what is God’s.’”

The Religious Right Machiavellis at the Alliance Defense Fund must be in a frenzy today trying to figure out how to shut Jobin down. If his carefully reasoned

appeal gets around, the ADF’s campaign to forge evangelical churches into a disciplined political machine will be finished.

Let’s hope Liberty U. Chancellor Falwell doesn’t revoke Pastor Jobin’s diploma. You’ve produced one outstanding student of history and theology, Jerry!

GLENN BECK’S “COLLECTIVE SALVATION” MYTH MISUSES AMERICAN HISTORY – AGAIN

Sally Kohn

(Excerpted from “Glenn Beck’s Rampant Misuse of Founding Fathers Myths,” in The Christian Science Monitor, 10/13/2010, posted on altnet.com)

Fox News television host Glenn Beck says the idea of “collective salvation”—“that our fates are linked—is “dangerous to the Constitutional republic.” He argues that related notions of social justice, redistribution, and ending oppression are fundamentally anti-American, communist creeds. America’s Founding Fathers would disagree.

“We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

A union. For the common defense. General welfare. Justice. Though our unity has endured serious trials, America was not by accident called the United States of America. In a letter to James Madison, George Washington wrote, “We are either a united people, or we are not. If the former, let us, in all matters of general concern act as a nation, which have national objects to promote, and a national character to support. If we are not, let us no longer act a farce by pretending to it.”

The message remains clear today. We cannot just say we are a nation and cling to an inflated sense of nationalism while, in practice, ignoring the needs and humanity of our fellow Americans. We have to “act as a nation,” working together as a nation for our collective best interest. In his first inaugural address, Thomas Jefferson said that we must “unite in common efforts for the common good.” Chief among those “common efforts” was America itself.

Yes, the colonists fled the tyranny of the British crown, but the choice they made was democracy over monarchy, not extreme individualism over statehood. Certainly, their spirit of independence still undergirds the American character today, but our history is also a testament to hard-earned lessons in cooperation.

The American Revolution and subsequent founding of the United States of America were definitive acts of collective salvation, deciding that we could be more as a

nation than as individuals alone.

Within this context, the Founding Fathers saw the importance of ensuring a level playing field within the new republic – that the common good of equality could never be achieved by people on unequal footing. John Adams wrote, “Government is instituted for the common good; for the protection, safety, prosperity, and happiness of the people; and not for profit, honor, or private interest of any one man, family, or class of men.”

Sure, some of our Founding Fathers had a long way to go in their day-to-day treatment of women, people of color, and minority religions – and that’s putting it mildly. But those principles of equality and insurances for common good were written into our founding documents with great purpose. And they have paved the way for every future step toward equality this country has made. The Founders, in their wisdom, never said America was perfect. They made clear they were working to perfect the union, which subsequent generations would continue.

In the Federalist Papers, Madison elaborated that society’s unequal groupings—the landed versus those without property, creditors versus debtors, and so on—are “much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good.” Beck and other pundits have labeled “oppression” a bad word the left uses to play victim and blame conservatives.

But founders like Madison were acutely aware of real oppression within America’s borders – and the very real consequences of this inequality on the country as a whole. The “principal task” of government is to regulate and balance these interests toward the ideal of equality, Madison wrote.

Glenn Beck’s narrative claims working class, mostly white folks in America are being undermined by the needs of poor people and people of color – needs prioritized by an allegedly biased and socialist President Obama. In Beck’s mind, “collective salvation” isn’t collective at all but code for putting some people’s interests first. It’s an ironic critique considering that conservative economic policies have for decades put the needs of big business and the richest of the rich ahead of everyone else, whether black or white, middle class or poor.

Even more ironic is that Beck himself actually embraces “collective salvation” – the idea that none of us can be saved until all of us are saved. He isn’t directing Americans to turn inward and solve their problems alone. Beck wants you to watch his show, come to his march in Washington, call your representatives, talk to your neighbors, agitate in your church – making clear that he knows individual problems of such magnitude can only be solved through collective action.

If only Beck and other pundits, quick to point fingers, would go a step further and see that all of our problems – falling wages for working people, rising cost of living,

foreclosures, crumbling education infrastructure, racial tension, insecurity – cannot just be solved by one group binding together in a pitched partisan battle against “the other.” Instead, all of us must work in “common efforts for the common good.”

Collective salvation isn’t anathema to America; it’s essential to the Founders’ vision. It’s as American as sharing apple pie.

TWO FOOTNOTES TO THE CHILEAN MINERS “MIRACLE”

John Rafferty

(Based, in part, on materials forwarded by Colin Rafferty)

First, the lazy and fearful U.S. media ignored the religious nuttiness surrounding the vigil for the Chilean miners who have since been rescued, but one of the world’s best newspapers, the U.K.’s *Guardian*, reported on the fierce jockeying by the religious for bragging rights to the expected “miracle” of the miners’ rescue. Along with more than a thousand international journalists was one Rolly the Clown. “You could call me a psychologist of sorts,” Rolly said. “People need a clown at their side when they are grasping for solutions.” The miners’ families had three.

