

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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January, 2011

Happy New Year! Time for us to pass judgment on the willfully stupid of the past year, to ponder the improbability of our existence and the believability of our beliefs (as well as their growing acceptance), to beat up on both the Pope and the Christian Right (again), to wish we could beat Burlington, Vermont, to welcome a new member, to remember one of humanism's greats and one of our very own. And to plan a party for our own—and Charles Darwin's—birthday! – JR

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## IS THIS REALLY THE BIGGEST NEWS STORY OF MODERN TIMES?

**James A. Haught**

(Reprinted from "A Huge News Story, Barely Noticed," in West Virginia's The Charleston Gazette—Mr. Haught is Editor—and subsequently reprinted in the December Atlanta Freethought News)

Philosopher-historian Will Durant called it "the basic event of modern times." He didn't mean the world wars, or the end of colonialism, or the rise of electronics. He was talking about the decline of religion in Western democracies. The great mentor saw subsiding faith as the most profound occurrence of the past century—a shift of Western civilization, rather like former transitions away from the age of kings, the era of slavery and such epochs.

Since World War II, worship has dwindled starkly in Europe, Canada, Australia, Japan and other advanced democracies. In those busy places, only 5 or 10 percent of adults now attend church. Secular society scurries along heedlessly.

Pope Benedict XVI protested: "Europe has developed a culture that, in a manner unknown before now to humanity, excludes God from the public conscience." Columnist George Will called the Vatican "109 acres of faith in a European sea of unbelief." America seems an exception. This country has 350,000 churches whose members donate \$100 billion per year. The United States teems with booming megachurches, gigantic sales of

"Rapture" books, fundamentalist attacks on evolution, hundred-million-dollar TV ministries, talking-in-tongues Pentecostals, the white evangelical "religious right" attached to the Republican party, and the like.

But quietly, under the radar, much of America slowly is following the path previously taken by Europe. Little noticed, secularism keeps climbing in the United States. Here's the evidence:

**Rising "nones."** Various polls find a strong increase in the number of Americans—especially the young—who answer "none" when asked their religion. In 1990, this group had climbed to 8 percent, and by 2008, it had doubled to 15 percent—plus another 5 percent who answer "don't know." This implies that around 45 million U.S. adults today lack church affiliation. In Hawaii, more than half say they have no church connection.

**Mainline losses.** America's traditional Protestant churches—"tall steeple" denominations with seminary-trained clergy—once dominated U.S. culture. They were the essence of America. But their membership is collapsing. Over the past half century, while the U.S. population doubled, United Methodists fell from 11 million to 7.9 million, Episcopalians dropped from 3.4 million to 2 million, the Presbyterian Church USA sank from 4.1 million to 2.2 million, etc. The religious journal *First Things*—noting that main-line faiths dwindled from 50 percent of the adult U.S. population to a mere 8 percent—lamented that "the Great Church of America has come to an end." A researcher at the

Reserve your space now, for the  
SHSNY ANNIVERSARY &  
DARWIN DAY BANQUET  
Saturday, February 12, 2011  
See page 7.

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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; Irv Millman; Robert A. Murtha, Jr.

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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.

Ashbrook think-tank dubbed it “Flatline Protestantism.”

**Catholic losses.** Although Hispanic immigration resupplies U.S. Catholicism, many former adherents have drifted from the giant church. The 2008 American Religious Identification Survey found that 20 million Americans have quit Catholicism—thus one-tenth of U.S. adults now are ex-Catholics.

**Fading taboos.** A half-century ago, church-backed laws had power in America. In the 1950s it was a crime to look at the equivalent of a *Playboy* magazine or an R-rated movie—or for stores to open on the Sabbath—or to buy a cocktail or lottery ticket—or to sell birth-control devices in some states—or to be homosexual—or to terminate a pregnancy—or to read a sexy novel—or for an unwed couple to share a bedroom. Now all those morality laws have fallen, one after another. Currently, state after state is legalizing gay marriage, despite church outrage.

Sociologists are fascinated by America’s secular shift. Dr. Robert Putnam of Harvard, author of *Bowling Alone*, found as many as 40 percent of young Americans answering “none” to faith surveys. “It’s a huge change, a stunning development,” he said. “That is the future of America.” He joined Dr. David Campbell of Notre Dame in writing a new book, *American Grace*, that outlines the trend. Putnam’s Social Capital site sums it up: “Young Americans are dropping out of religion at an alarming rate of five to six times the historic rate.”

Oddly, males outnumber females among the churchless. “The ratio of 60 males to 40 females is a remarkable result,” the 2008 ARIS poll reported. “These gender patterns correspond with many earlier findings that show women to be more religious than men.”

Growing secularism has political implications. The Republican Party may suffer as the white evangelical “religious right” shrinks. In contrast, burgeoning “nones” tend to vote Democratic. Sociologist Ruy Teixeira says the steady rise of the unaffiliated, plus swelling minorities, means that “by the 2016 election (or 2020 at the outside) the United States will have ceased to be a white Christian nation. Looking even farther down the road, white Christians will be only around 35 percent of the population by 2040, and conservative white Christians, who have been such a critical part of the Republican base, will be only about a third of that—a minority within a minority.”

Gradually, decade by decade, religion is moving from the advanced First World to the less-developed Third World. Faith retains enormous power in Muslim lands. Pentecostalism is booming in Africa and South America. Yet the West steadily turns more secular. Arguably, it’s one of the biggest news stories during our lives—although most of us are too busy to notice. Philosopher-historian Durant may have been correct when he wrote that it is the basic event of modern times.

## WATSON AND CRICK WALK INTO A BAR ...

Robert L. Park

(Excerpted from “Life: The Greatest Science Quest of All Time,” on Mr. Park’s “What’s New” blog, 11/12/2010)

James Watson and Francis Crick stopped by the Eagle after leaving the Cavendish Lab on Saturday, February 28, 1953. Crick raised his glass and announced to all in the pub, “We have discovered the secret of life.”

