

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

February, 2011

Call it the atheism issue: we survey the varieties of our unbelief, from personal history to historical perspective, welcome good news from the mother country, question “belief” itself, and challenge the charge of “arrogance.” We examine the origins of organized religion from the thief’s point of view, claim Western Civ as our own, and dread the coming of May 21. We nominate the year’s first numbskull, welcome a bright new Board member, and make plans for a brand-new Board. – JR

SHSNY ELECTION NOTICE

The triennial election for the Board of Directors of the Secular Humanist Society of New York will take place this spring. Notice is given hereby, as it will be in the March and April issues of PIQUE.

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 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@shsny.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?

Our by-laws* require a minimum of five members on the Board, which elects the officers of SHSNY. Currently, the Board consists of nine members: Remo Cosentino, Arthur Harris, Lee Loshak, Elaine Lynn, Donna Marxer, Irv Millman, Robert A. Murtha, Jr., John Rafferty and brand-new member Carl Marxer (see page 12) – all of whom will stand for re-election, and all of whom hope that even more people willing to work for SHSNY will nominate themselves and 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.*

Don’t miss out – reserve now, for the
SHSNY ANNIVERSARY &
DARWIN DAY BANQUET
Saturday, February 12, 2011
See page 7.

IT’S OFFICIAL: BRITAIN IS SECULAR

(Excerpted from “Humanists call for UK policy to reflect secular majority” in the 12/29/2010 Bulletin of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU))

The latest British Social Attitudes survey, published in December 2010, reveals that 51 percent of Britons have no religion, compared to 42 percent who say they are Christian. The survey is the primary social research survey in Britain. The annual surveys conducted by the National Centre for Social Research have continually monitored and interpreted the British public’s changing attitudes towards social, economic, political, religious and moral issues.

As usual, the latest survey asks people whether they regard themselves as belonging to any particular religion and, if so, to which one. When the survey first asked these questions in 1985, 63 percent of the respondents answered that they were Christians, compared with 34 percent who said they had no religion (the rest belonged to non-Christian religions). Now, a quarter of a century on, the latest survey has found that only 42 percent say they are Christians while 51 percent say they have no religion.

The gay humanist charity, the Pink Triangle Trust (PTT), a UK-based membership organization of the

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.

SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, F.D.R. Station, New York, NY 10150-7661 / 212-308-2165 / www.shsny.org

Individual membership \$40 per year; Family membership \$65; Subscription only \$30.

Articles published in PIQUE are archived in <http://www.shsny.org>. They may be reprinted, in full or in part, in other newsletters. The URL (<http://www.shsny.org>) should be referenced.

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

IHEU, is calling on the government to end its pro-religious bias. PTT secretary George Broadhead commented: "These findings constitute a steady and remarkable turnaround and demonstrate quite clearly that the country has become much less religious and more secular in its outlook. Nevertheless, the powers-that-be, including politicians and the media, choose to ignore the findings and continue to give special privileges to the Churches and other religious institutions as if they had overwhelming support.

"Why is it that Anglican bishops sit in the House of Lords as of right, that morning worship of a broadly Christian character is mandatory in state schools, that faith schools are steadily being increased by the Government at tax payers' expense, and that chaplains provide counseling in our hospitals, prisons and armed forces, with no provision made for the majority who are not religious?

"It is high time that politicians and the media took note, not just of these highly significant statistics, but of the words of no less a person than the Queen, our Head of State, when (in a recent speech to the Church of England's General Synod) she said: 'It is rightly acknowledged that people of faith have no monopoly of virtue and that the wellbeing and prosperity of the nation depend on the contribution of individuals and groups of all faiths and none.'"

Comment: You rule, Queen, and we loved you in "Calendar Girls." – JR

WESTERN CIVILIZATION IS HUMANISM, AND WE SHOULD CLAIM IT

Steven Pinker

(Excerpted from "Steven Pinker on Textbooks, Culture Wars and the 'A' Word," an interview by Marilyn Westfall, posted on HumanistNetworkNews.org, 5/5/2010)

HUMANIST NETWORK NEWS: What do you think about [Irving] Kristol's idea that most people need religion and that atheism is a truth that they can't handle?

STEVEN PINKER: This is an idea associated with Leo Strauss. This is an empirical hypothesis, and I think it has been falsified. Namely, the nations of Europe are overwhelmingly secular, many of them are majority atheist, and yet their rates of violence are far lower than American states in the Bible Belt.

So if you want to know what kind of ideology leads people to be civilized versus to shoot each other to death, we have the answer: the atheist countries have homicide rates of one per 100,000, while Southern American states have rates 10 times as high.

HNN: Irving Kristol seemed to argue that humans aren't very responsive to change, in regard to behavior. How adaptable are humans?

SP: Well, a lot of our emotions are only so adapt-

able, but our cognitive apparatus is an open-ended combinatorial system – that's the essence of language. No two sentences are identical, except for some clichés. We're constantly spinning out and understanding new sentences, and that's because part of innate human nature is the ability to entertain new thoughts. We don't really know the limits.

But I think a lot of human behavior is not ideological anyway, it's just an unconscious sense of decency that evolves over time. I think the vast majority of people don't kill or rape, not because they consciously think about burning in hell fires afterwards. I think that change comes over the course of history as we internalize norms about what we don't do.

HNN: What about the European safety net? Does it make a difference with regard to belief in God when people feel more comfortable with what society has to offer?