“God has heard our prayers,” announced Catholic bishop Caspar Quintana in a stunning bit of Godly mind-reading. At the same time, evangelical preacher Javier Soto wandered among the miners’ families’ encampment with a guitar and songs of praise he is convinced goosed God into doing the right thing. “He listens to the music,” said the pastor, gesturing to the azure sky.

But the most presumptuous bid for “miracle credit” went to Carlos Parra Diaz, a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, who pronounced, “God has spoken to me clearly and guided my hand each step of the rescue. He wanted the miners to be rescued and I am His instrument.”

Um, guys, Who do you think was responsible for the miners’ dilemma in the first place?

Second, when you consider the predictable headlining of the survival and rescue of the miners—made not just possible but only even conceivable by 21st century technology—as “a miracle” by the brain-dead American media, consider, too, the almost-perfectly-prescient definition of “dumbth” by Warren Allen Smith, PIQUE’s first editor, in his original proposal for the award that has now become an SHSNY annual.

An example of a dumbth—“someone who needs to have his illogic pointed out to him”—Warren wrote in 1992, is “a person who falls five floors down an elevator shaft, is rescued by a policeman who crawls into the dark hole unaided, is saved by EMS personnel who rush to the scene, is operated on by a skilled surgeon, is nursed back to health by therapists, and who then credits God with “a miracle.” Sound pathetically familiar?

THANKSGIVING

Phil Appleman

O let us give thanks for the glorious spasm
that spurted atoms on an endless quest
for the far edge of everything, let's
praise the ancient heave and buckle,
the burn, blister, and boil
that birthed our blue-green planet,
be grateful for the lucky spark
that seasoned our primal soup,
and honor the ultimate sacrifice
of the creeping pioneers
who dragged us up onto dry land.
Let's be thankful for the heroism
of all those fallen fathers
who bequeathed to us these novelties,
our clever arms and legs,
thankful too for the company
of moles and manatees, sloths and seals,
horses and hedgehogs – and thankful for
the monkeys, gibbons, and gorillas
who once upon a time set off
on gambles of their own, aping our long,
long saga: vines
choking trees to reach the sun,
predators lurking at water holes...
Now, somewhere out there, the atoms race on,
still searching for the edge of everything,
but here, snug in our tundra and grassland,
our forest and savanna, let us thank
the furry ancestors who brought us
along this way, and now stay at our side
as we press on to some great adventure
just beyond our dreams.

“GREAT LECTURES”: GREAT START

Reported by Bob Murtha, Great Lectures Leader

Our new Great Lectures Series had an auspicious start on October 12. 22 of us showed up, and Stone Creek Lounge had to bring in extra chairs.

Our very interesting first lecture was Richard Dawkins on a DVD discussing “The God Delusion.” Dawkins’ lecture focused on the baneful effects of religion, including faith-based suicide bombers, faith-based war and faith-based ranters like Ted Haggard.

The recorded lecture was followed by a spirited discussion. Interestingly, Daniel Mann, a religious believer, showed up wanting to discuss his faith and the supporting evidence. This was very much out of synch with the night’s topic.

Our next Great Lecture, “The Virus of Faith,” scheduled for 7:00 p.m. on November 10, once again at Stone Creek Lounge, 140 East 27th Street, will be even more appropriate for discussions of issues of faith and

evidence. I hope to see an even bigger audience.

One more thing: the menu at Stone Creek has been expanded and improved. If you come hungry, you may reasonably expect a decent meal at a reasonable price.

OUR OCTOBER 10 FREETHOUGHT DAY BRUNCH WAS A ROUSING SUCCESS

Reported by John Rafferty

We filled the room—again—at historic Pete’s Tavern, for our third annual Freethought Day Brunch, celebrating the October 12, 1692, date on which Governor William Phips of the Massachusetts Bay Colony ordered that “spectral evidence” would no longer be admitted in the colony’s courts, thereby ending the infamous Salem witch trials.

So it was perfectly fitting that we celebrated Phips’s decision, a landmark event in the history of reason, science and freethought in America, with a lively and informative talk—and even livelier Q&A session—on the subject, “Can We Have a Science of Morality?” by philosopher and evolutionary biologist (and SHSNY Honorary Member) Massimo Pigliucci.

Massimo’s answer to the question: No, in direct rebuttal to Sam Harris’ new book, *The Moral Landscape*. Not that science can’t help us understand our ethics, Massimo explained, but for a fuller explanation, we recommend a visit (or two or twenty) to Massimo’s blog, rationallyspeaking.org.

