

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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March, 2011

This month we look back on where we have come from, forward to where we should go. We celebrate our February celebrations, and look forward to a new one on the 14th (*Hint: have a piece of pi*).

We question creation(s), consider the cost of Mars, revisit the “faith” of atheism, give the Catholic church a couple of smacks, and honor the humanist humorist who gave us the concept of “dumbth.”

But first, we consider – again, and yet again – the obscenity of gun violence in America. – JR

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## **CONTRARY-TO-FACT CONDITIONALS, THE TUCSON MASSACRE AND THE MEDIA The Skeptics Dictionary**

(Excerpted from “Contrary-to-Fact Conditionals & Media Vultures in My Crosshairs” in *Skeptimedia on The Skeptics Dictionary Newsletter*, Feb, 2011)

[Editor: In all the blather printed and aired in the nearly two months since the January 8 shootings in Tucson, this is the most reasoned essay I have found on the subject. – JR]

A conditional statement asserts that if an antecedent condition is true, then a consequent condition will also be true. A contrary-to-fact conditional is a conditional statement whose antecedent condition didn't or couldn't happen. *If Jared Lee Loughner had taken my philosophy class, he wouldn't have shot all those people* is a contrary-to-fact conditional. He didn't take my philosophy class, so we'll never know what he would or wouldn't have done had he taken the class.

I heard several pundits say pretty much the same thing: *if we had been more civil in our political discourse, the tragedy that erupted in Arizona wouldn't have happened*. But we weren't civil, so we'll never know what might have been had we framed our contempt of each other in more benign terms. ...

The media vultures, those ready to tear the flesh off their own mothers if they think it will help promote their agendas, were quick to pounce on this story, calling for more gun control, more prayer, better mental health services, a beginning of self-restraint in political speech, no more hunting metaphors when talking about political enemies, less government, fewer taxes, better immigration laws, the dangers of socialized medicine, the end of government-sponsored vaccination programs, and an end to liberal

lunatics and atheist immorality. Do I exaggerate? Very well, I exaggerate, but the fact remains: nobody knows why Jared Lee Loughner did what he did, not even Mr. Loughner himself. But many media vultures will seize the opportunity to spread their messages at his expense.

If Loughner had read a different comic strip that morning or seen a different message in his cereal bowl, he might have gone bowling or shot up his philosophy class. We'll never know, because he didn't do things differently. We'll never know if he'd have done what he did had Sarah Palin or any other tough talker never existed or said any of the things they've said about reloading or crosshairs. We'll never know what Loughner would have done had he been taking anti-psychotic medication or, if he was on medication, whether had he been off that medication he wouldn't have acted violently. He might have done the same thing whether he was on or off meds. Either way, the anti-drug vultures would have swooped in for the kill.

A media event such as a mass killing is an opportunity for the media vulture. The agenda is more important than truth or the feelings of anyone involved. Taking advantage of every opportunity to get before the cameras or in print is the priority. The contrary-to-fact conditional is the perfect polemical tool. You can't be proven wrong and you can appear to be a caring individual while you blow off steam or steer people to your side of the street. You don't even have to explicitly assert the conditional to employ it. People will understand it implicitly when you, for example, run your mouth off about prayer or the Ten Commandments or gun control. *If only we'd had compulsory prayer or the Ten Commandments posted in his schoolhouse, he wouldn't have turned out this way. If only all those Republicans hadn't used hunting and killing metaphors to describe what they'd like to do to their Democratic opponents, then such violence wouldn't*

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**BOARD OF DIRECTORS:** John Rafferty, *President/Editor*; Elaine Lynn, *Vice President/Secretary*; Donna Marxer, *Treasurer*; Remo Cosentino; Arthur Harris; Lee Loshak; Carl Marxer; Irv Millman; Robert A. Murtha, Jr.

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happen. Putting out a map that placed crosshairs on Ms. Giffords' district proved deadly. Palin's political operation marked 20 Congressional districts with crosshairs. Do the other 19 now need to be extra vigilant? We'll never know if such a map never existed what would have happened. What if Loughton had eaten Cheerios or Wheaties? Who knows what might have been. ...

In Arizona, "Second Amendment remedies" might be a little more frequent than in those states where one can't purchase a Glock 9 mm semiautomatic with a 15 or 33-round magazine without undergoing some sort of background check. Some pundits might blame Gov. Jan Brewer for the carnage. She signed the legislation that, in her words, "protects" and "restores" the Second Amendment rights of Arizona citizens by allowing them to carry concealed weapons without a permit. Some might blame the author of the law, state Sen. Russell Pearce, who declared that the freedom of every citizen to carry a loaded weapon is "a freedom that poses no threat to the public."

About the only thing we know for sure is that if Loughner hadn't had a loaded gun, he couldn't have done what he did. Whether any laws would have prevented him from getting his hands on a weapon is impossible to say. Laws would have made it a bit more difficult for a disturbed person like Loughner to carry out his plans, but it's impossible to say whether any law would have prevented his violent and deadly outburst.

It's true that people kill people, guns don't kill people; but agitated mentally ill people with easy access to loaded guns are a bit more dangerous than agitated mentally ill people who have to jump through a few hoops before they can get their hands on a loaded weapon.

## **AUTOS DON'T KILL PEOPLE, PEOPLE ... ETC.**

**Nicholas D. Kristof**

*(Reprinted from "Watch Out! The Assault Vehicle is Loose!" in The New York Times, January 29)*

Americans are infatuated with guns. And when you're infatuated, you sometimes can't think straight. Maybe that's why, three weeks after the Tucson shootings that shook the nation, we're still no closer to banning oversize magazines like the 33-bullet model allegedly used there. Maybe it will help clarify issues if we imagine an alternate universe — one in which Americans exhibit their toughness not with assault weapons but with assault vehicles, a world in which our torrid libertarian passion is not for our guns but for our cars. That alternate universe might look like this:

*The powerful National Automobile Association warned today that vehicle regulation, such as a ban on assault vehicles, would be "the first step toward totalitarianism."*

*"Autos don't kill people," declared Hank Magic, a N.A.A. spokesman. "People kill people." As part of a campaign against auto registration, the N.A.A. has started selling new bumper stickers: "They'll register*

*my car when they pry the steering wheel from my cold, dead fingers."*

*The N.A.A. defends assault vehicles as essential for self-defense and also "loads of fun."*