And they had; they had unraveled the structure of DNA, the secret of life on our planet. We share genes with every creature that crawls on Earth. But could nature have found other ways on other worlds to solve the problem of life? That would be an even greater discovery. We have seen no hint of life on the other planets in our solar system, though we haven’t yet poked into every corner. In any case, the search for life to which we are not related now reaches beyond the solar system to our region of the Milky Way galaxy.

## WHY ARE YOU HERE?

Robert Lanza, M.D.

(Excerpted from “Why Are You Here? A New Theory May Hold the Missing Piece,” in *HuffPost Social News*, on *HuffingtonPost.com*, 11/12/2010)

(Note: This essay is based on Dr. Lanza’s book, *Biocentrism*, co-authored with astronomer Bob Berman.)

Why do you happen to be alive on this lush little planet with its warm sun and coconut trees? And at just the right time in the history of the universe? The surface of the molten earth has cooled, but it’s not too cold. And it’s not too hot; the sun hasn’t expanded enough to melt the Earth’s surface with its searing gas yet. Even setting aside the issue of being here and now, the probability of random physical laws and events leading to this point is less than 1 out of  $10^{49}$ , equivalent to winning every lottery there ever was.

Biocentrism, a new theory of everything, provides the missing piece. Although classical evolution does an excellent job of helping us understand the past, it fails to capture the driving force. Evolution needs to add the observer to the equation. Indeed, Niels Bohr, the great Nobel physicist, said, “When we measure something we are forcing an undetermined, undefined world to assume an experimental value. We are not ‘measuring’ the world, we are creating it.” The evolutionists are trying to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. They think we, the observer, are a mindless accident, debris left over from an explosion that appeared out of nowhere one day.

Cosmologists propose that the universe was until recently a lifeless collection of particles bouncing against each other. It’s presented as a watch that somehow wound itself up, and that will unwind in a semi-predictable way. But they’ve shunted a critical component of the cosmos out of the way because they don’t know what to do with

it. This component, consciousness, isn't a small item. It's an utter mystery, which we think has somehow arisen from molecules and goo.

How did inert, random bits of carbon ever morph into that Japanese guy who always wins the hot-dog-eating contest?

In short, attempts to explain the nature of the universe, its origins, and what's really going on require an understanding of how the observer, our presence, plays a role. According to the current paradigm, the universe, and the laws of nature themselves, just popped out of nothingness. The story goes something like this: From the Big Bang until the present time, we've been incredibly lucky. This good fortune started from the moment of creation; if the Big Bang had been one-part-in-a-million more powerful, the cosmos would have rushed out too fast for the galaxies and stars to have developed. If the gravitational force were decreased by a hair, stars (including the Sun) wouldn't have ignited. There are over 200 physical parameters like this that could have any value but happen to be exactly right for us to be here. Tweak any of them and you never existed.

But our luck didn't stop with the laws, forces, and constants of the universe. *Sahelanthropus tchadensis*, *Orrorin tugenensis*, *Ardipithecus ramidus*, *Australopithecus anamensis*, *A. afarensis*, *Kenyanthropus platyops*, *A. africanus*, *A. garhi*, *A. sediba*, *A. aethiopicus*, *A. robustus*, *A. boisei*, *Homo habilis*, *H. georgicus*, and *H. erectus* – among other hominid species – all went extinct. Even the Neanderthals went extinct. But alas, not us! Indeed, we happen to be the only species of *Hominina* that made it.

Our special luck continues in the present time. Asteroids could strike Earth at any time, producing a surface-charring blast of heat, followed by years of dust that would freeze and/or starve us to death. Nearby stars could go supernova, their energy destroying the ozone layer and sterilizing the Earth with radiation. And a supervolcano could shroud the Earth in dust. These are just a few (out of billions) of things that could go wrong.

The story of evolution reads just like "The Story of the Three Bears." In the nursery tale, a little girl named Goldilocks enters a home occupied by three bears and tries different bowls of porridge; some are too hot, some are too cold. She also tries different chairs and beds, and every time, the third is "just right." For 13.7 billion years we, too, have had chronic good luck. Virtually everything has been "just right."

It's a fascinating story to tell children, but claiming that it's all a "dumb" accident is no more helpful than saying "God did it." Loren Eiseley, the great naturalist, once said that scientists "have not always been able to see that an old theory, given a hairsbreadth twist, might open an entirely new vista to the human reason." The theory of evolution turns out to be the perfect case in

hand. Amazingly, it all makes sense if you assume that the Big Bang is the *end* of the chain of physical causality, not the beginning.

Indeed, according to biocentrism, it's us, the observer, who create space and time (which is the reason you're here now). Consider everything you see around you right now. Language and custom say it all lies outside us in the external world. Yet you can't see anything through the vault of bone that surrounds your brain. Your eyes aren't just portals to the world. In fact, everything you experience, including your body, is part of an active process occurring in your mind. Space and time are simply the mind's tools for putting it all together.

Theoretical physicists Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow recently stated:

*"There is no way to remove the observer – us – from our perceptions of the world ... In classical physics, the past is assumed to exist as a definite series of events, but according to quantum physics, the past, like the future, is indefinite and exists only as a spectrum of possibilities."*

If we, the observer, collapse these possibilities (that is, the past and future) then where does that leave evolutionary theory, as described in our schoolbooks? Until the present is determined, how can there be a past? The past begins with the observer, us, not the other way around as we've been taught.

The observer is the first cause, the vital force that collapses not only the present but the cascade of past spatio-temporal events we call evolution.