SP: There's a hypothesis by Phil Zuckerman and Gregory Paul in [their Edge article] "Why the Gods Are Not Winning" that belief in God is a function of uncertainty over catastrophes in your life. If you live in a welfare state it buffers you against some of the worst things that life can throw at you, and so you're less likely to believe in God. They claim that there's a very strong correlation across countries between the size of the safety net and atheism.

HNN: How far should humanists/atheists go in finding compromises with religion?

SP: There should be ordinary decency and tact in talking about organizations that mean a lot to people. I think there should be no compromise on the intellectual front with religion. I don't think you should say that God, well, kinda, sorta, maybe on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays exists. When it comes to the track record of religion, you have to make distinctions. There are some things that religions do that are praiseworthy and some are not, but an across-the-board condemnation doesn't make sense. Nor does a make-nice position. The Inquisition and the Crusades and radical Islam deserve to be criticized. But it's also true that the Quakers had some good things to say about slavery in their time and that in the inner city the African American church is often a source of community.

One just has to make distinctions. It's a question of criticizing what deserves to be criticized. And there can be no compromise with falsehood. Nor with out-and-out immorality and evil, which religious practices in the past have sanctioned.

HNN: In discussing how to advance humanism and atheism, what do you think about the AHA's "Good without God" campaign?

SP: Right. Greg Epstein [Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University] uses that as his book title. I think it's

a successful approach. It's a great slogan. Madison Avenue couldn't have done better.

HNN: There's a lot of debate about this campaign, especially among Unitarian Universalist humanists with whom I correspond, and there's resistance to the word atheist and to Godless. What do you make of this?

SP: It's a linguistic phenomenon. Atheism does [evoke] a very primitive emotional reaction in the minds of many people. Many people simply equate it with immorality, which is why I think they tell pollsters that atheists are people they distrust the most. Often when there is a disliked word—a word with a negative connotation—people find a euphemism, that's why what used to [be called] garbage then became sanitation and now it's environmental services. And likewise atheism is constantly reaching for the untainted euphemism, secularist, freethinker, humanist, bright and so on. I think each one is going to get infected in turn until the societal attitude changes.

Atheism is merely absence of belief. Humanism will succeed when no one notices that it's there, when it's just common decency in Western civilization. In a way, really, humanism should just be. Western civilization since the Enlightenment doesn't depend on the belief in God. All of philosophy is humanism, all of science, all of law – we should claim that. We should claim Shakespeare. And modern biology and the modern Western university and democracy – that's humanism.

RELIGION IS THEFT

Jared Diamond

(Note: 25 bibliophiles turned out for SHSNY's January 6 Book Club to discuss Mr. Diamond's Pulitzer-prize winning Guns, Germs, and Steel, and with their insights and ideas made it one of our best evenings ever. The following, excerpted from Chapter 14, "From Egalitarianism to Kleptocracy," is part of Mr. Diamond's analysis of the four stages of social organization: Band, Tribe, Chiefdom, State, in ascending order of complexity and descending order of egalitarianism. – JR)

By now, it should be obvious that chiefdoms introduced the dilemma fundamental to all centrally governed, nonegalitarian societies. At best, they do good by providing expensive services impossible to contract for on an individual basis. At worst, they function unabashedly as kleptocracies, transferring net wealth from commoners to upper classes. ...

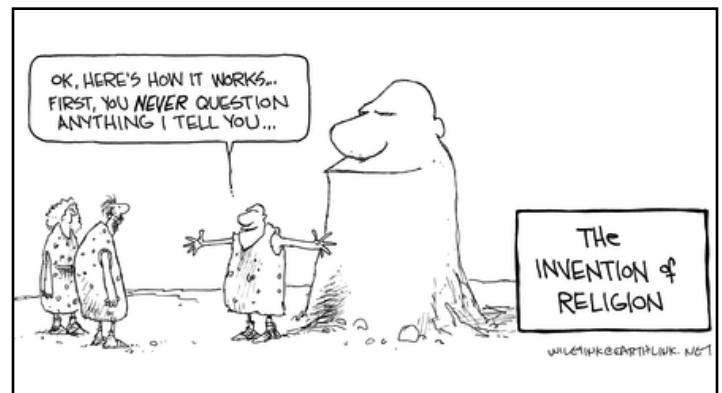
For any ranked society, whether a chiefdom or a state, one thus has to ask: why do the commoners tolerate the transfer of the fruits of their hard labor to kleptocrats? ... What should an elite do to gain popular support while still maintaining a more comfortable lifestyle than commoners? Kleptocrats throughout the ages have resorted to a mixture of four solutions:

1. Disarm the populace, and arm the elite. ...
2. Make the masses happy by redistributing much of the tribute received, in popular ways. ...
3. Use the monopoly of force to promote happiness, by maintaining public order and curbing violence. ...
4. The remaining way for kleptocrats to gain public support is to construct an ideology or religion justifying kleptocracy. Bands and tribes already had supernatural beliefs, just as do modern established religions. But the supernatural beliefs of bands and tribes did not serve to justify central authority, justify transfer of wealth, or maintain peace between unrelated individuals. When supernatural beliefs gained those functions and became institutionalized, they were thereby transformed into what we term a religion. Hawaiian chiefs were typical of chiefs elsewhere, in asserting divinity, divine descent, or at least a hotline to the gods. The chief claimed to serve the people by interceding for them with the gods and reciting the ritual formulas required to obtain rain, good harvests, and success in fishing.

Chiefdoms characteristically have an ideology, precursor to an institutionalized religion, that buttresses the chief's authority. The chief may either combine the offices of political leader and priest in a single person, or may support a separate group of kleptocrats (that is, priests) whose function is to provide ideological justification for the chiefs. That is why chiefdoms devote so much collected tribute to constructing temples and other public works, which serve as centers of the official religion and visible signs of the chief's power.