*Taken aback by the furor, the White House denied any interest in banning assault vehicles or registering all vehicles. The White House said that the president was considering more modest steps, such as banning repeat drunken drivers from the roads, prohibiting televisions mounted on the steering wheel and curbs on lethal car accessories that serve no transportation purpose — such as bayonets mounted on the front and back bumpers.*

*Mr. Magic warned: "Now the White House is trying to prevent Americans from enjoying themselves and defending themselves." He cited a driver in Florida in 1997 who had been threatened by a carjacking but was able to impale the attacker on his bumper. "Bumper bayonets save lives," he asserted.*

*The president also distanced himself from a proposed Transportation Department directive that would curb private tanks on the basis that they are damaging roads and, with road rage on the rise, sometimes rolling over other vehicles. The N.A.A. has denounced the proposal, warning: "Without tanks, how can we keep our children safe?"*

*"The solution is more tanks, not fewer tanks," Mr. Magic told a rally yesterday. "If tanks are banned, then only criminals will have tanks!"*

*Auto safety advocates say that tens of thousands of lives could be saved annually if the president and Congress would register vehicles, require seat belts and require licenses to drive cars. "It's tough because our country's history is steeped in automobiles," said one advocate. "But with political leadership, we can rise above that, as every other civilized country in the world has done."*

O.K., O.K. That's the end of our alternate history. In reality, of course, we have taken a deadly product — motor vehicles — and systematically made them quite safe. Scientists have figured out how to build roads so as to reduce accidents and have engineered innovations such as air bags to reduce injuries. Public campaigns and improved law enforcement have reduced drunken driving, and graduated licenses for young people have reduced accident rates as well. The death rate per 100 million vehicle miles traveled has fallen by almost three-quarters since the early 1970s, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

The trade-off is that we have modestly curbed individual freedom, but we save tens of thousands of lives a year. That's a model for how we should approach guns as a public health concern.

Granted, the Second Amendment complicates gun regulation (I accept that the framers intended for state militias, and possibly individuals, to have the right to bear flintlocks). But even among those favoring a broader

interpretation, the Second Amendment hasn't prevented bans on machine guns. There are still lines to be drawn, and a prohibition on 33-bullet magazines would be a useful place to start.

If we treat guns as we do cars and build a public health system to address them, here's what we might do: finance more research so that we have a better sense of which gun safety policies are effective (for example, do gun safes or trigger locks save lives?); crack down on gun retailers who break laws the way we punish stores that sell cigarettes to kids; make serial numbers harder to erase; make gun trafficking a law enforcement priority; limit gun purchases to one per person per month; build a solid database of people who are mentally ill and cannot buy firearms; ban assault weapons; and invest in new technologies to see if we can design "smart guns" that require input of a code or fingerprint to reduce accidents and curb theft.

Particularly after a tragedy like Tucson, why can't we show the same maturity toward firearms that we show toward vehicles — and save some of the 80 lives a day that we lose to guns?

### **THE QUESTION IS: IS ATHEISM A BELIEF?**

#### **THE ANSWER IS: YES**

##### **Flash Light**

In response to Greta Cristina's two-part essay in PIQUE, (January and February, "Is Atheism a Belief?") — probably the greatest advance in 20th century philosophy was the realization of the logical positivists (Bertrand Russell, A. J. Ayer, et al.) that many philosophical problems are fundamentally linguistic in nature, i.e., that language can make statements which cause philosophical confusion. They proposed the "verification principle," which held that a proposition which could not be verified was meaningless, and therefore should not be discussed. Thus they concluded the question of whether gods exist, which they felt couldn't be verified, should simply not be discussed.

However, the philosopher Karl Popper pointed out that the verification principle itself could not be verified. He proposed instead that to be meaningful an idea had to be disprovable. Thus he would say to Greta's theist that if his/her god hypothesis can't be disproved, it isn't a hypothesis; it isn't even a belief, rather the words don't convey meaning, and only cause confusion. I like to put it this way: some words express feelings, rather than ideas; ideas can be proved or disproved, feelings can't.

I point out these differences in part to show that even atheists "based on careful reasoning, and on the best available evidence," can come to different "conclusions," and thus such "conclusions" can only be described as their beliefs. Taking it a step further, Newtonian physics, although "based on careful reasoning, and on the best available evidence," is still only a belief, which should be obvious because that belief was eventually disproved by Einstein's Theory of Relativity. In short, yes, Greta, everything we "know" is only a belief. Beliefs are all we have to go on, and

the meaningful question is whether a proposition is actually a belief, i.e., a proposition which can be proved or disproved, allowing us to make accurate scientific predictions, or whether it merely expresses a feeling, leading us to confusion if we try to debate it.

Newtonian physics is still a useful belief, because for most physics problems its predictions are accurate enough to be useful. Most likely atheism will similarly always remain a useful belief, whereas for example, creationism is less a belief than mere verbal nonsense, at best an expression of feelings of faith, which should simply not be discussed in schools because it leads only to confusion.

Greta Christina is on the right track when she attempts to distinguish between propositions "based on careful reasoning, and on the best available evidence," vs. propositions based on "faith." However, it was almost a century ago that the logical positivists realized the way to do that is to distinguish between meaningful beliefs, which can be proved or disproved, and words which do not express ideas. That remains the only way a distinction can be made, because there's no denying it: while atheism may be a useful belief, it is still only a belief.

### **BELIEF AND UNBELIEF: WHO CARES?**

##### **Al Henick**

On the rare occasion when the thought sneaks into my head, "Could it be possible that I'm wrong about the non-existence of a deity?" I have no fear of being punished for denying God. After all, my God-given reasoning power tells me that a fair and benevolent God, if He existed, could not possibly stand by without lifting a finger while millions of innocent people are killed in holocausts, earthquakes, and assorted other catastrophes, so how could He punish me? On the contrary, if I asserted a belief in the illogical and absurd fairy-tales of most religions, I would deserve punishment for hypocrisy and mendacity.

On the other side of the coin, when preachers of religion find it impossible to explain the suffering of innocents on this earth while monsters survive, they fall back on the myth of heaven and hell, in hypocritical and mendacious contradiction of all evidence, and *that* is more deserving of punishment.

Heaven help *them*!

But then, all of the above is meaningless, anyway, since Nobody is home up there.

Oxymoronic, isn't it?