### **AS THE THREE KINGS/MAGI/WISE MEN MAKE THEIR WEARY WAY TOWARD THEIR DATE WITH DESTINY IN A MANGER IN BETHLEHEM ON JANUARY 6 ...**





**CORLISS LAMONT 1902-1995**

**Dick Cousineau**

(Excerpted from *Secular Circular*, the newsletter of the Humanists of Santa Barbara, December, 2010)

A true humanist hero, Corliss Lamont was born in Englewood, NJ, to Wall Street wealth (his father was Chairman of the Board at J.P. Morgan Co.) yet championed the working classes and devoted his life to the humanistic philosophy, patriotism, world peace, and the furtherance of American civil rights. As a private citizen and following his philosophic dictates he brought many cases to the Supreme Court regarding civil rights and constitutional law. An ardent supporter of such rights, Lamont was Director of the ACLU from 1932 until 1954 and came under close scrutiny by Sen. McCarthy, who called him openly "an Un-American socialist and a traitor to his class and country."

Lamont taught courses on humanism at Columbia University, where he endowed a Chair in Civil Liberties at the School of Law. Author of sixteen books and hundreds of pamphlets, he is best remembered for his *Philosophy of Humanism* and *Illusion of Immortality*, as well as *Humanist Weddings and Funerals* and biographies of John Dewey and Bertrand Russell. In his philosophy, he defined ten characteristics of a humanist.



A humanist:

1. Believes in a naturalistic attitude toward the universe and considers all forms of supernaturalism as myth.
2. Believes that humans are an evolutionary product of nature and have no survival after death.
3. Believes that humans possess the power to solve their problems through their reliance on reason and science applied with courage.
4. Believes in an ethic of happiness in this world, freedom of thought, and progress for all humankind.
5. Believes that humans, while conditioned by the past, possess freedom of choice and are the creators of their own destinies.
6. Believes that the individual can attain the "Good Life" by self-development and activities that promote community welfare.
7. Believes in the development of arts and awareness of beauty, and the appreciation of Nature's loveliness and splendor.
8. Believes in the establishment of social programs that promote democracy, world peace, and economic order.
9. Believes in the complete social implementation of

reason, and scientific methods, with freedom of speech and civil liberties for all.

10. Believes that Humanism is a philosophy ever open to experimental testing, new facts and rigorous reasoning.

In his later years Lamont was given the Gandhi Peace Award, served on the Board of Directors of the ACLU, the National Urban League and the American Humanist Association. He was a man who daily lived his humanistic values in words and deeds and heavily supported these issues with funds and time.

He died in 1995 and his presence on this earth made a lasting difference to this world.

**WE'RE NUMBER 84!**

**WE'RE NUMBER 84!**

**John Rafferty**

Less religious than Las Vegas? That's us. According to research conducted by *Men's Health* and reported in that magazine's December issue, New York, New York ranked 84th in religiosity on the list of 100 "Holy Hometowns" across the USA.

The feature was part of the magazine's regular "Metrogrades" rankings of various aspects of life in urban America of interest to men. The magazine's researchers calculated the rankings by combining places of worship per capita with the number of different religious organizations in a city and the number of volunteers who support those groups. They also added in the amount of money donated to those organizations and the amount spent per capita on religious books.

So, even though New York, our little "Sodom By The Sea," houses more than 2,000 churches, 1,000 synagogues and 100 mosques (and who-knows-how-many more religious who-knows-whats in storefronts), we don't go to services much, don't contribute a hell of a lot when the plates are passed or volunteer to polish the candelabra very often. And we even browse and buy in bookstores that don't have "Religion & Spirituality" sections.

The result? We finished in humanistically respectable 84th place, 25 spots *less* holy even than "Sin City" Las Vegas (56), but, regrettably, still more holy than our neighbors Yonkers (88) and Newark (92), than New York-in-Winter Miami (91), than only-city-smarter-than-New-York Boston (98) ... and holier, naturally, than America's *least* holy city (at least according to *Men's Health*), Burlington, Vermont.

Which is "Holy City" Number One? Why, Colorado Springs, of course, nexus of fundamentalist Christian proselytizing in the military and home of the 11,000-member New Life Church founded by Ted Haggard.

So what does it all mean to New York humanists?

It means we've got work to do — catching up to and overtaking that upstart pretender, Burlington!

## WHO GETS THE DUMBTH-OF-THE-YEAR 2010 AWARD? CAST YOUR VOTE!

It's time to decide: Which nationally-recognizable personality was not just wrong, but most spectacularly wrong-headed, denying or clueless about reality, in 2010?

"Dumbth" is the coinage of the late secular humanist and humorist Steve Allen, as well as the title of his book, *Dumbth, the Lost Art of Thinking, With 101 Ways to Reason Better and Improve Your Mind*. In 1992, PIQUE Editor Warren Allen Smith proposed that SHSNY give Dumbth Awards to "those who deserve to have their illogic pointed out."

Who would get a Dumbth Award? Mr. Smith suggested, as an example,

*"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.'"*

So, who among our numbskull nominees will receive the not-so-coveted horse's-ass trophy first won by TV personality **Star Jones**, who said in 2005 that God "blessed her" by postponing the 2004 Christmas-week tsunami that killed 230,000 people until after her honeymoon? It was passed on to 2006 winner **Pat Robertson**, who claimed that God gave Israel's Ariel Sharon a stroke for negotiating with the Palestinians. (In fact, we decided Pat deserved a special Lifetime-in-Dumbth Award—remember gay pride parades causing hurricanes?)

In 2007, right-wing harridan **Ann Coulter** beat out stiff competition with her suggestion that American Jews needed to "be perfected" by becoming Christians (we put a blond ponytail on the award's behind in her honor). But in 2008 there was no real contest, as Darwin-denier **Ben Stein** walked away with the award for opining that while prayer leads to beauty, "Dachau is where science leads you ... to killing people." And finally (at least until now), our 2009 winner, His Holiness, **Pope Benedict XVI**, left all other contenders in the dust with his pronouncement that "You can't resolve [AIDS] with the distribution of condoms. On the contrary, it increases the problem."