Besides justifying the transfer of wealth to kleptocrats, institutionalized religion brings two other important benefits to centralized societies.

First, shared ideology or religion helps solve the problem of how unrelated individuals are to live together without killing each other – by providing them with a bond not based on kinship. Second, it gives people a motive, other than genetic self-interest, for sacrificing their lives on behalf of others. At the cost of a few society members who die in battle as soldiers, the whole society becomes much more effective at conquering other societies or resisting attacks.



ARE WE MISSING THE MOST IMPORTANT NEWS OF ALL TIME?

John Rafferty

(Based on a 12/1/2010 article by Bob Smietana in *The Tennessean*, and a 12/9/2010 article by Shelia Poole at <http://www.ajc.com> – and on tracts handed to SHSNYer Ethel Romm in NYC and passed on to this writer.)

The world is going to end on May 21. This year. Less than four months from now. Really. The news is being proclaimed on billboards throughout the South and on over sixty radio stations of the Family Radio network up and down the East Coast and as far west as Kansas City. But not a word of this literally earth-shattering news is being reported in the mainstream media, and we hear not a single word of caution or advice from the Obama administration. Why?

"He Is Coming Again" the billboards announce, the message paid for by fans of Family Radio, who have discovered the truth of the timing of the long-awaited Second Coming through the calculations of Family Radio founder Harold Camping.

Don't laugh. It's true that previous predictions of the end of the world have not panned out – from the New Testament promise that Jesus would return during the lifetime of some of the original apostles to "The Great Disappointment" of 1843, when William Miller and his followers sold their possessions and waited in a field for Jesus, and on to the failure 23 years ago of former NASA engineer Edgar C. Whisenant's predictions in his million-best-selling book, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988* – but Harold Camping has really figured it out, and it's all proven by simple arithmetic. Really.

Just start with Luke 17: "As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be in the days of the Son of Man."

Then using the famous calculations of Irish Bishop Usher of Armagh, we know that the flood occurred on what would be May 21, 4990 B.C. of the modern calendar. And we know that God gave Noah his warning of the flood seven days before (Genesis 7:10-11).

Now, here's the clincher: 2 Peter 3:8 tells us that "one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." And seven thousand years after 4990 B.C. (allowing for no year 0 between B.C. and A.D.) is the year 2011. God warned Noah that he had seven days to build the ark, and at the same time warned *us* that we had seven thousand years before the rapture.

$4990 + 7,000 + 1 = 2011$ – it's simple arithmetic!

"The Rapture is going to be a great day for God's people but awful for everyone else," says 29-year-old Allison Warden, a volunteer with WeCanKnow.com, a website set up by followers of Family Radio, and she is absolutely sure that Camping's prediction is right.

"It's a certainty."

Stay tuned. Right here. 109 days to go.

IS ATHEISM A BELIEF?

Part 2: Let's Get Rid of "Belief" Itself

Greta Christina

(Reprinted from AlterNet, 10/20/2010)

Editor: In the first half of this essay, in January PIQUE (available soon at shshy.org), Ms. Christina made the cogent argument for atheism as a conclusion, not a belief. In conclusion, she deals with the question of defining belief itself.

Once again, I dearly wish I could just end [the argument] there. Fill out the rest of this piece with some tirades against the religious right, or tell you an inappropriate and irrelevant anecdote about my sex life. (Or show you some more pictures of my cats. They're very cute. I promise you.)

But I'm afraid I can't.

Because we have a somewhat knottier question here, a question that muddies this issue and makes conversations about it a giant, slippery mess.

We have the question of what the word "belief" even means.

The word "belief" has multiple meanings. It can mean a basic tenet – in other words, a doctrine or dogma – especially in a religious context. But it can also simply mean an opinion or conviction: something thought to be true or not true. It can mean "trust or confidence" – such as, "I believe in my marriage." And, of course, it can mean "deeply held core value, something that's considered to be fundamentally good" – such as, "I believe in democracy."

That's true for a lot of words, of course. Plenty of words have multiple meanings; some even have meanings that are almost the opposite of each other. But because this particular word is so central to religion and the debates about it, it comes with an inordinate amount of problematic baggage.

When they're debating atheists or defending their religion, religious people often blur the lines between some or all of these different meanings, slipping back and forth between them. In trying to defend the validity of their own beliefs – or to slur atheists with the appalling (if somewhat baffling) taint of having faith – religious people often conflate these different meanings of the word "belief."

They mix up the "opinion or conclusion" meaning with the "doctrine or dogma" meaning, to make any reasonably plausible conclusion seem like unsupported dogma, or to make unsupported dogma seem like any other reasonably plausible conclusion. They mix up the "core value" meaning with the "doctrine or dogma" meaning, to make any passionate conviction seem like stubborn close-mindedness, or to make inflexible adherence to dogma seem like a strong moral foundation. They mix up the "trust and confidence" meaning with the "doctrine or dogma" meaning, to make any act of

confidence without absolute certainty seem like irrational blindness ... or to make belief in that for which there's no good evidence seem like a loving act of loyalty, and to make atheism seem suspicious and cynical.