### **WHY BELIEVE AT ALL?**

##### **Carl Sagan**

The world is so exquisite, with so much love and moral depth, that there is no reason to deceive ourselves with pretty stories for which there is little good evidence. Far better, it seems to me, to look death in the eye and to be grateful every day for the brief but magnificent opportunity that life provides.



## CRAIG T. NELSON WINS THE 2010 SHSNY DUMBTH AWARD

No, it isn't an Emmy or an Oscar, but tone-deaf and self-absorbed TV actor Craig T. Nelson handily won the election for the not-so-coveted horse's-ass trophy for the most hare-brained, anti-rational statement by a public figure in 2010.



Now rich on residuals from his hugely popular TV sitcom of a couple of decades ago, "Coach," Nelson appeared on Glen Beck's show last spring to argue against government bailouts, i.e.: "I've been on welfare and food stamps ... did anyone help me?"

Beating out fellow foot-in-mouthers Christine O'Donnell (2nd place), Newt Gingrich (3), Pat Robertson (4), Michele Bachman (5), and Rep. Hank Johnson (distant dead last), Nelson led in both the online voting and on the paper ballots distributed at the festive Darwin Day dinner February 12 - where his election was roundly applauded.

## WHENCE THE TERM "DUMBTH"? HUMANIST HUMORIST STEVE ALLEN 1921-2000

Dick Cousineau

(Reprinted - and lightly amended - from the HSSB Secular Circular, newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara (CA), January, 2011.)

Master comedian, accomplished musician, superb interviewer, brilliant screen writer, philanthropist, and humanist, Steve Allen is highly regarded by the entertainment industry for his creative endeavors, but his claim to wide respect was and is based upon his keen, inquiring mind, deep humanitarian beliefs, and courage to stand up for often unpopular causes.



Stephen Valentine Patrick William Allen was born in New York City to devout Roman Catholic parents who were popular performers in musical comedy and vaudeville but of modest means. After service in the Army in WW II he enrolled at Arizona State University, but soon left to work in radio in Phoenix. In 1946 he became an announcer at KFAC, the classical music station in Los Angeles. Within a few years he was innovating radio programs and was instrumental in developing "concept" television talk shows in Los Angeles and New York City. His award-winning "Meeting of the Minds" (written and co-produced with his wife Jayne Meadows) stood out in sharp contrast to TV programs of the time. The talk show-like series, which paired great thinkers with historical figures good and evil in dialogue and argument, was lauded as the "best TV writing of 1967-1977." The series was cancelled soon after, however, because it was considered "too thoughtful" for the American public. This was the endeavor Allen hoped to be

remembered for, because he believed the issues raised were timeless and would long survive his passing.

In his travels during the 60s and 70s, Allen began reading Bibles he found in his various hotel rooms. He was surprised and appalled by many passages and began to write down his comments and critical commentaries. He published his research in 1990 in *Steve Allen on the Bible, Religion, and Morality*, which had been carefully vetted by biblical scholars who were impressed by his sound and credible observations. Other notable books by Allen include *How to be Funny*; *Reflection*; *But Seriously* and *Dumbth*, *The Lost Art of Thinking*.

"Dumbth" was his one-word noun for willful or lazy stupidity, "the simple inability to see and understand clearly what is at issue and to act accordingly, with basic rationality." It is "not a side-issue in today's problem-bedeveled world," he wrote in the second edition of *Dumbth*, and "lamenting the extent of it is not an elitist preoccupation. Dumbth may be the single greatest problem facing our society today."

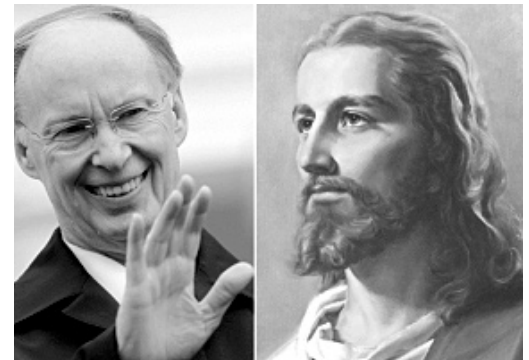
He deplored the steady diet of bad taste, vulgarity and violence on TV in the 1980s and established the "Council for Media Integrity" in an attempt to influence the TV industry, but it had little effect. His last book, on that subject, was titled *Vulgarians at the Gate*.

Steve Allen identified himself and was recognized as a humanist. He was unanimously elected to the International Academy of Humanism, was a Humanist Laureate of the Academy of Humanism, and a member of CSICOP and the Council for Secular Humanism. (Who in the mass media today would dare to admit to being a humanist?) We lost a fine person when in 1990 Steve was killed in an automobile accident at the age of 78, but his legacy of free thought, trust in science, reason, humor and intelligence continues to inspire us.

**Comment:** Steve Allen had a routine - a deadpan reading of the lyrics of bad pop songs, some even chart-topper hits - that got funnier and funnier as he continued through the repetitive and inane verses. He and Ernie Kovacs were the smartest funny men, or funniest smart men, ever on TV. - JR

## WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #61

Robert Bentley, the new Republican governor of Alabama, Ron Martin Luther King, Jr. Day announced: "Now I will have to say that, if we don't have the same daddy, we're not brothers and sisters. So anybody here today who has not accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, I'm telling you, you're not my brother and you're not my sister ..."



Separated at birth?

## WE CELEBRATE DARWIN DAY, CHINESE NEW YEAR, THE DUMBTEST OF LAST YEAR AND, WHAT THE HELL, OURSELVES

On Saturday, February 12, we held our fourth annual celebration of the birthday of Charles Darwin (he's 202 this year), as well as our slightly-tardy (as usual) recognition of the anniversary of the founding of SHSNY on January 14, 1988. As we have each year, we also awarded the SHSNY Dumbth Award for the most clueless clot of the previous year (see page 4), adding a little extra excitement this year with an extra round of paper-ballot voting at the dinner tables.

We celebrated at Golden Unicorn Restaurant ("one of NYC's five best") in the middle of Chinatown in the middle of Chinese New Year, and 63 humanists, rationalists and freethinkers of every description relished every one of the ten courses of a truly memorable feast. Said Roger Sorrentino, "The best Chinese meal I've had since I lived in China."

We toasted departed friends George Rowell and former SHSNY President Ed McCartan, and even current President John Rafferty's talk, on the history of SHSNY and of secular humanism in America (page 8), couldn't dampen the fun.

Next year? More, bigger, better!