Tough acts to follow. But some dunderhead has to win, so here, in non-judgmental alphabetical order, are 2010's nominees for Dumbth Of The Year:

**Rep. Michele Bachman**, receiving her second-straight nomination, who revealed her belief in spooky-silly prognostication with her statement in March that, "I said I had very serious concerns that Barack Obama has anti-American views. And now I look like Nostradamus."



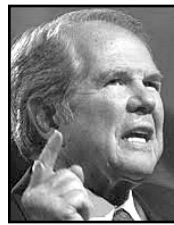
**Ex-House Speaker Newt Gingrich**, a perennial Dumbth hopeful, made his bid for the 2010 Award on Fox News Sunday with this that gobsmacked even Chris Wallace: "The secular socialist machine represents as great a threat to America as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union once did."

**Rep. Hank Johnson**, Democrat from Georgia's 4th District, who in questioning Pacific Fleet Admiral Robert Willard about the Navy's plans to increase the number of people on Guam, warned: "My fear is that the whole island will become so overly populated that it will tip over and capsize."



**Actor Craig T. Nelson**, who for unknown reasons was interviewed on the Glenn Beck show and, in fulminating against government bailouts, reminisced about his own history prior to getting rich on TV: "I've been on welfare and food stamps ... did anyone help me?"

**Not-a-Witch Christine O'Donnell**, for a double-barreled blast of ignorance, that "there is just as much, if not more, evidence supporting" the Biblical six-day creation story as there is for "physics," and "Evolution is a myth; why aren't monkeys evolving into people?"



**Rev. Pat Robertson** pronounced that the Haitians themselves were responsible for the January earthquake because their ancestors "swore a pact with the Devil" to rid themselves of their French colonial masters, and "ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after another."

Sharp-eyed readers with good memories will notice that some others nominated in these pages during the year have been left off this ballot. In the interests of space, we have excised Fox News' Brit Hume, who blamed Tiger Woods' infidelity on his Buddhism, actor Danny Glover, who blamed the Haitian earthquake on global warming, and Chuck DeVore, who presumed an endorsement of his Senate candidacy by TV hero Jack Bauer, a fictional character. They just weren't as interesting (or funny) as the chuckleheads pictured above.

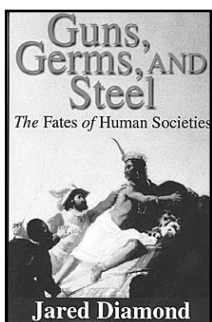
### Cast Your Vote Now, and Again in February

Okay, nominations are closed, and balloting — online and by phone — begins right now, and lasts through January 31. Cast your vote via [editor@shsny.org](mailto:editor@shsny.org), or leave a message at 212-308-2165. Celebrators will get a second chance to vote at our February 12 Anniversary/Darwin Dinner (see page 7), at which the winner of the not-so-coveted horse's-ass trophy will be announced. — JR



# SHSNY CALENDAR: JANUARY - MARCH 2011

**SHSNY BOOK CLUB**  
**THURSDAY, JANUARY 6, 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 Jared 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*

"Artful, informative, and delightful." — *New York Review*

"One of the most important and readable works on the human past published in recent years." — *Colin Renfrew*  
 — *Paperback*

*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, February 3, 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 our evolution. It is a view independently reinforced by recent biomedical studies showing that our brains are built to feel another's pain.

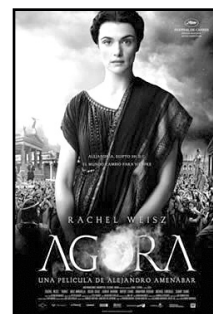
"... like other creatures who hang out in herds, we've evolved to be empathetic. We don't just hear a scream, it chills us to the bone; when we see a smile, we answer with one of our own. ... Listen to your inner ape." — *Paperback*

**SHSNY BOOK CLUB**  
**March Date TBA, 6:30 p.m.**  
 at the Muhlenberg Library  
**AMERICAN GRACE:**  
*How Religion Divides Us and  
 Unites Us*  
 by Robert D. Putnam  
 & David E. Campbell

A sweeping chronicle of national change over time and a mammoth survey of American religion. The authors argue two seemingly contradictory themes: first, that a "new religious fault line" exists in America, a deep political polarization; and second, that the culture (especially its younger generation and "what may prove to be the most seismic shift of all," the dramatic increase of "nones") is so much more accepting of diversity that thesis #1 will not tear America apart. — *Hardcover*

**SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT**  
**MONDAY, JAN 10, 7:00 pm**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**  
**"AGORA"**

In the last days of the Roman Empire, at the end of the 4th Century in Alexandria, Egypt, zealots of the now triumphant Christian faith begin the "purification" of the great city and center of learning.



One woman, the atheist philosopher, mathematician and astronomer, Hypatia, stands against the mobs that would destroy the greatest library of the ancient world.

Based on the true-life story of one of history's greatest women (with a slave-and-mistress love story thrown in), this award-winning 2009 film epic stars Rachel Weisz.

*SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.*  
 Check out Stone Creek's menu and prices online at [stonecreekny.com](http://stonecreekny.com)  
*February 14: Elmer Gantry*

**SUNDAY, JAN 16, 12 NOON**  
**OUR MONTHLY SHSNY**  
**BRUNCH GET-TOGETHER:**  
**NEW RESTAURANT!**

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 \$18. Check it out at [bxlcafe.pregraphic.com/](http://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!*

# SHSNY CALENDAR: JANUARY - MARCH 2011

## GREAT LECTURES

**TUESDAY, JAN 25, 7:00 pm**  
**"THE ATHEISM TAPES"**

**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 will lead off with the interview of philosopher Colin McGinn, followed by a general discussion: What do *you* think?