Meanwhile, the day was beautiful, the brunch was excellent, conversations flowed, new friendships were formed, a rousing good time was had by all – and our new pay-in-advance PayPal system (new for SHSNY, anyway) meant that no one had to be turned away from an oversold room. Speaking of which ...



NOW YOU CAN PAY YOUR SHSNY DUES, BUY A SUBSCRIPTION, PREPAY FOR AN EVENT, OR MAKE A DONATION – ON PAYPAL

Donna Marxer, SHSNY Treasurer

It’s simple – go to our website, www.shsny.org, click on the Membership link at the top of the screen to pay your dues, renew your subscription, or even make a donation to SHSNY (heartily recommended). You don’t have to have a PayPal account – use your credit card as you would for any online purchase.

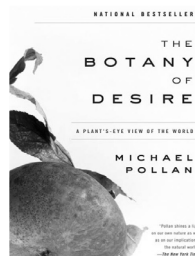
To prepay for an event (like our upcoming Darwin Day/ Anniversary Dinner), there will be a link right in the notice of the event on the home page. Simple.

The new system saves time, paper and postage, but of course you can still pay or contribute to SHSNY by cash or check. Promptly, please.

SHSNY CALENDAR: NOVEMBER 2010 - JANUARY 2011

THURSDAY, NOV 4, 6:30 pm
The SHSNY Book Club
meets at
The Muhlenberg Library
209 West 23 St (7th Ave.)
to discuss
THE BOTANY OF
DESIRE: A Plant's-Eye View
of the World
by Michael Pollan

Do plants, Michael Pollan wondered, use humans as much as we use them? His answer is an engaging look at the true nature of domestication.



Journalist Pollan's fascinating account of four everyday plants and their coevolution with human society challenges traditional views about humans and nature. Using the histories of apples, tulips, potatoes and cannabis to illustrate the complex, reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world, he shows how these species have successfully exploited human desires to flourish. "It makes just as much sense to think of agriculture as something the grasses did to people as a way to conquer the trees." — *Paperback*

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

Every SHSNY Book Club is a Book Swap, too.

Bring the books gathering dust on your shelves and take your pick of other readers' castaways. The leftovers? Donated to the Library.

Book Club: Thurs, Dec 2, 6:30
at the Muhlenberg Library
GUNS, GERMS, AND STEEL:
The Fates of Human Societies
by Jared Diamond

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, by National Medal of Science winner Diamond "... is a brilliantly written, passionate, whirlwind tour through 13,000 years of history on all the continents — a short history of everything about everybody. The origins of empires, religion, writing, crops, and guns are all here. ... Its account of how the modern world was formed is full of lessons for our own future. After the first two pages, you won't be able to put it down." — *Paul Ehrlich — Paperback*

Book Club: Thurs, Jan 6, 6:30
at the Muhlenberg Library
THE AGE OF EMPATHY:
Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society
by Franz de Waal

A pioneer in primate studies, Frans de Waal sees our better side in chimps, especially our capacity for empathy. He has gathered ample evidence that our ability to identify with another's distress — a catalyst for compassion and charity — has deep roots in the origin of our species. It is a view independently reinforced by recent biomedical studies showing that our brains are built to feel another's pain."

"... proof positive that, like other creatures who hang out in herds, we've evolved to be empathetic. We don't just hear a scream, it chills us to the bone; when we see a smile, we answer with one of our own.

"... offers advice to cutthroat so-called realists: Listen to your inner ape." — *Paperback*

WED, NOV 10, 6:30 pm
REASONABLE NEW YORK
and
CENTER FOR INQUIRY-NYC
present
DAVID HELFLAND
EXPLORING THE UNIVERSE
at
New York Society for
Ethical Culture
2 West 64 St. (at CPW)

Reasonable New York, the new consortium of nine local reason-based organizations — including SHSNY — will host astronomer David Helfand on November 10. Helfand will discuss the discoveries of Earth-like planets, then sit down for a conversation with CFI General Counsel Derek Araujo. A question-and-answer segment with the audience will follow.

David Helfand is Chair of the Department of Astronomy at Columbia University, and a member of CFI-NYC's Board of Advisors.

After 400 years of speculation, work over the past decade has established that our solar system is not unique. Indeed, it appears that planetary systems are the rule, rather than the exception, and the discovery of Earth-like planets in the habitable zones of nearby stars is less than a year away. Helfand will first help us orient ourselves by discussing our place in space and time in the Universe, and then explore how we both discover new solar systems and establish the existence of other habitable worlds.

Admission is open to all, and free!



SHSNY CALENDAR: NOVEMBER 2010 - JANUARY 2011

MONDAY, NOV 8, 7:00 pm

SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge

140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

**"MONTY PYTHON AND
THE HOLY GRAIL"**

The comedy clan sends up religion again, skewering the Grail legend, King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table and the whole insane idea of

a "holy quest."

Watch

The Black Knight be dismembered!