If atheists say, "I don't believe in God," religious people will reply, "See? Atheism is a belief!" (Overlooking the fact that "Not believing in X" isn't the same as "Believing in Not X.") If atheists say, "I believe in evolution" - meaning, "I think evolution is true" - religious people will jump all over it, saying, "See? Atheists believe in evolution, just like I believe in God!" (Overlooking the fact that evolution is a conclusion supported by a massively overwhelming body of hard physical evidence from every relevant branch of science, and that religion is supported primarily by logical errors, cognitive errors, misunderstandings of probability, an excessive tendency to trust authority figures and things we were taught as children, and the demonstrably flawed cognitive process known as intuition.) If atheists say, "I believe in something bigger than myself," religious people will reply, "See? See? You have beliefs! Therefore, your atheism is a belief!" (Overlooking the fact that atheists *having* beliefs is not the same as atheism *being* a belief. Sheesh.)

Even if it's patently clear from context which definition of "belief" we're using, it's way too common for religious followers to twist it around into the definition that best supports their ... well, their beliefs.

And because of this, I've come to the reluctant conclusion that, when atheists are discussing our own ideas and feelings and conclusions, we should stop using the word "belief." I'm trying to wean myself off it, and I'm encouraging other atheists to do the same.

If we want to say that we think something is true, I think we should use the word "conclusion." (Or "opinion," depending on how certain we are about what we think.) If we want to say that we think something is good, I think we should use the word "value." If we want to say that we have trust or confidence in something, I think we should use the word, well, "trust" or "confidence." I've come to the reluctant conclusion that the word "belief" is irrevocably tainted: there's no way to use it in discussions with believers without the great likelihood of being misunderstood. Deliberately or otherwise. So whenever

it seems likely that our use of the word "belief" will be misunderstood - and it seems that any use of the word "belief" is likely to be misunderstood - we should endeavor to make our language as clear and precise as possible.

It's impossible to prevent religious believers from twisting our ideas. It's impossible to prevent religious believers from putting words in our mouth, and pretending that we said things we clearly never said and don't think.

But we don't have to help them.

WE HAVE OUR FIRST 2011 DUMBTH NOMINEE

Almost before we began receiving votes for the 2010 SHSNY Dumbth Award (announcement of the winner will be made at the Darwin Day/ Anniversary Dinner - page 7), Fox News bloviator Bill O'Reilly made a strong opening bid for the 2011 prize.

On January 4, O'Reilly had David Silverman, president of the American Atheist Group, on the "O'Reilly Factor" to explain/defend (apologize for?) AA's billboards (see below) calling all religions scams.

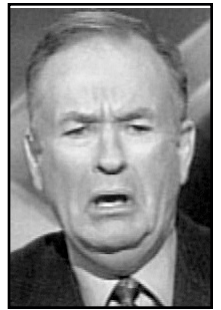
O'Reilly first claimed that Silverman was insulting religious people. Silverman countered that his message was simply the truth, so how could it be offensive? Then O'Reilly, as they say in television of overreachers, "jumped the shark."

O'Reilly: I'll tell you why [religion's] not a scam, in my opinion: tide goes in, tide goes out. Never a miscommunication. You can't explain that.

Silverman (with a WTF expression): Tide goes in, tide goes out?

O'Reilly: See, the water, the tide comes in and it goes out, Mr. Silverman. It always comes in, and always goes out. You can't explain that.

Comment: As O'Reilly nemesis Keith Olbermann of "Countdown" on MSNBC said the next night, "It's the moon, Bill, the moon! How could you not know? It was in all the papers!"



You **KNOW** they're all SCAMS

Southeast Regional Atheist Meet

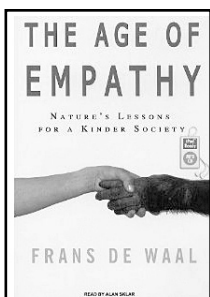
January 29-30

atheists.org/huntsville

 **American Atheists • Telling the Truth since 1963**

SHSNY CALENDAR: FEBRUARY - APRIL 2011

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURSDAY, FEB. 3, 6:30
at the Muhlenberg Library
THE AGE OF EMPATHY:
Nature's Lessons for a
Kinder Society
by Franz de Waal



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.

"A corrective to the idea that all animals—human and otherwise—are selfish and unfeeling to the core."

"Like other creatures who hang out in herds, we've evolved to be empathetic. We don't just hear a scream, it chills us to the bone; when we see a smile, we answer with one of our own. ... Offers advice to cut-throat so-called realists: Listen to your inner ape." — *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, March 10, 6:30 p.m.
at the Muhlenberg Library
AMERICAN GRACE:
How Religion Divides Us
and Unites Us
by Robert D. Putnam
& David E. Campbell

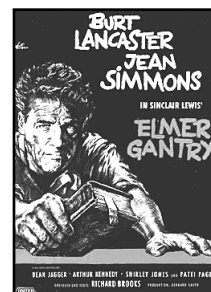
A sweeping chronicle of national change over time and a mammoth survey of American religion. The authors argue two seemingly contradictory themes: first, that a "new religious fault line" exists in America, a deep political polarization; and second, that the culture (especially its younger generation 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 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 MOVIE NIGHT
MONDAY, FEB 14, 7:00 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)
"ELMER GANTRY"

Based on Sinclair Lewis's scathing indictment of religious hypocrisy, this 1960 film won a Best Actor Oscar for Burt Lancaster. A gladd-handing charlatan, Elmer Gantry is a huckster who spins his talent for preaching into a métier behind the pulpit. Hopping aboard the barnstorming evangelical crusade of Sister Sharon Falconer (Jean Simmons), Gantry moralizes his way to fame and fortune til an erstwhile ladylove (Shirley Jones) threatens to expose his shady history as a skirt-chaser and scam artist to investigative reporter Arthur Kennedy. Much melodrama ensues.



SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.
 Check out Stone Creek's menu and prices online at stonecreekny.com
March 14: "Saved!"

SUNDAY, FEB 20, 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/

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!