Subsequently, we'll hear Richard Dawkins, philosopher Daniel

Dennett, playwright Arthur Miller, theologian Denys Turner and physicist Steven Weinberg, each discussing their personal intellectual journeys,

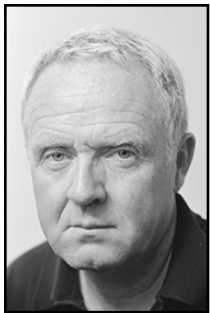
offering illuminating analyses of nontheism from a wide range of perspectives.

*Part 2 of The Atheism Tapes 3/22.*  
*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/>



**SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2011, 7:00 p.m.**

**Our 3rd Annual**  
**SHSNY ANNIVERSARY & DARWIN DAY BANQUET**  
**Golden Unicorn Restaurant**  
**18 East Broadway**  
**(in the heart of Chinatown)**

Come gather at "one of NYC's 5 Best" Chinese restaurants to celebrate the 202nd birthday of Charles Darwin (February 12, 1809) and the 23rd Anniversary of the birth (January 14, 1988) of SHSNY.

Highlights of the evening:

## 10-COURSE CHINESE BANQUET

... including Peking Duck, Stir-Fried Lobster, Filet Steak with Chinese Broccoli, Stir-Fried Peach & Chicken, Winter Melon Seafood Soup, several veggie choices, plus Shrimp Dumplings, Crispy Spring Rolls, Singapore Mai Fun, and desserts, of course. Preview it all (and get directions) at [www.goldenunicornrestaurant.com](http://www.goldenunicornrestaurant.com)

## PRESENTATION OF THE SHSNY 2010 DUMBTH AWARD

Who will win the not-so-coveted horse's-ass award? Banquet attendees will get a chance to vote a second time for the idiot of their choice. (To vote the first time, see page 5.)

**President's Anniversary Address**  
**JOHN RAFFERTY**

on

## WHAT MUST HUMANISTS DO NOW? IT'S TIME FOR US TO 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 past decade. Now it's time for humanists to make a positive difference, to become a force in our city. President John Rafferty calls a newly invigorated and growing Secular Humanist Society of New York—and all of New York's freethinkers—to action.

Don't miss the most important – and most fun – meeting of the year!

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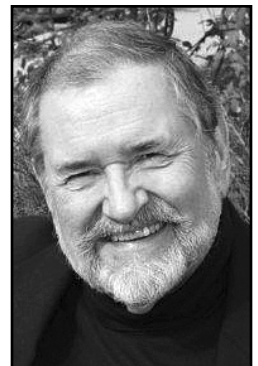
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## IS ATHEISM A BELIEF?

### Part 1: Logical Conclusions Are Not “Beliefs”

Greta Christina

(Excerpted from *AlterNet*, 10/20/2010)

Is atheism a belief? No. I really wish I could just leave it at that. Maybe post a funny story about Einstein instead, or show you some cute pictures of our cats. But I suppose I can't just leave it at that.

Here's the thing. One of the most common accusations aimed at atheists is that atheism is an article of faith, a belief just like religion. Because atheism can't be proven with absolute 100-percent certainty, the accusation goes, therefore not believing in God means taking a leap of faith – a leap of faith that's every bit as irrational and unjustified as religion.

It's a little odd to have this accusation hurled in such an accusatory manner by people who supposedly respect and value faith. But that's a puzzle for another time. Today, I want to talk about a different puzzle – the puzzle of what atheism really is, and how it gets so misunderstood.

Let's start with this right off the bat: No, atheism is not a belief. For me, and for the overwhelming majority of atheists I know, atheism is not the *a priori* assumption that there is no God. Our atheism is not an article of faith, adhered to regardless of what evidence does or does not support it. Our atheism is not the absolute, 100-percent, unshakable certainty that there is no God.

For me, and for the overwhelming majority of atheists I know, our atheism is a provisional conclusion, based on careful reasoning and on the best available evidence we have. Our atheism is the conclusion that the God hypothesis is unsupported by any good evidence, and that unless we see better evidence, we're going to assume that God does not exist. If we see better evidence, we'll change our minds.

Look at it this way. Are you 100-percent certain that there are no unicorns? Are you 100-percent certain that the Earth is round? I assume the answer is a pretty heartfelt “No.” I assume you accept that it's hypothetically possible, however improbable, that unicorns really exist and that all physical traces of them have disappeared by magic. I assume you accept that it's hypothetically possible, however improbable, that the Earth really is a flat disc on the back of a giant turtle, and that all evidence to the contrary was planted in our brains by hyper-intelligent space aliens as some sort of cosmic prank.

Does that mean your conclusions—the “no unicorns/round Earth” conclusions—are articles of faith?

No. Of course not.

Your conclusion that there are no unicorns on this round Earth of ours is based on careful reasoning and the best available evidence you have. If you saw better evidence—if there were a discovery of unicorns on a

remote island off Madagascar, if you saw an article in *The Times* about an astonishing but well-substantiated archeological find of unicorn fossils—you'd change your mind.

And that's the deal with atheism. If atheism is a belief, then any conclusion we can't be 100-percent certain of is a belief. And that's not a very useful definition of the word “belief.” With the exception of certain mathematical and logical conclusions (along the lines of “If A and B are true, then C is true”), we don't know anything with 100-percent certainty. But we can still make reasonable conclusions about what is and is not likely to be true. We can still sift through our ideas, and test them, and make reasonable conclusions about how likely or unlikely they are. And those conclusions are not beliefs. If that's how you're defining belief, then just about everything we know is a belief.