Tremble before the awful "Knights who say 'Ni!'" Enter the nunnery of the sex-starved! Inspired lunacy!

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.

Check out Stone Creek's menu and prices online at stonecreekny.com

**December 13: "Oh, Brother,
Where Art Thou?"**

**SUNDAY, NOV 21, 12 NOON
OUR MONTHLY SHSNY
BRUNCH GET-TOGETHER:
NEW RESTAURANT!**

Sixteen of us showed up for the first SHSNY Sunday brunch at BXL East, and the universal Zagat-like review was — *great!*

We'll gather again at BXL East, 210 East 51 Street, just east of 3rd Avenue, for outstanding Belgian fare, with dishes ranging from \$7 to \$16, and *prix-fixe* Sunday Brunch (including a drink) for \$17. Check it out at bxlcafe.pregraphic.com/

Everyone interested in getting together with 20 or more like-minded humanists and rationalists for good grub and lively talk in a charming East-side setting is welcome. Bring friends!

Notice: New time - 12 noon!

GREAT LECTURES

TUES, NOV 23, 7:00 pm

Richard Dawkins

"THE VIRUS OF FAITH"

**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**

How is it, asks Richard Dawkins, that despite science having exposed old religious myths, militant faith is back on the march? The mechanism for perpetuating beliefs that Dawkins describes as leading to murderous intolerance, is by imposing religion on children who are too inexperienced to judge it for themselves.



We teach children superstitions drawn from ancient scriptures that promote a "contradictory and poisonous system of morals." Dawkins compares this to a virus, which infects the young and is passed down the generations.

Part 2 of last month's "Root of All Evil" lecture, this British TV documentary — a fast-paced illustrated presentation on DVD — was the precursor of Dawkins's 2006 best-selling book, *The God Delusion*.

Each Great Lectures evening will begin with a viewing of a DVD, followed by a Q&A and general discussion led by SHSNY Board Member Bob Murtha.

Great Lectures Night is FREE.

Next Lecture TBA, Jan 25

Save the Date!

Saturday, February 12

for our annual

**DARWIN DAY + SHSNY
ANNIVERSARY BANQUET**

**at Golden Unicorn Restaurant
("one of NYC's 5 Best!")**

OTHER EVENTS

Sundays:

Religion on the Line

6-9:00 a.m. — WMCA, 770 AM

Equal Time for Freethought

6:30 p.m. — WBAI-NY 99.5FM

Religion & Ethics Newsweekly

6:30 p.m. — Channel 13

Wednesdays:

Atheism History Week - 5:30 p.m.

Hosted by SHSNY President John Rafferty. On MNN Channel 67 and RNN Channel 110 in Manhattan, and simultaneously anywhere via live streaming on your computer at www.mnn.org

Thursdays:

NYC City Atheists TV - 7:00 p.m.

Atheist Book Club - 7:30 p.m.,

hosted by SHSNY VP/Secretary Elaine Lynn. Both on MNN Channel 67 and RNN Channel 110 in Manhattan, and simultaneously anywhere via live streaming on your computer at www.mnn.org

Fridays:

Drinking With Atheists — Meet every Friday Night, at a venue to be announced, with like-minded friends for a fun evening of conversation. Details at: www.meetup.com/RichiesList/

Various Dates & Times:

Agnostic A.A. — Seven A.A.-endorsed meetings. Schedules: agnosticAAnyc.org/meetings.html

**FOR UPDATES ON
ALL SHSNY EVENTS ...**

... check the website at www.shsn.org and/or 212-308-2165 and/or our MeetUp site at <http://humanism.meetup.com/155/>

Check Richie's List, too, at <http://atheists.meetup.com/515/>

WE AREN'T IGNORANT OF RELIGION, WE'RE THE ONES WHO UNDERSTAND IT

Laurie Goodstein

(Excerpted from The New York Times, "Basic Religion Test Stumps Many Americans," 9/28/10)

Americans are by all measures a deeply religious people, but they are also deeply ignorant about religion. Researchers from the independent Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life phoned more than 3,400 Americans and asked them 32 questions about the Bible, Christianity and other world religions, famous religious figures and the constitutional principles governing religion in public life.

On average, people who took the survey answered half the questions incorrectly, and many flubbed even questions about their own faith.

Those who scored the highest were atheists and agnostics, as well as two religious minorities: Jews and Mormons. The results were the same even after the researchers controlled for factors like age and racial differences. "Even after all these other factors, including education, are taken into account, atheists and agnostics, Jews and Mormons still outperform all the other religious groups in our survey," said Greg Smith, a senior researcher at Pew.

That finding might surprise some, but not Dave Silverman, president of American Atheists. "I have heard many times that atheists know more about religion than religious people," Mr. Silverman said. "Atheism is an effect of that knowledge, not a lack of knowledge. I gave a Bible to my daughter. That's how you make atheists."