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY, CHUCK, & HAPPY ANNIVERSARY, SHSNY, from ...

Rory Allweiss	Lorraine Gudas	Richard Milner
Edith Amster	Jay Gumbiner	Carlos Mora
Lois Andrews	Eliane Hahn	Lisa Mulleneaux
Maria Astifidis	Max Hahn	Robert Murtha
Giddian Beer	Art Harris	Robert Ondricek
Wally Berliner	Elaine Heller	Justine Ondricek
Dorothy Blumner	Charles Heller	Warren Ostrofsky
Stuart Blumner	Tunç Iyriboz	Candice Owens
Steven Boshi	Daniel Kalish	John Rafferty
Denise Cherry	Helen Kedzierski	Caroline Rubinstein
Norman Cherry	Lee Loshak	Rich Sander
Conrad Claborne	Marsha Lowenthal	Chris Schwartz
Susan Clemett	Elaine Lynn	Lew Schwartz
Remo Cosentino	Frank Manus	Deb Shapiro
Aaron Davitt	Carl Marxer	Roger Sorrentino
Chris Everett	Donna Marxer	John Wagner
Edith Finell	Charlotte Marzani	Roger Walton
Jamie Garde	Julene Mays	Michael Weiss
Arnold Gonzalez	Gino Mazzella	Phil Winegar
Mary Ellen Goodman	Bob Miller	Karen Wone
Harry Graber	Irv Millman	Beth Zucker

*Before the party...*



*...the party's over*



# SHSNY CALENDAR: MARCH - MAY 2011

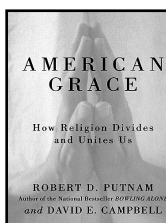
## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

**THURSDAY, MARCH 10, 6:30**  
at the Muhlenberg Library  
209 West 23 St. (at 7th Ave.)

**AMERICAN GRACE:**  
*How Religion Divides Us  
and Unites Us*

by Robert D. Putnam  
& David E. Campbell

*American Grace* is a sweeping chronicle of national change over time and a mammoth survey of American religion. The authors, Harvard professor Putnam (*Bowling Alone*) and Notre Dame coauthor Campbell (*Why We Vote*), argue two seemingly contradictory themes: first, that a "new religious fault line" exists in America, a deep political polarization; and second, that the culture is so much more accepting of diversity that thesis #1 will not tear America apart.



The book explores cultural developments — the boom of evangelicals in the 1970s and 1980s; the rise of feminism in the pews; the liberalization of attitudes about premarital sex and homosexuality, especially among the youngest generations; and what may prove to be the most seismic shift of all: the dramatic increase of "nones," or people claiming no institutional religious affiliation. — *Hardcover*

*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.

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

**Thursday, April 14, 6:30 p.m.**  
at the Muhlenberg Library  
**COLLAPSE:**

*How Societies Choose  
to Fail or Succeed*  
by Jared Diamond

In a fascinating follow-up to his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (our January book club choice), Diamond explores the geographic and environmental reasons why some human populations have flourished and others have died. *Collapse* uses the same factors to examine why ancient societies, including the Anasazi of the American Southwest, the Maya, the Easter Islanders, and the Viking colonies of Greenland, as well as modern ones such as Rwanda, have fallen apart — and looks closely at some at-risk communities right here in America, as well. — *Paperback*

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

**Thursday, May 12, 6:30 p.m.**  
at the Muhlenberg Library  
**THE PRINCIPAL**

**UPANISHADS:**

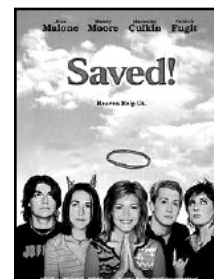
*The Essential Philosophical  
Foundation of Hinduism  
(Sacred Wisdom)*

*The Upanishads*, the sacred writings of Hinduism, predate recorded history. Since they were "revealed" to the Rishis of the Vedic civilization some 5,000 to 10,000 years ago, many have come to regard them as perhaps the greatest of all the books in the history of world religions, the work that contains the kernel of the mystical and philosophical truths that form the basis of all religious thinking today. An \$11 hardcover edition is translated by Alan Jacobs, with an introduction by David Frawley.

## SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

**MONDAY, MARCH 14, 7:00 pm**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**  
**"SAVED!"**

Mary is a good Christian girl who goes to a good Christian high school where she has good Christian friends and a perfect Christian boyfriend, Dean, who, it turns out, may be gay. To help him "turn straight" after seeing a vision of Jesus, she offers up her virginity. But it doesn't help, because Dean's caught and sent to a "degayification" center and Mary ends up pregnant. Now a social outcast, she becomes real friends with the school's misfits — even a Jew!



Yes, it's a teen comedy, but lighten up, rationalists, and let's have some silly fun.

*SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.*

Check out Stone Creek's menu and prices online at [stonecreekny.com](http://stonecreekny.com)  
*April 11: TBA*

**SUNDAY, MAR. 20, 12 NOON**  
**OUR MONTHLY SHSNY**  
**BRUNCH GET-TOGETHER**  
**BXL East, 210 East 51 St.**

We'll gather again just at our new favorite bistro 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 \$18. Check it out at [bxlcafe.pregraphic.com/](http://bxlcafe.pregraphic.com/)

Everyone interested in getting together with 15 or more like-minded humanists and rationalists for good grub and lively talk in a charming East-side setting is welcome. Bring friends!

# SHSNY CALENDAR: MARCH - MAY 2011

## GREAT LECTURES

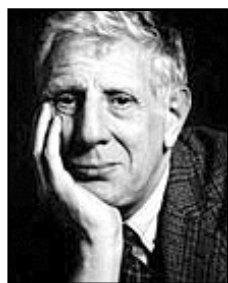
TUESDAY, MAR. 22, 7:00 pm

**"THE ATHEISM TAPES:**

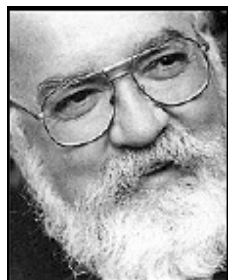
**DANIEL DENNETT"**

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

In this ground-breaking and fascinating 2004 BBC series now on DVD, playwright and atheist Jonathan Miller conducted short interviews of six of today's leading men of letters and science.



Great Lectures leader Bob Murtha led off with Miller's interview of philosopher Colin McGinn, following up with physicist Steven Weinberg in February. In March, we'll get to know philosopher Daniel Dennett, whose fields are evolutionary biology and cognitive science.