Religious belief, on the other hand, is a belief. If you ask most religious believers, “What would convince you that your belief was mistaken? What would convince you that God does not exist?” they typically reply, “Nothing. I have faith in my God. Nothing would persuade me that he was not real. That's what it means to have faith.” This isn't true of all believers—some will say that their religious belief is based on evidence and reason and could be falsified—but when you press them hard on what evidence would persuade them out of their belief, they get very slippery indeed. They keep moving the goalposts again and again, or they keep changing their definitions of God to the point where he's so abstract he essentially can't be disproven, or they make their standards of evidence so impossible that they're laughably absurd. (“Come up with an alternative explanation for the existence of every single physical particle in the universe. Everything—down to the minutest sub-atomic particle known or surmised presently, to everything yet to be discovered in the future—must be accounted for up-front, each with its own individual explanation.” I'm not kidding. Someone actually said that.) Their belief might be falsifiable in theory, but in practice, it's anything but. In practice, it's an *a priori* assumption, an axiom they start with and are not willing to let go of, no matter how much overwhelming evidence there is contradicting it, or how many logical pretzels their axiom forces them into.

And that's conspicuously not the case for atheism.

Now, a few atheists will contradict this. A few atheists do say, “Yes, I'm 100-percent persuaded that atheism is correct.” But when you press them on it, they almost always acknowledge that Yes, hypothetically, there might be some God hypothesis that's correct. Even if it's not a God hypothesis that anyone actually believes in, or even if it's only the most detached, deistic, non-interventionist, “for all practical purposes non-existent”



God you can think of ... when pressed, even the ardent "100-percenters" acknowledge that there's a minuscule, entirely hypothetical possibility that God exists. When they say they're 100-percent convinced of their atheism, they mean that they're 100-percent convinced for all practical purposes, given the best information they currently have.

And that's still a conclusion – not a belief.

So is atheism a belief? No.

[In February PIQUE, in conclusion, Ms. Christina argues for doing away with the word "belief" in our arguments.]

## JESUS AND MO ON ATHEISM AS A FAITH

(Transcribed from *Jesusandmo.net*, 11/10/2010)

**Mohammed** (to barmaid): You can't prove with 100 percent certainty that there is no God. Therefore, your atheism is a faith. You are a believer in the No-God.

**Jesus**: Science is your religion, and Richard Dawkins is your prophet.

**Mo**: You, barmaid, are a faith-head.

**Jesus**: Ha-ha. Faithy-waithy faith-head.

**Mo** (as he and Jesus leave the bar): Another victory for faith, I believe.

**Jesus**: Wait – are we for it or against it?

## RELIGIOUS RIGHT: OBAMA HAS NO BUSINESS QUOTING THE FOUNDERS

**John Rafferty**

In describing America's diversity to an audience in Indonesia on November 10, President Obama said that the national motto "E Pluribus Unum" ("Out of many, one") is a good summary of the American experience.

Outraged, the Congressional Prayer Caucus, led by Rep. Randy Forbes (R-VA), wrote the President on December 6 to remind him that the national motto is now "In God We Trust," as indeed it has been since earlier right-wing ideologues cowed a spineless Congress and made the change during the anti-godless-communist mania of the 1950s.

What the caucus' letter did not mention was that "E Pluribus Unum" was established as the national motto by America's founding fathers in 1782, codified on the Great Seal of the United States, and that it still appears on the presidential seal and most of our coinage.

Oh, the Caucus is also ticked that when the President quoted from the Declaration of Independence he didn't use the "Creator" word. They suggested a meeting so they can straighten him out on American history.

The Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church & State, opined that, given the problems the country is facing and the amount of work on the President's desk, "members of the Congressional Prayer Caucus, by contrast, appear to have a lot of time on their hands."

## BEFORE WE GET ALL EXCITED ABOUT THE POPE'S "U-TURN" ON CONDOMS ...

(Reprinted from "Intrinsic moral evil" in the Vatican," in the *National Secular Society (UK) Newslite*, 11/26/2010)

There's nothing theologians like better than trying to decipher what the hell their colleagues are talking about. And then producing an interpretation that is equally impenetrable.

We saw a perfect example of this when the pope said something (who knows what?) about condoms and the Catholic Church's teachings on their use. Did he mean that the policy had changed? Did he mean that the policy had not changed? Was he starting a debate? Was he ending a debate?

Trying to find a way through the fog of inflated and bewildering language (why use one word when you can write a three volume treatise?) is like paddling in treacle. But it keeps the bejeweled old celibates in the Vatican happy, helps them pass their days poring over the minutiae of what this word meant or what that phrase amounted to. It's a fascinating game when the crosswords and sudokus run out.

In the meantime, the African continent is ravaged by a disease that has no cure and which, without expensive drugs, cannot be controlled. People die – slowly – in miserable, pain-wracked circumstances. These are young people with young families. They simply responded to their bodies' urges for sexual experience and tried, at the same time, to abide by the Church's teachings. The Church's demand for abstinence is a call to deny human nature, and very few of us want or are capable of resisting one of the strongest of all life's urges (not even priests, it seems).

The victims of HIV infection leave orphaned children who then often have to fend for themselves in a cruel and poverty-stricken society. *The Guardian* carried a report on the mixed responses in Africa to the pope's ambiguous statement – they range from pragmatic compassion to hardline denial.

And while this happens to tens of thousands of people, the old fools at the Vatican bicker endlessly over whether the pope meant only male prostitutes, whether female prostitutes were also included, or – more likely – that it was prostitutes engaged in homosexual activities where no procreation could result. If there is any chance of procreation – adding another Catholic to the flock – the pope is adamant that condoms are verboten, even if just one of the participants is HIV positive and therefore likely to transmit it to the other.

One thing is clear – the interview on which these convoluted arguments are based were the opinions of one man. They were not an intimation that the Catholic Church is changing its teachings on condoms (no "U-turn" as some papers triumphantly announced).