SHSNY CALENDAR: FEBRUARY - APRIL 2011

GREAT LECTURES

TUESDAY, FEB 22, 7:00 pm

"THE ATHEISM TAPES: STEVEN WEINBERG"

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 in January. For February, we move on to physicist Steven Weinberg, and subsequently to philosopher Daniel Dennett, playwright Arthur Miller, theologian Denys Turner and, of course, Richard Dawkins, each discussing their personal intellectual journeys, offering illuminating analyses of nontheism from a wide range of perspectives.



Part 3: Daniel Dennett: 3/22.

Great Lectures Night is FREE.

FOR UPDATES ON ALL SHSNY EVENTS ...

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

Check 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 (It's Chinese New Year, too) 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

PRESENTATION OF THE SHSNY 2010 DUMBTH AWARD

Who'll 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.

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!

Cost for the evening, all-inclusive: \$50 per person. Cash bar.

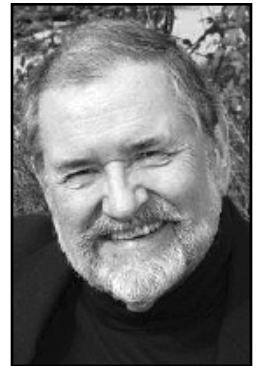
PRE-PAYMENT IS A MUST!

Pre-pay at www.shsny.org. Use your PayPal account or your credit card.

Or mail your check, made out to "SHSNY," to:

SHSNY, PO Box 7661, FDR Station, New York, NY 10150-7661.

Questions? Call 212-308-2165, and leave a call-back number.



THE ARROGANCE OF ATHEISTS

S.E. Cupp

(Excerpted from “The arrogance of the atheists: They batter believers in religion with smug certainty” in the Daily News, 12/29/2010)

Back in college, while I was busy pretending that a blottoed discussion of Nietzsche over \$1 beers made me an intellectual giant, my fiftysomething father, who’d worked so hard to send me there, was quietly being saved. Having long eschewed any ties to his Southern Baptist upbringing, he suddenly found himself born again and on a quest to know God better.

As a longtime atheist, I was a little surprised. But eventually I came to be relieved by this development. While my friends’ fathers were buying flashy sports cars and exchanging their wives for models, my own father was turning inward and asking: Is there more to life than this?

I was also proud of him for becoming a student again. As I watched him pore over C.S. Lewis, Lee Strobel and even neoatheist thinkers such as Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, I thought it amazing that he still wanted to learn something new.

It was a revelation I’d experience over and over again – meeting faithful believers and discovering that, no matter how long they’d been in the fold, many were still on a dogged quest for spiritual knowledge.

And it’s why I decided to go back to school as well and study religion in a more meaningful way. It wasn’t necessarily an acknowledgment of a higher power, but a realization that I knew little about the beliefs I had railed so arrogantly against.

Which brings me to the problem with modern atheism, embodied by the likes of Harris and Hitchens, authors of *The End of Faith* and *God Is Not Great*, respectively. So often it seems like a conversation ender, not a starter. And the loudest voices of today’s militant atheism, for all their talk of rational thought, don’t seem to want to do too much thinking at all. As James Wood wrote in *The New Yorker*, “The new atheists do not speak to the millions of people whose form of religion is far from the embodied certainties of contemporary literalism. Indeed, it is a settled assumption of this kind of atheism that there are no intelligent religious believers.”

What spiritual quest are they on, except to put an abrupt end to those like my father’s? For them, the science is settled, the data are conclusive and the book (no, not the Good Book) has been written. Time for everyone else to pack up and move on to other business, like, presumably, accumulating wealth and fulminating at the sight of the nearest Christmas tree.

The militant atheist wants nothing more than to spoil the believer’s spiritual journey. That’s both mean-spirited and radically unenlightened.

Though more than 95 percent of the world finds some meaning in faith, God-hating comic Bill Maher shrugs this off as a “neurological disorder.” His version of a quest for knowledge was a series of scathing jokes at the faithfuls’ expense in the documentary “Religulous.”

The latest incarnation of the thought-eschewing secularist is American Atheists spokesman Dave Silverman, who sums up the argument this way on atheistnexus.org: “Religion is my bitch.” He has also tweeted, “Yes it is a myth. Deal with it. All delusions are myths.”

It’s these snarky and condescending rejections, not of faith itself but of those who profess it, that reflect a total unwillingness to learn something new about human nature, the world around us and even of science itself. While the neoatheists pay only cursory attention to dismantling arguments for God, they spend most of their time painting his followers as uncultured rubes. The fact that religion has inexplicably persisted, even despite Copernicus, Darwin and the Enlightenment, doesn’t seem to have much sociological meaning for them.

The truth is, folks like Maher and Silverman don’t want to know about actual belief – in fact, they are much more certain about the nature of the world than most actual believers, who understand that a measure of doubt is necessary for faith. They want to focus on the downfall of a gay pastor or the Nativity scene at a mall.

I wonder what they’d say to someone like Immaculee Ilibagiza, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide who says that her faith in Jesus Christ got her through 91 days of hiding in a 3x4-foot bathroom while her family was murdered outside. Would they tell her she was crazy? Delusional? To just deal with it? I would hope not – but I am not sure.

When the esteemed theologian David Martyn Lloyd-Jones asked C.S. Lewis when he would write another book, Lewis responded, “When I understand the meaning of prayer.” It was an acknowledgment that he—a thinker with a much sharper mind than, say, Maher’s—didn’t know everything. I implore my fellow atheists to take this humility to heart. There’s still a lot to learn, but only if you’re not too busy being a know-it-all.