To come: playwright Arthur Miller, theologian Denys Turner and, of course, Richard Dawkins, each discussing

their intellectual journeys, offering illuminating analyses of nontheism from a wide range of perspectives.

**Part 4: April 26.**

**Great Lectures Night is FREE.**

## FOR UPDATES ON ALL SHSNY EVENTS ...

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

Check [www.reasonablenew-york.org](http://www.reasonablenew-york.org) and Richie's List, too, at <http://atheists.meetup.com/515/>

## NORTHEAST CONFERENCE ON SCIENCE & SKEPTICISM

April 9-10 at the

**Baruch Performing Arts Center  
(Lexington Ave at 23rd St.)**

NECSS featured speakers and panelists this year include Keynote Speaker astronomer Phil Plait, Brooke Allen, Julia Galef, John Allen Paulous, John Rennie, Eugenie C. Scott, Carl Zimmer, and SHSNY's own Maslismo Pigliucci and Jennifer Michael Hecht.

The weekend will include a live podcast of *Rationally Speaking* with Massimo and Julia, and NECSS is also sponsoring other weekend events: two "Drinking Skeptically" socials, a performance by George Hrab & Triologic, a cocktail reception with NECSS speakers, and group visits to NYC museums (with NECSS speakers). More info and registration at [www.necsscon.org/events](http://www.necsscon.org/events).

## INSTITUTE FOR SCIENCE AND HUMAN VALUES WORKSHOP

May 20-21, St. Petersburg, FL

***Developing Healthy Values:  
The Educator, The Parent,  
The Adolescent***

**An Institute for Science and  
Human Values Workshop on  
raising ethical, happy children  
in our society.**

Paul Kurtz's new organization is up and running, (check it out at <http://www.instituteforscience-andhumanvalues.net/>) and this first workshop weekend will focus on "presenting specific methods and practices that can be implemented in schools to help students develop healthy values and morals, and which will be acceptable to school authorities and school boards of education."

## AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

**70TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

April 7-10, Boston, MA

Celebrate 70 years of humanist activism, and take part in lectures and discussions with leading humanist thinkers on a range of philosophical and ethical topics.

Highlights of the weekend will include the awarding of the Religious Liberty Award to Bart Ehrman, that of Humanist Heroine to Judy Norsigian, the presentation of the Isaac Asimov Science Award to Steve Wozniak, and the recognition of Rebecca Goldstein (author of *The Mind-Body Problem* and *Thirty-Six Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction*) as Humanist of the Year.

Conference speakers will include Greg Epstein, Sean Faircloth, Anne Klaeyen and Roy Speckhardt. Special guests include Richard Dawkins and Steven Pinker.

Info at: <https://secure.americanhumanist.org/conf2011>

## PLANNING AHEAD

Holidays, double bookings and other screwups and disasters aside, the *usual* monthly schedule of SHSNY events is ...

**Book Club: First Thursday**  
at the Muhlenberg Library.

**Movie Night: Second Monday**  
at Stone Creek Lounge.

**Brunch: Third Sunday**  
at BXL East Bistro.

**Great Lectures: Fourth Tuesday**  
at Stone Creek Lounge.

## SAVE THE DATE

Sunday, May 1, 12 Noon  
SHSNY Day of Reason Brunch  
at Pete's Tavern, with  
Tom Flynn, Editor, *Free Inquiry*  
(details in April PIQUE)

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? WHAT SHALL WE DO?

John Rafferty

(Excerpted from an address given at the SHSNY Anniversary & Darwin Day Dinner at Golden Unicorn Restaurant, February 12, 2011)

Tonight we celebrate the 202nd birthday of Charles Darwin, born on this date in 1809 (as was another good guy, Abraham Lincoln) and, a little belatedly, the 23rd anniversary of the founding, on January 14, 1988, of the Secular Humanist Society of New York.

So I want to talk tonight, first, about the Secular Humanist Society of New York, past and present. Then, fittingly for Darwin Day, I want *you* to talk about how we should evolve.

My association with SHSNY began in 1998. I can't remember how I got on the mailing list for PIQUE, but I was interested in any organization that Newt Gingrich, the Reverend Pat Robertson and the late Jerry Falwell considered no better than the Communist Party and probably not as worthy as the Ku Klux Klan.

Anyway, there was a notice in PIQUE that Edward O. Wilson was to lecture one April Sunday afternoon at the 92StY on "consilience" – which was the big buzzword of the late 90s among intellectual groupies – and I decided to attend. Also in the notice was the information that some SHSNY members would meet beforehand for lunch at a nearby restaurant, and I figured, "Why not?"

Sure enough, a dozen OFs were sitting around a large table. Testing the waters, I walked over and asked, "Is this the Misfits & Malcontents Marching Society?" They all gaped, but then several laughed, and I knew I was in the right place.

By the way, that lecture? Consilience? I still don't know what the hell Wilson was talking about.

### *History of SHSNY*

The Secular Humanist Society of New York was formed ten years before, on January 14, 1988, at Variety Recording Studios, Room 551, 130 West 42nd Street – by "a dozen or so," including still-members John Arents, Art Harris, Brian Lemaire and Seymour Storch.

Those "dozen or so" included members of the New York or other local branches of The Skeptic Society, Ethical Culture, and the then-existing New York chapter of the American Humanist Association, but they had a particular kind of humanism in mind – *secular* humanism – not religious or even "spiritual," and allied with the new Council for Secular Humanism.

Okay, what is secular humanism?

It's not hard to trace the philosophy of humanism all the way back to Renaissance Europe and even further back to Epicurus in the golden age of Greece. But humanism in America really comes out of New England Transcendentalism of the 19th century, through Reform Judaism and American Unitarianism, out of which Ethical Culture developed, and finally the leftward turn of academia in

response to the horrors of the first World War and the seeming collapse of the capitalist system in the Great Depression.

In 1933, the first *Humanist Manifesto* – signed by philosopher John Dewey and 33 other intellectuals, including teachers and seminarians who had organized the Humanist Fellowship at the University of Chicago in 1927 – was a call for "a new religion." In fact, the first two words of the Manifesto were "Religious humanists ..." and most of its fifteen theses were all about redefining religion. But it also called for socialism in all but name, for

*"... a shared life in a shared world and radical change to the existing acquisitive and profit-motivated society that has shown itself to be inadequate."*

Remember, this was the depths of the Depression.