Indeed, it is clear that the ban on rubbers remains inexplicably in place.

The Vatican often labels other people “intrinsically disordered” and “morally evil,” but its own teachings in this area are surely wickedness personified. And this week’s events hold them up to a very unflattering light.

### **BUMPER STICKER OF THE MONTH**

He’s YOUR god, they’re YOUR rules; YOU burn in hell.

– from *The Utah Humanist*, December, 2010

### **REPORT FROM CALIFORNIA: THE TWO BASIC FLAVORS OF IDEOLOGY**

**Joseph Navarro**

*(Reprinted from the November, 2010 Humanist Society of Santa Barbara Secular Circular)*

I’d always wanted to go to one of those secular humanist conferences advertised in *Free Inquiry* but they were always too far away and too costly. Then I saw the ad for a conference in Los Angeles in October. I raided my piggy bank and headed south for three days of the likes of PZ Myers, James Randi, Robert Wright, Sam Harris, and my all-time favorite “angry atheist,” Richard Dawkins.

As you might guess from the names mentioned, the weekend was jam-packed with interesting and sometimes contentious presentations. For this article I’ll focus on Saturday night’s dialogue between Sam Harris (*Letter to a Christian Nation*) and Robert Wright (*The Evolution of God*). The topic was secularism’s stand on religion and belief, but for reasons I still can’t figure out the dialog started right off with a slugfest over Islam.

Harris adamantly argued that the teachings of Islam are directly responsible for the violence and destruction perpetrated by the likes of bin Laden and other extremists. Wright countered that the reasons behind the violence stemmed more from geopolitics—lost lands, poverty, decreased global competitiveness—not the tenets of Islam. Wright went so far as to accuse Harris of playing right into the hands of the American right-wing by fueling their Islamophobia. Harris countered with a long list of liberal credentials and told Wright he was being cautiously PC by refusing to believe the extremists’ own words, which unambiguously proclaim their religious motivation.

The debate was bordering on tedium and my mind started to wander, so I directed it to wander toward a place where my own ideas are stored to see if any connections could be made. I pondered the possibility that both Wright and Harris could be right. The concepts of materialism (as in reality, not as in possessions) and ideology linked them happily together, I surmised.

Although Marx may have gotten the communism part of his philosophy wrong, the materialism part was

spot-on.

People are basically motivated by real-world situations (so Wright is right), but they often need to justify or rationalize their behavior with ideology (so Harris is right too). Ideology comes in two basic flavors—religious and secular. Essentially they’re the same sort of mental creations, but religious ideology has a supernatural element (e.g., salvation through Christ, Allah’s will) while secular ideology is grounded in something like class consciousness or the fundamental rights of man. Any of them can be dangerous to the health and welfare of sentient beings, and when they work in tandem, watch out. Even a good-sounding secular ideology can go awry. George W. invaded Iraq because God told him it needed democracy (his fall-back after everyone realized he was lying about WMDs)—a much better sell than invading for a strategic spot on the globe from which to make sure U.S. oil profits remain steadily on the rise.

Secularism, materialism (as in possessions), and western forces are encroaching on the Islamic world (locate Iraq and Afghanistan on a globe) and (except for those few with lots of oil) collectively they’re not getting rich competing on the global market. Those feeling most threatened by all this are attacking their perceived enemies and using religion to recruit and justify.

Toward the end of the presentation there was a question/answer period and I was tempted to ask Wright and Harris if they thought their positions were more complementary than contradictory. But they were having such a good time slugging it out I just kept my thoughts in my head.

*Letters:*

### **A CONSERVATIVE CRITIQUE OF NOVEMBER PIQUE**

*To the Editor:* I wish there were a community for atheists that was truly politically neutral. PIQUE still reeks of cartoonish characterizations of those on the right. “Elect the Willfully Ignorant” in November was especially egregious. And sure, Christine O’Donnell was the weakest tea party candidate, but the left has some real doozies too. Further, the article on collective salvation completely missed the mark, but, hey, it’s Glenn Beck, so it must be dumb. It’s easy to cherry-pick dumb statements from any side. As we discussed at this week’s NY Philosophy, it is very wrong to accuse all Muslims of being terrorists due to the actions of a few. If that is disgusting, then why is it okay to draw generalizations as this newsletter has done about conservatives? Childish.

I won’t make it my life’s mission to reform the secular progressive movement, but it sure is tempting. Liberals are only 20 percent of the U.S., conservatives are 42 percent (the rest are self-identified as moderates, per

Gallup). Admittedly, atheists (including you and me) are rated by Americans barely higher than trial lawyers; if atheists want a more universally-appealing message, they need to strip off the Mickey Mouse politics, e.g., "For instance, when I say 'taxes are bad,' I'm honestly saying everything I know about that subject."

Really? People who think we are taxed too high and the government spends too much are know-nothings? And also, Christians are about to turn the U.S. into a theocracy? I thought that meme went away with Bush (but whew, he almost had us parade-marching). With that (okay, low) level of intellectual discourse, atheists will remain reviled and never get their message across.

America overall is dumb because it is too religious, yet it is rightly conservative. Europe is accurately atheist, but absurdly progressive (but thankfully trending back to conservatism lately). It is perhaps wishful thinking to hope some country would get it right.

Lastly, the tea party movement is often misunderstood, perhaps even by you. It is an intersection where libertarians and conservatives agree, i.e., fiscal policy. The movement believes we are headed for a fiscal train wreck a la Greece if we don't deeply reform.

Libertarians and conservatives disagree on everything else – social issues and foreign policy. I disagree with libertarians on both, and with conservatives on some of that social crap, but if I had to pick a box to check, of course as you know it'd be conservatism. But the tea party movement is fiscal at its core, and should not be mocked by atheists. No movement is perfect, and libertarians and conservatives have a lot to mock, but so do progressives – it'd be cool to see a more balanced critique of all.