Among the topics covered in the survey were: Where was Jesus born? What is Ramadan? Whose writings inspired the Protestant Reformation? Which Biblical figure led the exodus from Egypt? What religion is the Dalai Lama? Joseph Smith? Mother Teresa? In most cases, the format was multiple choice.

The researchers said that the questionnaire was designed to represent a breadth of knowledge about religion, but was not intended to be regarded as a list of the most essential facts about the subject. Most of the questions were easy, but a few were difficult enough to discern which respondents were highly knowledgeable.

On questions about the Bible and Christianity, the groups that answered the most right were Mormons and white evangelical Protestants.

On questions about world religions, like Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism, the groups that did the best were atheists, agnostics and Jews.

One finding that may grab the attention of policy makers is that most Americans wrongly believe that anything having to do with religion is prohibited in public schools. An overwhelming 89 percent of respondents, asked whether public school teachers are permitted

to lead a class in prayer, correctly answered no.

But fewer than one of four knew that a public school teacher is permitted "to read from the Bible as an example of literature." And only about one third knew that a public school teacher is permitted to offer a class comparing the world's religions. The survey's authors concluded that there was "widespread confusion" about "the line between teaching and preaching."

Mr. Smith said the survey appeared to be the first comprehensive effort at assessing the basic religious knowledge of Americans, so it is impossible to tell whether they are more or less informed than in the past.

Clergy members who are concerned that their congregants know little about the essentials of their own faith will no doubt be appalled by some findings:

Fifty-three percent of Protestants could not identify Martin Luther as the man who started the Protestant Reformation. Forty-five percent of Catholics did not know that their church teaches that the consecrated bread and wine in holy communion are not merely symbols, but actually become the body and blood of Christ. Forty-three percent of Jews did not know that Maimonides, one of the foremost rabbinical authorities and philosophers, was Jewish.

RELIGIOUS BELIEF LINKED TO BEING A BIT DIM

(Excerpted from The Daily Mash (U.K.), 9/29/10)

People who describe themselves as religious may also be a bit thick, according to new research. As a study found that atheists know more about religion than religious people, experts said that in all fairness that should not really count as news and it was actually rather cruel to ask them complicated questions of that nature.

Professor Henry Brubaker, of the Institute for Studies, said: "Are you religious because you're stupid or does being religious make you stupid? It's the classic chicken and egg scenario.

"For any religious people who may be reading this, a chicken is a domesticated bird, roughly the size of a football, while an egg is the small, beige oval thing that comes out of it and then goes into your tummy.

"You think they were made by a character called God, Jehovah, Allah, Brahma or L. Ron Hubbard."

According to the study, Jews and Mormons were the least stupid believers ... while Southern U.S. Baptists had to have the questions explained using bits of fruit.

Most Protestants believe their church was founded by "Space 1999" actor Martin Landau, while many Roman Catholics thought that holy communion symbolized St. Peter's fondness for salted Pringles.

Meanwhile only half of those surveyed could identify the Koran as being the holy book of Islam, while the other half said that whatever it was they were terrified of it and wanted to shoot it in the face.

PANCAKES, NOT PRAYERS, MAKE PEOPLE HAPPY

John Rafferty

When I read in the online version of the *Kansas City Star* of September 14 that the International House of Pancakes (IHOP) is suing the International House of Prayer (IHOP), as well as a couple of other IHOPs, over trademark dilution and infringement, I couldn't help but smile.

Kansas City cares about IHOP v. IHOP because 10-year-old IHOP (prayer), which sends "a never-ending digital signal of prayers to Jerusalem, where it streams live on God TV for broadcast all over the world," has drawn "thousands from around the world to south Kansas City to prepare for 'end times.'" Seemingly unaware of the logical contradiction, the ministry is also planning to build a \$150 million world headquarters. The other IHOP (pancakes) just makes sugar-and-syrup-loaded breakfasts at 350 locations, one of which is just across highway U.S.71 from the site of the planned IHOP (prayer) headquarters.

So, which side are you on, prayers or pancakes?

Mm, me too. And my smile? For about a year earlier in this decade there was in my East 50s neighborhood a quirky little restaurant called Pancakes Make People Happy. Great name, but a not-well-thought-out business plan. What they gave people was pancakes, and what they got was overflow crowds on weekend mornings, then lonesome blues the rest of the week. I heard that the ownership was Canadian, but I'm more inclined to think they lived somewhere on the astral plane.

But they made pancakes, and pancakes *do* make people happy, which is more than can be said for prayer, which is more likely to make people fearful, guilt-ridden and, if practiced over long periods of time, delusional.

The lawsuit? Gary Hecker, a Los Angeles intellectual-rights attorney, thinks the courts will side with IHOP (pancakes). Even if the IHOP (prayer) defense convinces the courts that the two entities "are so different that no confusion could exist," Hecker told the *Star*, "I would take the pancakes."