By 1973, following an even more horrendous war and after most of the left had awakened to the evils of Soviet communism, American humanists were ready to broaden their societal concerns. The American Humanist Association had been founded in 1941, a direct offspring of Unitarian Universalism – which for all its lack of a capital-G god, dogma and/or ritual *is* a religion – and much inspired by the publication of Corliss Lamont's *Humanism as a Philosophy*. Two of the AHA's leading lights, Edwin Wilson and Paul Kurtz, produced *Humanist Manifesto 2*.

That "new religion" that Dewey and others called for in 1933 did not include a creator god, but still called itself "religious." By 1973, Kurtz and Wilson recognized "varieties of naturalistic humanism," including scientific, ethical, democratic, religious and Marxist.

"Naturalistic," but not yet "secular."

*Humanist Manifesto 2* is mind-numbingly long, but it addressed a whole new litany of societal concerns, while playing down – way down – the earlier criticism of capitalism. The Great Depression was long gone, but the Cold War was hot.

That second manifesto called for international cooperation that would lead to international government, and for protections for the global environment. It promoted new rights, especially for women and minorities – which the 1933 intellectuals didn't consider – including freer access to birth control, abortion and divorce, ideas unthinkable in 1933. It called for strengthening church-state separation, for an end to racial, religious and sexual discrimination, and even criticized "sexism and sexual chauvinism" – a far cry from 1933's emphasis on "manly attitudes." Most tellingly, the 1973 manifesto pointed out that ...

*"... as nontheists, we begin with humans, not God, nature not deity."*

Nontheists.

But, as with all societal movements, growth leads to change, change leads to conflicting ideas and goals, conflict often becomes personal, and invariably leads to rupture and schism. By 1978 Paul Kurtz was unhappy with the still-leftward bent of some American Humanist Association oldtimers – a few of whom were still excusing Stalin – impatient with the "religious humanism" that lingered in



the AHA, and annoyed with attempts to curb his autonomy as editor of *Humanism* magazine.

And so he founded The Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism, which later became the Council for Secular Humanism, and in 1980 issued "A Secular Humanist Declaration" – *Humanist Manifesto 3*. It was signed by 58 intellectuals from around the world, including Isaac Asimov, Francis Crick, Albert Ellis, Sidney Hook, B.F. Skinner, Sherwin Wine, and A.J. Ayer, an international humanist all-star team, and includes the statement that:

*"Secular humanists may be agnostics, atheists, rationalists, or skeptics, but they find insufficient evidence for the claim that some divine purpose exists for the universe."*

Secular humanism, finally, which I always print without initial capitals in PIQUE, because it's *not* a religion.

And secular humanism is what those "dozen or so" in 1988 in New York had in mind when they formed the Secular Humanist Society of New York.

The first "mission statement" I could find in our archives is from January, 1989, a year later, that quoted Al Tino, the organization's first Chairman, in a mailer soliciting new members:

*"Our goal is to create a secular humanist community in the New York City area to promote the ideals of secular humanism and provide educational, intellectual and social opportunities for both members and others who are interested in the secular humanist philosophy. We welcome new members: people who would enjoy meeting other humanists, people who share our goal of increasing the understanding and acceptance of humanism in American society. We are agreed that secular humanism is not a religion, but an alternative approach to living."*

That's the public face of the organization. But just between us kids I also found in the minutes of the second-ever meeting, on February 10, 1988, among "the purposes and activities of the projected organization" listed:

*"Hostility to organized religion as a major focus of interest."*

Shh.

Our newsletter, with the exciting name "Chapter News," was started in January, 1989, edited by Keith Charles. Warren Allen Smith took over in April, 1990, re-named it PIQUE, and opened its pages up to essays of opinion as well as reports of lectures and social events.

By June 1990 the "dozen or so" had grown to "around 50." Some records are missing, but it's fairly certain that two years later, in December, 1992, we had 116 paid members, and 151 by May of '94.

The pages of PIQUE chronicle lots of meetings, lectures and social events, and SHSNY was obviously an active, growing organization. Also in those first years, SHSNY attracted such Honorary Members as Isaac Asimov, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and Arthur C. Clarke.

But just as in the 1970s in the national humanist movement, trouble bubbled up. There are arguments in the

newsletter and in board meeting minutes over what the extent and focus of activism by the organization should be. Warren Smith, who was and is a gay-rights activist, was focused on AIDS and gay-related issues, and argued for an Act-Up type of activism by SHSNY. Others advocated only "checkbook activism." Still others questioned the idea of straying from specifically humanist questions, like church-state separation.

"Growth leads to change, change leads to conflict, and conflict becomes personal." At least one board member was censured for writing vitriolic personal attacks on another, resignations seemed to become the order of the day, and by the mid-1990s the organization was in serious trouble.

A decade of doldrums and declining membership followed. President and newsletter editor Ed McCartan, a former U.S. Navy captain, held the organization together by dint of his personal leadership, and George Rowell took on the thankless task of badgering those lingering members for their dues. But I give credit particularly to my own mentor in SHSNY, John Arents, a self-described shy and private chemistry professor, who became Treasurer and Secretary, the de facto Events Chairman and, perhaps most importantly, after Ed the Editor of PIQUE, which John turned into the most interesting freethought newsletter in America.

I'm proud of what I've done as Editor, but I have built on John's work.

### **Comeback**

Several years ago, when Conrad Claborne took over as president, SHSNY had fewer than 90 paid members, and 20-or-so subscribers. We worked to increase the Board to nine members, and those members worked to develop the programs that have brought in new members.

Our first new venture, a book club, drew three attendees in February 2004 in Conrad's apartment, including a woman who announced that she was looking to meet single men. I'm happily married, Conrad is gay, and we never saw her again. Now we regularly draw 25 people at the Muhlenberg Library every month, thanks to the work of our Book Club editor, Elaine Lynn.

We held our first brunch in March, 2007, and drew 19 people. One month later, in April, 2007, we held our first movie night, showing a dvd of Jonathan Miller's "Atheism" in the back room of the Stone Creek Lounge, and 22 people ate, drank, watched and argued. Bob Murtha held his first Great Lectures evening last November, also at Stone Creek, and also showing dvds, followed by discussion.