ONE ATHEIST RESPONDS

Dennis Middlebrooks

(A letter the Daily News did not print.)

Instead of accusing fellow atheists of arrogance toward religious people, perhaps S.E. Cupp should focus her wrath on religious fundamentalists who are undermining science education, opposing stem cell research and gay rights, and declaring that all non-believers and those of different faiths are sinners who will spend eternity tortured in hellfire.

That’s what I call real arrogance!

AND SO DOES ANOTHER

John Rafferty

So to Ms. Cupp, our rejection of faith “reflects a total unwillingness to learn something new about human nature, the world around us and even of science itself.” And we “are much more certain about the nature of the world than most actual believers, who understand that a measure of doubt is necessary for faith.”

Really? What, exactly, is the “something new” that religion teaches us? One single example, please, of something new that faith has *taught us* in the thousands of years since the priests began, in all the world’s languages, *telling us* what we can and cannot do.

And speaking of language, there’s nothing like standing it on its head in order to make a bogus point. The faithful, Ms. Cupp tells us, are the reasonable doubters, and we faithless are the arrogantly certain.

In the real world, we (most of us) don’t believe because there is no evidence for belief, and we rely for our provisional certainties on the scientific method, a system of never-ending questioning. Yet somehow, to Ms. Cupp, that is not doubt, but arrogant certainty. While faith, which my childhood catechism taught me erases doubt, is now somehow dependent on doubt.

Orwell would bust a gut laughing.

What bothers Ms. Cupp and so many other critics of the “new atheists” is that we have stopped apologizing for our “belief” in reason and science, and that we are no longer willing to give idiotic faith a pass. No, we *won’t* respect your belief that the sun stood still in the sky over Jericho, that a crucified carpenter-preacher rose from the dead after three days, or that an illiterate prophet ascended to heaven on a winged horse. No more.

David Silverman says “religion is a myth.” And your point, Ms. Cupp, is what? That it’s *not* a myth?

One last point. No, Ms. Cupp, even though you snidely are “not sure,” let me assure you that I would not—and neither would any atheist or humanist I know—tell Immaculee Ilibagiza after her ordeal that she was crazy or that her faith in Jesus was delusional. “The consolation of imaginary things,” British philosopher Roger Scruton has said, “is not imaginary consolation.”

But here are facts, Ms. Cupp, just between us: Jesus *is* an illusion; faith in Jesus *is* a delusion; and Ms. Ilibagiza’s family, all of whom we can assume had just as much faith in Jesus as she had, are dead.

WHY I AM AN ATHEIST

Ricky Gervais

(Excerpted from blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy 2010/12/19, the Wall Street Journal blog.)

Why don’t you believe in God? I get that question all the time. I always try to give a sensitive, reasoned answer. This is usually awkward,

time consuming and pointless. People who believe in God don’t need proof of his existence, and they certainly don’t want evidence to the contrary. They are happy with their belief. They even say things like “it’s true to me” and “it’s faith.” I still give my logical answer because I feel that not being honest would be patronizing and impolite. It is ironic therefore that “I don’t believe in God because there is absolutely no scientific evidence for his existence and from what I’ve heard the very definition is a logical impossibility in this known universe,” comes across as both patronizing and impolite.

Arrogance is another accusation. Which seems particularly unfair. Science seeks the truth. And it does not discriminate. For better or worse it finds things out. Science is humble. It knows what it knows and it knows what it doesn’t know. It bases its conclusions and beliefs on hard evidence – evidence that is constantly updated and upgraded. It doesn’t get offended when new facts come along. It embraces the body of knowledge. It doesn’t hold on to medieval practices because they are tradition. If it did, you wouldn’t get a shot of penicillin, you’d pop a leech down your trousers and pray. Whatever you “believe,” this is not as effective as medicine. Again you can say, “It works for me,” but so do placebos. My point being, I’m saying God doesn’t exist. I’m not saying faith doesn’t exist. I know faith exists. I see it all the time. But believing in something doesn’t make it true. Hoping that something is true doesn’t make it true. The existence of God is not subjective. He either exists or he doesn’t. It’s not a matter of opinion. You can have your own opinions. But you can’t have your own facts.

Why don’t I believe in God? No, no no, why do YOU believe in God? Surely the burden of proof is on the believer. You started all this. If I came up to you and said, “Why don’t you believe I can fly?” You’d say, “Why would I?” I’d reply, “Because it’s a matter of faith.” If I then said, “Prove I can’t fly. Prove I can’t fly see, see, you can’t prove it can you?” You’d probably either walk away, call security or throw me out of the window and shout, “F—ing fly then, you lunatic.”

This, is of course a spirituality issue, religion is a different matter. As an atheist, I see nothing “wrong” in believing in a god. I don’t think there is a god, but belief in him does no harm. If it helps you in any way, then that’s fine with me. It’s when belief starts infringing on other people’s rights when it worries me. I would never deny your right to believe in a god. I would just rather you didn’t kill people who believe in a different god, say. Or stone someone to death because your rulebook says their sexuality is immoral. It’s strange that anyone who believes that an all-powerful all-knowing, omniscient power responsible for everything that happens, would also want to judge and punish people for what they are. From what I can gather, pretty much the worst type of

person you can be is an atheist. The first four commandments hammer this point. There is a god, I'm him, no one else is, you're not as good and don't forget it. (Don't murder anyone, doesn't get a mention till number 6.)

When confronted with anyone who holds my lack of religious faith in such contempt, I say, "It's the way God made me."

But what are atheists really being accused of?