Mm, me too.

SOL ABRAMS, 1923 – 2010

We have only just learned that long-time SHSNY member and frequent contributor to PIQUE, Sol Abrams, died in March.

A much-decorated Army veteran of the Philippines campaign in WWII (his was a military funeral), Sol had been an educator—he retired as a high school assistant principal—and a fierce champion of liberal and humanist causes who wrote knowledgeably and often on "the sins of the Bible." He is survived by a son, two grandsons, and his wife, Lillian, who remains a member of SHSNY.

LET'S CALL THE NEW TYRANNY BY ITS NAME: RADICAL CHRISTIANITY

Chris Hedges, Truthdig

(Excerpted from "How Radical Christian Conservatives May Succeed in Destroying Democracy," on alternet.org, 10/15)

The ancient Greek playwright Aristophanes spent his life battling the assault on democracy by tyrants. It is disheartening to be reminded that he lost. But he understood that the hardest struggle for humankind is often stating and understanding the obvious.

Aristophanes, who had the temerity to portray the ruling Greek tyrant, Cleon, as a dog, is the perfect playwright to turn to in trying to grasp the danger posed to us by movements from the tea party to militias to the Christian right, as well as the bankrupt and corrupt power elite that no longer concerns itself with the needs of its citizens. He saw the same corruption 2,400 years ago. He feared correctly that it would extinguish Athenian democracy. And he struggled in vain to rouse Athenians from their slumber.

There is a yearning by tens of millions of Americans, lumped into a diffuse and fractious movement, to destroy the intellectual and scientific rigor of the Enlightenment. They seek out of ignorance and desperation to create a utopian society based on "biblical law." They want to transform America's secular state into a tyrannical theocracy. These radicals, rather than the terrorists who oppose us, are the gravest threat to our open society. They have, with the backing of hundreds of millions of dollars in corporate money, gained tremendous power. They peddle pseudoscience such as "Intelligent Design" in our schools. They keep us locked into endless and futile wars of imperialism. They mount bigoted crusades against gays, immigrants, liberals and Muslims. They turn our judiciary, in the name of conservative values, over to corporations. They have transformed our liberal class into hand puppets for corporate power. And we remain meek and supine.

The huge amount of taxpayer money doled out to Wall Street, investment banks, the oil and natural gas industry and the defense industry, along with the dismantling of our manufacturing sector, is why we are impoverished. It is why our houses are being foreclosed on. It is why some 45 million Americans are denied medical care. It is why our infrastructure, from public schools to bridges, is rotting. It is why many of us cannot find jobs. We are being fleeced. The flagrant theft of public funds and rise of an obscenely rich oligarchic class is masked by the tough talk of demagogues, themselves millionaires, who use fear and bombast to keep us afraid, confused and enslaved.

Aristophanes saw the same psychological and political manipulation undermine the democratic state in ancient Athens. He repeatedly warned Athenians in

plays such as "The Clouds," "The Wasps," "The Birds," "The Frogs" and "Lysistrata" that permitting political leaders who shout ... "I shall keep up the fight in defense of the people forever!" to get their hands on state funds and power would end with the citizens enslaved.

"The truth is, they want you, you see, to be poor," Aristophanes wrote in his play "The Wasps." "If you don't know the reason, I'll tell you. It's to train you to know who your tamer is. Then, whenever he gives you a whistle and sets you against an opponent of his, you jump out and tear them to pieces."

Our democracy, through years of war, theft and corruption, is also being diminished. But the example Aristophanes offers is not a hopeful one. He held up the same corruption to his fellow Greeks. He repeatedly chided them for not rising up and fighting back. He warned, ominously, that by the time most citizens awoke it would be too late. And he was right. The appearance of normality lulls us into a false hope and submission. Those who shout most loudly in defense of the ideals of the founding fathers, the sacredness of the Constitution and the values of the Christian religion are those who most actively seek to subvert the principles they claim to champion. They hold up the icons and language of traditional patriotism, the rule of law and Christian charity to demolish the belief systems that give them cultural and political legitimacy. And those who should defend these beliefs are cowed and silent.

"For a considerable length of time the normality of the normal world is the most efficient protection against disclosure of totalitarian mass crimes," Hannah Arendt wrote in "The Origins of Totalitarianism." "Normal men don't know that everything is possible, refuse to believe their eyes and ears in the face of the monstrous. ... The reason why the totalitarian regimes can get so far toward realizing a fictitious, topsy-turvy world is that the outside non-totalitarian world, which always comprises a great part of the population of the totalitarian country itself, indulges in wishful thinking and shirks reality in the face of real insanity." ...