– John Broughton, *New York Philosophy*

**Letters:**

#### **LETTER FROM CALIFORNIA: ON BRUNCH, PRAYER AND PANCAKES**

*To the Editor:* I'll not be attending the November SHSNY brunch, but the November issue of PIQUE was the best ever, or so my house guest and I have opined. I discuss here only the "prayer or pancakes" article ("Pancakes, Not Prayers, Make People Happy"). I'm not too fond of pancakes; they're too bland a food, and my hands inevitably get sticky on the maple syrup. But prayers are even blander, so pancakes still would win in a contest.

I have two things to say about prayer; I hope I haven't said them both before. (1) In filling out a questionnaire for a nontheist Quaker group, I defined prayer as one-way communication with a square circle. (2) Billy Graham, when he had a regular newspaper column, once answered a distraught believer's question, "Why doesn't God answer my prayers?" as follows: "God answers all prayers. Sometimes the answer is no." To my amusement, I find this reply of Graham's to be

operationally indistinguishable from atheism.

Another item on the pancake lawsuit. If the International House of Pancakes wins its suit, I suggest that the International House of Prayer and other "offending" organizations simply shift the capital O to lower case. A nice eye-catcher, and I'm pretty sure the pancake house would lose a second lawsuit if it were to file one against the lower case "o."

Again, have a fine brunch. – Bill Lindley

*Comment:* We do, Bill, with pancakes on the menu. – JR

#### **EDWARD F. McCARTAN**

*(Reprinted from The New York Times of October 3, 2010. For periods during the 1990s, Ed McCartan was President of SHSNY and Editor of PIQUE.)*

**McCARTAN** – Edward F. On September 25, 2010. Retired Naval Commander, Editor and Editorial Consultant. Survived by his wife Rita, daughters Ann and Marty, and his sister Freddie. In accordance with his wishes, burial was at sea. Donations to Smile Train, Ed's favorite charity, would be appreciated.

#### **EDWARD F. McCARTAN AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE Rita McCartan**

**E**dward F. McCartan's life was defined by honor and humanism. He graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in the top ten percent of a class of 1,000. He was one of the Navy's youngest commanders, having been Captain of the U.S.S. Sanderling at age 24, during World War II, and also served as captain and executive officer of other ships. His 20-year naval career included naval intelligence, and he was considered a Sovietologist, an expert on the then Soviet Union, during the Cold War era.

Following retirement from the Navy, Ed had an illustrious career as a writer, publisher, editor, editorial consultant and book reviewer. As a publisher, Ed was the first, in 1972, to set type in larger point, 18 point type instead of 10 point, for novels and works of non-fiction, in order to serve the visually handicapped and elderly readers. In 1993, he made the computer database of resources for cancer survivors a reality on behalf of the Post Treatment Resource Program of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center.

In the early 1990s, when Ed was President of SHSNY, he worked tirelessly to promote SHSNY and secular humanism. He interfaced with Paul Kurtz and Tim Madigan of the Center for Inquiry, as well as various humanist writers, including Morton Hunt, and humanist organizations in the New York City area and elsewhere. In that capacity, he arranged for SHSNY to meet at the Albert Ellis Institute in New York City.



## NUTCASE CHRISTIANS HONOR JUST SOME OF AMERICA'S SOLDIERS ...

John Rafferty

On the day before President Obama presented the Medal of Honor to Staff Sergeant Salvatore Giunta — for “repeatedly and without hesitation charg[ing] through extreme enemy fire, embodying the warrior ethos that says, ‘I will never leave a fallen comrade’” and rescuing three wounded G.I.s—rabid fundamentalist Christian Bryan Fischer was complaining on his American Family Association blog that our nation’s highest military award had become “feminized” because it was being given to soldiers who rescued others, rather than to “soldiers who kill people and break things.”

### ... BUT ALL OF NAZI GERMANY'S

Before I had a chance to read more of Mr. Fischer’s philosophy, an AFA ad popped up, selling their “Merry Christmas” buttons.

“God with Us”? That’s an exact translation of the German “*Gott mit uns*” that was inscribed on the belt buckle of every one of Adolf Hitler’s soldiers.

The image has since disappeared from the AFA site, and the posts to Mr. Fischer’s screed are almost unanimously characterized, I’m happy to say, by the one that begins, “You, sir, are a coward and an idiot ...”



## MEET RICHARD MILNER, SHSNY'S NEWEST HONORARY MEMBER

Author, editor, historian of science, anthropologist, performer, Richard Milner has appeared before SHSNY audiences several times since he filled in as a speaker one evening, unannounced, for his friend Michael Shermer (who couldn’t make it from California) — and proceeded to delight us all with excerpts from his one-man show, “A Musical Evening With Charles Darwin.”



Were you one of the hundreds of thousands who were enchanted every month for years by Stephen Jay Gould’s witty and erudite “This View of Life” essays in *Natural History* magazine? Richard, who was a childhood and lifelong friend of Stephen, was his editor.

Were you one of the entertained at our 2010 Darwin Day/SHSNY Anniversary dinner by a man in Victorian get-up who did droll Gilbert&Sullivan-ish ditties while dodging waiters bearing dim-sum? Again, Richard.

And did you enjoy his illustrated lecture at our Book Club meeting last month on “Darwin’s Oddball Army” — at which he sold all the copies he could carry of his *Darwin’s Universe: Evolution from A to Z*, and gave us a preview of his next book, *Charles R. Knight, The Artist Who Saw Through Time?* So did we.

Welcome to SHSNY, Richard.

Page 1  
The “Biggest News Story  
of Modern Times”?

Page 5  
Vote for 2010's Dumbest

Page 7  
Join the celebration:  
Our Annual Darwin Day  
& SHSNY Anniversary  
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