The dictionary definition of God is "a supernatural creator and overseer of the universe." Included in this definition are all deities, goddesses and supernatural beings. Since the beginning of recorded history, which is defined by the invention of writing by the Sumerians around 6,000 years ago, historians have cataloged over 3700 supernatural beings, of which 2870 can be considered deities.

So next time someone tells me they believe in God, I'll say "Oh which one? Zeus? Hades? Jupiter? Mars? Odin? Thor? Krishna? Vishnu? Ra?..." If they say "Just God. I only believe in the one God," I'll point out that they are nearly as atheistic as me. I don't believe in 2,870 gods, and they don't believe in 2,869.

I used to believe in God. The Christian one, that is.

I loved Jesus. He was my hero. More than pop stars. More than footballers. More than God. God was by definition omnipotent and perfect. Jesus was a man. He had to work at it. He had temptation but defeated sin. He had integrity and courage. But He was my hero because He was kind. And He was kind to everyone. He didn't bow to peer pressure or tyranny or cruelty. He didn't care who you were. He loved you. What a guy. I wanted to be just like Him.

One day when I was about 8 years old, I was drawing the crucifixion as part of my Bible studies homework. I loved art too. And nature. I loved how God made all the animals. They were also perfect. Unconditionally beautiful. It was an amazing world.

I lived in a very poor, working-class estate in an urban sprawl called Reading, about 40 miles west of London. My father was a laborer and my mother was a housewife. I was never ashamed of poverty. It was almost noble. Also, everyone I knew was in the same situation, and I had everything I needed. School was free. My clothes were cheap and always clean and ironed. And mum was always cooking. She was cooking the day I was drawing the cross.

I was sitting at the kitchen table when my brother came home. He was 11 years older than me, so he would have been 19. He was as smart as anyone I knew, but he was too cheeky. He would answer back and get into trouble. I was a good boy. I went to church and believed in God - what a relief for a working-class mother. You see, growing up where I did, mums didn't hope as high as their kids growing up to be doctors; they just hoped

their kids didn't go to jail. So bring them up believing in God and they'll be good and law abiding. It's a perfect system. Well, nearly. 75 percent of Americans are God-fearing Christians; 75 percent of prisoners are God-fearing Christians. 10 percent of Americans are atheists; 0.2 percent of prisoners are atheists.

But anyway, there I was happily drawing my hero when my big brother Bob asked, "Why do you believe in God?" Just a simple question. But my mum panicked. "Bob," she said in a tone that I knew meant, "Shut up." Why was that a bad thing to ask? If there was a God and my faith was strong it didn't matter what people said.

Oh ... hang on. There is no God. He knows it, and she knows it deep down. It was as simple as that. I started thinking about it and asking more questions, and within an hour, I was an atheist.

Wow. No God. If mum had lied to me about God, had she also lied to me about Santa? Yes, of course, but who cares? The gifts kept coming. And so did the gifts of my new found atheism. The gifts of truth, science, nature. The real beauty of this world. I learned of evolution—a theory so simple that only England's greatest genius could have come up with it. Evolution of plants, animals and us - with imagination, free will, love, humor. I no longer needed a reason for my existence, just a reason to live. And imagination, free will, love, humor, fun, music, sports, beer and pizza are all good enough reasons for living.

But living an honest life - for that you need the truth. That's the other thing I learned that day, that the truth, however shocking or uncomfortable, in the end leads to liberation and dignity.

So what does the question "Why don't you believe in God?" really mean? I think when someone asks that they are really questioning their own belief. In a way they are asking, "What makes you so special? How come you aren't brainwashed with the rest of us? How dare you say I'm a fool and not going to heaven, f— you!"

Let's be honest, if only one person believed in God he would be considered pretty strange. But because it's a very popular view it's accepted. And why is it such a popular view? That's obvious. It's an attractive proposition. Believe in me and live forever. Again, if it was just a case of spirituality this would be fine.

"Do unto others ..." is a good rule of thumb. I live by that. Forgiveness is probably the greatest virtue there is. But that's exactly what it is - a virtue. Not just a Christian virtue. No one owns being good. I'm good. I just don't believe I'll be rewarded for it in heaven. My reward is here and now. It's knowing that I try to do the right thing. That I lived a good life. And that's where spirituality really lost its way. When it became a stick to beat people with. "Do this or you'll burn in hell."

You won't burn in hell. But be nice anyway.

WHY ARE WE HERE? IS THE ANSWER SOLIPSISM?

Chic Schissel

Robert Lanza's article "Why Are You Here?" (PIQUE, January, 2011) has got my head spinning. To the question of why we are here, he offers something he calls "Biocentrism" as the answer, seemingly a construct more of philosophy than of science. Evolution, he seems to say, is inadequate because it says we "are a mindless accident, debris left over from an explosion that appeared out of nowhere one day."

As far as I understand what Lanza means, Biocentrism is consciousness, the product of observation. Space, time, everything is the product (or the invention) of our observation. Biocentrism works as an explanation because quantum physics, according to Stephen Hawking, declares that the past and the future are indefinite and are only a spectrum of possibilities.

(Oy! No wonder I can't remember what happened last Thursday.)

Lanza's argument seems to be influenced by the infinitesimally tiny probability that we would actually be here. He cites the many unlikely events that had to come together in evolution to produce us. But quintillions of life-forming events failed, their evolved genetic makeup unequal to the environmental challenge. We are here because of the progressive chain of success (luck?) of certain particular events, rare as they were. Given the number of trials, this was almost inevitable.