All ideological, theological and political debates with the representatives of the corporate state, including the feckless and weak Barack Obama, are useless. They cannot be reached. They do not want a dialogue. They care nothing for real reform or participatory democracy. They use the tricks and mirages of public relations to mask a steadily growing assault on our civil liberties, our inability to make a living and the loss of basic services from education to health care. Our gutless liberal class placates the enemies of democracy, hoping desperately to remain part of the ruling elite, rather than resist. And, in many ways, liberals, because they serve as a cover for these corporate extremists, are our greatest traitors.

Aristophanes too lived in a time of endless war. He

saw how war ate away at the insides of a democratic state until it was hollowed out. His play "Lysistrata," written after Athens had spent 21 years consumed by the Peloponnesian War, is a satire in which the young women refuse to have sex with their men until the war ends and the older women seize the Acropolis, where the funds for war are stored. The play called on Athenians to consider radical acts of civil disobedience to halt a war that was ravaging the state. The play's heroine, Lysistrata, was the playwright's mouthpiece for the folly and self-destructiveness of war. But Athens, which would lose the war, did not listen.

The tragedy is that liberals and secularists, like Obama, are not viewed as competitors by the corporate forces that hold power, but as contaminants that must be eliminated. They have sought to work with forces that will never be placated. They have abandoned the most basic values of the liberal class to play a game that in the end will mean their political and cultural extinction.

There will be no swastikas this time but seas of red, white and blue flags and Christian crosses. There will be no stiff-armed salutes, but recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance. There will be no brown shirts but nocturnal visits from Homeland Security. The fear, rage and hatred of our dispossessed and confused working class are being channeled into currents that are undermining the last vestiges of the democratic state. These dangerous emotions, directed against a liberal class that as in ancient Athens betrayed the population, have a strong appeal. And unless we adopt the radicalism held by Aristophanes, unless we begin to hinder the functioning of the corporate state through acts of civil disobedience, we are finished.

Let us not stand at the open gates of the city meekly waiting for the barbarians. They are coming. They are slouching towards Bethlehem. Let us, if nothing else, like Aristophanes, begin to call our tyranny by its name.

Comment: I take exception to just one word in Chris Hedges' essay and his original headline: "conservative." The new radical Christians are no more "conservative" than the Nazis were national "socialists." While true conservatives would reduce the size of government and its influence on individual freedom, these new fascists aim to control every aspect of our lives, from our schools to our courts, our doctors' offices and our bedrooms. They will, if we let them, "transform America's secular state into a tyrannical theocracy." - JR

YOUR TAX DOLLARS AT WORK: GIVING A WHOLE NEW MEANING TO "TONE DEAF"

The U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan named its transition process from foreign to local security forces "Inteqal," which means "transfer" in Dari and Pashto, the country's two main languages. In Urdu, the official language of neighboring Pakistan, it means "dead."

YET ANOTHER LETTER ON HATE CRIME LAW

To the Editor: Without taking a hard bottom-line position on hate crime laws, I have to point out a few anti-hate-crime-law arguments that seem a bit over the top to me.

First, I simply don't understand this "thought crime" business (PIQUE, "I Told You, I Told You, and I Told You," September). It has always, probably since the inception of written law, been the practice to consider the motivation and state of mind of a defendant. The definitions differentiating between accidental death, justifiable homicide, negligent homicide and various degrees of murder rest largely on just these factors. We have seen quite enough of alternative systems of justice that disregard a defendant's motivations and mental state in the travesties called "zero-tolerance" laws. When a sex offender's parole is revoked because he wrote out his fantasies but never even showed them to anyone, that's punishment for thought crime. But basing the severity of punishment for a violent physical act on the perpetrator's mental state is ordinary common-sense justice.

Second, Dennis Middlebrooks (PIQUE, "Letters on Hate Crime Law," October) sees no important difference between a random knifing and a hate-motivated killing of a homosexual, but the difference should be obvious. The hate-motivated crime sends a chilling threat to all homosexuals that they are hated enough to be killed. This type of crime threatens not only members of the target group, but the foundations of society.

I can see there are problems with taking this too far, but I suspect that most of these are the result of the same mistake that plagues other well-intentioned anti-discrimination efforts: the tendency for the law to designate "protected groups" and assume that any bad outcome for any of them must be due to discrimination. As long as hate-crime laws are written and enforced the way, say, second-degree murder is, I'd think they can be a positive force. – *Harvey Wachtel*

MORE ON THE "GROUND ZERO MOSQUE"

To the Editor: Regarding the comments on the proposed so-called Ground Zero Mosque in October PIQUE, I must admit I agree with Art Harris' position against construction. While I do not deny that Muslims have a legal right to purchase the property and construct the Cordoba House Cultural Center, there are valid concerns about the lack of transparency over the funding for the project as well as over past controversial remarks made by Iman Feisal Abdul Rauf relating to the 9/11 attacks and other matters.