In the past few years, we have hosted such speakers as Michael Shermer, Susan Jacoby, Austin Dacey, Norm Allen Jr., Confucian scholar Sam Milligan, Darwin descendent Matthew Chapman, Jason Torpy, Scientology-escapee Paul Grosswald, Alan Brown of Americans United, Larry Beinhart on his novel, *Salvation Boulevard* (the movie is coming out this spring), William Lobdell, author of *Losing My Religion* ... and have been enlightened and entertained by our honorary members: philosopher and evolutionary biologist Massimo Pigliucci, poet and historian Jennifer Michael Hecht, and Darwin scholar and editor Richard

Milner, whom we have with us here tonight.

Today we have over 150 paid members, more than 40 paid subscribers to PIQUE, from places as far-flung as Australia, Liechtenstein and Switzerland, we exchange newsletters with 20 or more other freethought groups, and have an e-distribution list of over 350.

We're back!

Last year we were invited to become the New York charter chapter of the American Humanist Association, which gathers under its great umbrella secular *and* religious humanists like Unitarian Universalists. We accepted, and so now belong to both national humanist organizations. We will have Tom Flynn of the Council for Secular Humanism and Editor of *Free Inquiry* as speaker at our Freethought Day brunch in May, and we are planning a major event with Roy Speckhardt, Executive Director of the AHA, in August.

That August event will be shared with eight other New York freethought organizations "confederated" under the banner of Reasonable New York, which is represented here tonight by Rich Sander of Richie's List and Tunç Iryiboz, the current Chairman of RNY.

Okay, that's where we've been and where we are. In sum, we're a growing, vibrant, active organization. We offer something every week of the month, as well as highlight events like tonight's five or six times a year and, in conjunction with other organizations in RNY, enough lectures, roundtables, meetups and parties to keep New York's freethought community busy socially almost any day or night of the year.

But we are, by charter, an educational institution. Our tax-exempt, non-profit business is to spread our humanist gospel of reason, science, and democracy. Therefore, what shall we *do*?

Let us consider, this Darwin Day, how we shall evolve. We have done the subway posters, we have supported the bus and billboard campaigns, and we have denounced the subversion of science and reason of the last couple of decades. How do we now become a force in our community? How can we make a difference? How do we put the ideas and ideals we believe in to work for the betterment of our community?

Those are not rhetorical questions. I'm asking for your opinions and ideas.

**Update:** *You, I'm asking you, reader - what should we do? Send your suggestions on schools or libraries we can adopt, charities we should support, funds we should establish, to editor@shsny.org.*

### A HUMANIST JOKE FOR ST. PATRICK'S DAY

*(Transmitted to PIQUE by the estimable Bob Murtha)*

**A**n American golfer playing in Ireland hooked his drive into the woods. Looking for his ball, he found a little leprechaun flat on his back, a big bump on his head and the golfer's ball beside him.

Horried, the golfer got his water bottle from the cart and poured it over the little guy, reviving him.

"Arrgh! What happened?" the leprechaun asked.

"I'm afraid I hit you with my golf ball."

"Oh, I see. Well, ye got me fair and square. Ye get three wishes, so whaddya want?"

"Thank God, you're all right!" the golfer says. "I don't want anything, I'm just glad you're OK, and I apologize."

As the golfer walks off, the leprechaun thinks, "What a nice guy. I'll give him what I'd want - a great golf game, all the money he ever needs, and a fantastic sex life."

A year goes by (as it does in stories like this) and the American golfer is back. On the same hole, he again hits a bad drive into the woods and the leprechaun is there waiting for him.

"'Twas me that made ye hit the ball here," the little guy says. "I just want to ask ye, how's yer golf game?"

"My game is fantastic!" the golfer answers. "I'm an internationally famous golfer now." He adds, "By the way, it's good to see you're all right."

"Oh, I'm fine now, thank ye. I did that fer yer golf game, you know. Tell me, how's yer money situation?"

"Why, it's just wonderful!" the golfer says. "When I need cash, I just reach in my pocket and pull out \$100 bills I didn't even know were there!"

"I did that too. And tell me, how's yer sex life?"

The golfer blushes, turns his head away in embarrassment, and says shyly, "It's OK."

"C'mon now," urges the leprechaun, "I'm wanting to know if I did a good job. How many times a week?"

Blushing even more, the golfer looks around then whispers, "Once, sometimes twice a week."

"What?" exclaims the leprechaun, "that's all?"

"Well," says the golfer, "I figure that's not bad for a Catholic priest in a small parish."

### JUST IN CASE YOU THOUGHT THE CATHOLIC CHURCH HAD ADVANCED BEYOND THE 14TH CENTURY ...

*(Excerpted from "John Paul II's Blood to be Relic in Polish Church," by Monika Scislowska, huffingtonpost.com, 1/17)*

**A**vial containing blood drawn from Pope John Paul II shortly before he died will be installed as a relic in a Polish church soon after his beatification later this year.

Piotr Sionko, spokesman for the John Paul II Center, said the vial will be encased in crystal and built into the altar of a church in the city of Krakow that is opening in May. ...

After John Paul's death, some Polish officials said they hoped John Paul's heart would be removed from his body and returned to his homeland for burial. However, church officials dismissed any possibility of dismembering the body, saying the age had passed for that practice.

**Comment:** *I am at a loss to come up with a comment funnier than the bloody (!) stupid story itself. - JR*

**T**here is no absurdity so palpable but that it may be firmly planted in the human head if you only begin to inculcate it before the age of five, by constantly repeating it with an air of great solemnity. - *Arthur Schopenhauer*

## A QUESTION FOR CREATIONISTS: WHICH CREATION?

Timothy Beal

(Excerpted from "In the Beginning(s): Appreciating the Complexity of the Bible" on huffingtonpost.com, 2/16/11)

People love to argue about the Bible. Whether very many of them are actually reading it is less clear. Take the creationism-versus-evolution debates, which have become a central battleground in the larger atheist-versus-believers debates. Despite more than a century of conflict, few in these debates seem aware that there are actually several different accounts of creation scattered throughout the Bible, and they don't all agree. The opening chapters of *Genesis* give us two.

In the first, God begins on the macrocosmic level, calling forth light from dark, waters from waters, and land from sea. Then comes vegetation, then the sun, moon and stars, and then animal life. Finally, as the *pièce de résistance* of creation, God makes humankind, in the plural, male and female, in God's image.