I am hitting a drive on a golf course. The fairway has a million blades of grass, and my ball lands on one of these. This is a million-to-one shot, but it happened; the ball had to land somewhere. Every time a 13-card bridge hand is dealt, the odds against that hand occurring is 700 billion to 1, but, however unlikely, it happens dozens of times every time we play. Unlikely events happen all the time, and needn't generate surprise.

Does Biocentrism explain why we are here? If space and time, present and past, recorded history, are merely the residue of our observation, we can't even for sure assert that we are here.

Or if we can, it might be called solipsism.

HITCHENS REMAINS HITCHENS, RIGHT TO THE (ALMOST) END

Regarding the constant questioning—especially by Rasmus and/or ghoulish Christians—about whether he is still an atheist in the face of his terminal illness, Christopher Hitchens told *The Times* (London):

"Suppose there were groups of secularists at hospitals who went round the terminally ill and urged them to adopt atheism: 'Don't be a mug all your life. Make your last days the best ones.'

People might suppose this was in poor taste."

HOW CAN YOU BE QUALIFIED TO KILL PEOPLE IF YOU'RE NOT "SPIRITUAL"?

Jason Leopold

(Based on and excerpted from "Army's 'Spiritual Fitness' Test Comes Under Fire," on truth-out.org, 1/5/2011)

The idea makes a lot of sense: a "holistic fitness program" aimed at reducing the epidemic of soldier suicides and post-traumatic stress disorder cases. But along with measuring soldiers' "resilience" in four other "core areas," i.e.: emotional, physical, family, and social, the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness test also measures "spiritual fitness." Soldiers fill out an online survey of 100+ questions, and are required to participate in remedial courses to strengthen their resilience in the disciplines in which they received low scores.

But when a "foxhole atheist" like Sgt. Justin Griffith, who is based at Fort Bragg, NC, checked the "not like me at all" box in response to the statement, "I am a spiritual person, my life has lasting meaning, I believe that in some way my life is closely connected to all humanity and all the world," he was found to be spiritually unfit.

His test results advised him that *"You may lack a sense of meaning and purpose in your life. At times, it is hard for you to make sense of what is happening to you and others around you. You may not feel connected to something larger than yourself. You may question your beliefs, principles and values. ... Improving your spiritual fitness should be an important goal."*

The spiritual component of the test contains questions written predominantly for soldiers who believe in God or another deity, meaning nonbelievers are guaranteed to score poorly and will be forced to participate in exercises that use religious imagery to "train" soldiers up to a satisfactory level of spirituality.

Enter the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, demanding that the Army cut the "spiritual" portion of the test immediately. President Mikey Weinstein said MRFF represents more than 200 soldiers "vehemently objecting to this clearly transparent 'religious test,' the majority of them practicing Christians themselves."

Soldiers are not advised that the "spirituality training" is, technically, voluntary, but as five-year veteran Griffith (and any veteran) knows, soldiers who do not act on recommendations, however "voluntary," can expect major grief from their superiors.

The Army, of course, disagrees, maintaining that the "spiritual dimension questions ... pertain to the domain of the human spirit: they are not 'religious' in nature. The CFS Program defines spiritual fitness as a strengthening a set of beliefs, principles, or values that sustain a person beyond family, institutional and societal sources of support."

Comment: And, of course, a commitment to rationality and, say, humanism, could never sustain anyone, could it? – JR

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #78

(Based on *HuffingtonPost.com*, January 5)

Glenn Beck has been dropped by New York radio station WOR due to poor ratings, and as of this writing was due to go off the air on January 17.

Although Beck's radio show is the third-biggest in the country – and WOR is one of New York's two biggest talk radio stations – program director Scott Wakefield told the *Daily News*, "Somewhat to our surprise, the show wasn't getting what we wanted."

Comment: Perhaps getting anti-rationalist, history-fudging conspiracy-theorist Beck wasn't what New York wanted. – JR

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #79

The Kentucky Tourism Development Finance Authority has granted preliminary approval for a creationist theme park that will get up to \$37 million in tax incentives.

The theme park, Ark Encounter, will "include dinosaurs" and "a 500-foot-long wooden replica of Noah's Ark containing live animals such as juvenile giraffes." It will also include "a replica of the Tower of Babel."

Ark Encounter is backed by both Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear, and Answers in Genesis, the fundamentalist organization that also built the Creation Museum.

So, what could be wrong with a project that Beshear says will create 900 jobs and bring 1.6 million tourists to Kentucky in its first year – according to a feasibility

study commissioned by Ark Encounters LLC?

Well, how about the fact that, according to the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, no state official, including Beshear, has ever actually seen the study.

Comment: Trust us, we're Christians. – JR

MEET CARL MARXER, SHSNY'S NEWEST BOARD MEMBER

At the January 5 meeting, the SHSNY Board voted to invite relatively-new but certainly active member Carl Marxer to join the Board. Invited, he accepted immediately, and was elected unanimously.



Carl is an award-winning motion graphics designer, editor and documentary producer with his own company, Video Production Services. He is also an adjunct Professor of Broadcast Design and Motion Graphics at the Savannah College of Art and Design in Atlanta, Georgia, and has only recently moved to the NYC area (Jersey City counts!). Upon arrival here he re-connected with his cousin, SHSNY Treasurer Donna Marxer, got interested in our organization ("I guess I've always been a humanist, but now I have a better understanding of what it's all about"), and volunteered to pitch in.

Welcome aboard, Carl – and we hope your example will fire up a few more volunteers.

Want to join the Board?
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**Meet the newest
Board member**
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**It's not too late:
Join the celebration!
Our Annual Darwin Day
& SHSNY Anniversary 12
Banquet, February 12**
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