In addition, I was outraged by the Landmarks Commission rubberstamping of Michael Bloomberg's labeling of the existing property, an impressive pre-Civil War Italianate style building that has witnessed a great deal of history, as unworthy of preservation. ...

Furthermore, I was struck by John Rafferty's unsolicited assurances to the imam and his wife that bias against Muslims in the U.S. will one day pass because the American people are "basically decent and tolerant, and will come around." Really? Are these the same American people who, despite the growing hostility to Muslims, still consider them to be more in tune with American values than atheists, who remain the most despised group in America? And does John believe that Muslims are any less hostile to non-believers than their "decent and tolerant" fellow supernaturalists? As a secular humanist, I am more concerned about the bias against freethinkers in this country than I am by hostility to Muslims, which hostility, incidentally, I do oppose. However, I am well past the point where I am going to fret over the civil rights of people who would either be indifferent to our civil rights or, indeed, oppose them.

Finally, I note that Lawrence Wright believes the fact that American Muslims hold more college and graduate degrees than the national average, and have a higher employment rate, somehow renders America "largely immune to the extremism that has placed some European nations in peril." As I recall, most of the 9/11 hijackers were college graduates, as was the Fort Hood Massacre shooter and the would-be Times Square car bomber. Accordingly, I am not reassured. – *Dennis Middlebrooks*

HO-HUM

John Rafferty

(Based on "Lawsuits Accuse Megachurch Leader of Sexual Misconduct" in The New York Times, 9/22/2010)

Another fundamentalist, anti-gay Baptist minister has been charged with coercing sex with teenage boys and using church funds to take them with him on his travels.

So what else is new? This time it's not a white guy in a polyester suit and a bad haircut, but a jive-ass, Porsche-driving, hang-with-the-A-List, George W. Bush-hugger and gospel-of-wealth preaching African American.

Hypocrisy and mendacity know not race.

Bishop Eddie Long, pastor of 33,000-person New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in the Atlanta suburb of Lithonia—whom the Southern Poverty Law Center has called "one of the most virulently homophobic black leaders in the religiously based anti-gay movement"—is being sued by two young men who were 17 and 18-years-old when, they say, Long coerced them into sex. Their lawyer contends that church officials knew what was going on, but "would do everything to protect the most powerful church in the Southeast."

Update: Two more accusers have surfaced. And when Bishop Eddie next faced his congregation, he told them he was "not perfect."

No kidding.

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #109

Even though the state Supreme Court struck down laws criminalizing homosexuality in 1997, the Montana Republican party once again adopted a platform plank in support of making homosexual acts illegal. Under the "Crime" section of the GOP platform, the statement says: "We support the clear will of the people of Montana ... to keep homosexual acts illegal."

Any dissent within Republican ranks? Montana GOP executive director Bowen Greenwood said "The matter has never even come up for discussion."

EXCEPT FOR THE ARCHBISHOP, MAYBE WE SHOULD LIVE IN AUSTRALIA

(Excerpted from Humanist Monthly, the newsletter of the Capital District (Albany) Humanist Society.)

Roman Catholic Archbishop Denis Hart of Melbourne, Australia, has issued instructions banning "romantic ballads, pop or rock music, political songs [and] football club songs" at funerals, and insisting on only prayers for soul of the deceased.

Why? What's bugging the archbishop?

According to a cemetery contacted by Melbourne's *Herald Sun*, a list of songs played at recent Australian funerals includes: "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life," by Monty Python; "Another One Bites the Dust," by Queen; "Highway to Hell," by AC/DC, and "Ding-Dong the Witch is Dead" from The Wizard of Oz.

CONFESSION

Stephen Dobyns

(Reprinted from forwardmomentum.com/html/Vol1Iss8.htm)

The Nazi within me thinks it's time to take charge.
The world's a mess; people are crazy.
The Nazi within me wants windows shut tight,
new locks put on the doors. There's too much
fresh air, too much coming and going.
The Nazi within me wants more respect. He wants
the only TV camera, the only bank account,
the only really pretty girl. The Nazi within me
wants to be boss of traffic and traffic lights.
People drive too fast; they take up too much space.
The Nazi within me thinks people are getting away
with murder. He wants to be the boss of murder.
He wants to be boss of bananas, boss of white bread.
The Nazi within me wants uniforms for everyone.
He wants them to wash their hands, sit up straight,
pay strict attention. He wants to make certain
they say yes when he says yes, no when he says no.
He imagines everybody sitting in straight chairs,
people all over the world sitting in straight chairs.
Are you ready? he asks them. They say they are ready.
Are you ready to be happy? he asks them.
They say they are ready to be happy.
The Nazi within me wants everyone to be happy
but not too happy
and definitely not noisy.
No singing, no dancing, no carrying on.

We know more religion
than the religious.
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The Best-Qualified
Dumbth Candidate Ever!
Page 2

Next Tuesday:
Elect the
Willfully Ignorant.
Page 1

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