In the second story, which immediately follows this one, the order of creation is entirely different. Here God's first act of creation, before there are any plants or animals, is to form a single human, not yet male or female, by shaping it from the dust of the earth and then bringing it to life by breathing into its nostrils. Thus *ha'adam*, Hebrew for "the human," is formed from *ha'adamah*, "the earth," and becomes a living soul by divine breath. A beautiful image of the ecological spirituality of humanity: a God-breathed and breathing lump of clay, human from humus, an incarnation of divine transcendence and earthy immanence, as intimate with the ground as with God. Then come plants and animals. Then, when no animal fits the bill as lifelong companion (sorry, Fido), God essentially divides the human into two, male and female. So, in the first story, humans in the plural, male and female, are created last; and in the second, a single human is created first. These two versions of creation simply do not sync.

That's just the first few pages of *Genesis*. There are several other creation stories in the Bible, and they don't add up to anything like a coherent biblical account of cosmic or human origins.

In Job 38, for example, the first act of creation involves a conflict between God and the sea, that is, the formless, watery deep that was there before the world began. God sinks foundations into it for the earth to rest like some huge primeval offshore drilling station. God then sets boundaries for the waters so that they don't overwhelm it.

In the brief account of creation in Psalm 74, on the other hand, there are monsters, and the struggle to establish order is more intense. God must first slay Leviathan and the sea dragons, monstrous forces of primordial chaos, in order to create the cosmos as a safe, orderly place.

Then again, in Psalm 104, Leviathan is not a monstrous opponent of creation but a sea creature with whom God plays.

And then there's the account of creation in Proverbs 8, in which God has a divine consort, Wisdom (in Hebrew, *Hokhmah*), who declares that she was with God "from the beginning, from the origin of the earth ... there was still no deep when I was brought forth, no springs rich with water, before the mountains were sunk." When God "assigned the sea its limits" and "fixed the foundations of the earth," she says, "I was at his side as confidant. I was a source of delight every day, playing before him all the time" (my translation).

This may remind us of the account of beginnings in the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the logos," usually translated as "Word" but also carrying the meaning of "Wisdom," now incarnate in Christ.

You get the idea. These and other biblical visions of beginnings don't add up to a consistent biblical account of creation. Unlike the creationism in circulation today, the Bible's own creationism is rich in different, mutually incompatible ways of imagining cosmic and human beginnings. There is no single biblical account of creation. The Bible doesn't seem to have a problem with that. Why should we?

**Comment:** We don't, but we do have a problem with the so-called "biblical literalists" who would substitute their fantasy of "creation" (which one?) for science in the schools.

## NEIL deGRASSE TYSON MAKES THE CASE FOR MARS ...

(On "Real Time with Bill Maher" on HBO February 4, astrophysicist and Director of the Hayden Planetarium Tyson challenged the comedian host)

**Maher:** I'll give you a great reason not to go to Mars: Bush thought it was a good idea. (Audience laughter.) It's a colossal waste of resources, and ...

**Tyson:** Everyone I know who says that going to Mars is a waste of resources gives me too high a number for how much money they think NASA's getting. I say, "How much do you think they're getting on your tax dollar?" They say 10 percent, 15 percent. It's one half of one penny. And you're going to attack NASA for one half of one penny? And say it's spending it on the wrong thing? NASA, which is a force of nature unto itself, to inspire a generation to want to become scientifically literate? One of the great problems the nation has today is the *absence* of science literacy.

You spend all this time [on the program] talking about the financial crisis, and all I can think of is how much of that could have been mitigated, if not avoided altogether, if people who were being lent money were mathematically fluent enough to calculate the effect of a variable interest rate on their monthly payments.

## ... AND FOR SCIENCE

**Maher** (referring to the previous week's show): We had one guest who didn't believe in global warming, and two who didn't believe in evolution.

**Tyson:** The good thing about science is that it's true whether you believe in it or not.



## HAVE A SLICE OF PI ON MARCH 14

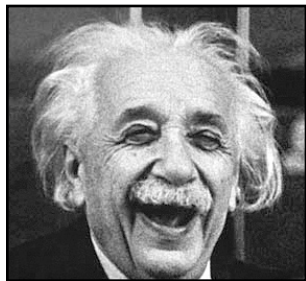
**L**arry Shaw created Pi Day — honoring the mathematical constant — in 1989 at the San Francisco Exploratorium, and every year since the staff and public marches around one of its circular spaces, then eats fruit pies.

From that modest beginning the idea of the “holiday” has spread to college campuses all across the country. Pi Day is celebrated on March 14 (3/14 in month/day date format), since 3, 1 and 4 are the three most significant digits of pi in the decimal form.

In 2009, even our science-challenged U.S. House of Representatives acknowledged the day with a non-binding resolution supporting the designation of Pi Day. (One can only assume that some of the more benighted members thought they were voting for omnibus legislation also in support of Mom, baseball and the flag.)

Alternatively, we also have Pi Approximation Day, on July 22 (22/7 in day/month date format), since the fraction 22/7 is a common approximation of pi.

Oh, and March 14 is also the birthday of Albert Einstein. Happy 132nd, Alby.



## THE SHSNY BOARD OF DIRECTORS ELECTION ATTRACTS TWO NEW NOMINEES

**A**s per our by-laws,\* the triennial election for the Board of Directors of the Secular Humanist Society of New York will take place next month. Candidate statements and ballots will be mailed to all dues-paid members on April 15 (two ballots to Family Memberships), and returned ballots will be due on or before May 15. Results will be announced in the June issue of PIQUE, and the new 3-year Board term will begin June 1.

### Who is eligible?

All dues-paid members of SHSNY are eligible. You may nominate yourself or another member(s) — by letter to the P.O. Box or e-mail to [editor@shsn.org](mailto:editor@shsn.org) — at any time before April 1. Please include a brief statement (100-300 words) summarizing the candidate's/your qualifications and vision for the future of SHSNY, which may be written by the candidate and/or the nominator. If you nominate someone else, please include a statement by the nominee that s/he is willing to serve.

### Who will stand for election?

The nine current members of the Board (see page 1) will stand for re-election, and have been joined by two new nominees: long-time SHSNY member Carlos Martin Mora, and science researcher and freethought activist John Wagner. Pictures of and statements by all the candidates will be published in April PIQUE.

Willing to work? Nominate yourself. Join us.

*\*If you are a member of SHSNY and do not have a copy of the bylaws, call and leave a message at 212-308-2165.*

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