

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

December, 2009

Bah, humbug! Okay, now that that's out of our editorial system, let's start with perspectives on Christmas in Victorian England, 17th century Spain, and right-now right-here. Inconsistent with the "holy days," we evaluate three versions of atheism, the Pope woos Church of England dissidents, the French bust Scientology, and Hollywood disremembers abortion, while we seek Dumbth nominees, fix the blame for the coming 2012 disaster, and consider selling bibles for a living. – JR

A NEW YORK KIND OF HOLIDAY Garrison Keillor

(Excerpted from *salon.com*, 12/10/2008)

The Christmas tree in Rice Park in St. Paul, Minn., is taller than the tree at Rockefeller Center in New York, 90 feet compared to 72, but New York's is the Tree de la Tree, the Tree Iconic, the one that you'll see on national TV, just as the Tonys get the attention even though there's better theater out in the hinterlands than most of the gilded schlock on Broadway. And it's *The New York Times* whose imprimatur you want on your book, movie, CD, TV show, dill pickles, your child's science project, the sweater you knit for your sister, and so forth. It is the National Good Taste Stamp of Quality, issued by wizened gnomes on Eighth Avenue.

We who live out in the frozen cornfields of the Midwest understand this very well and we don't mind. ... We admire New Yorkers for many things, for their excellent transit system that gives you close encounters with interesting individuals, their handy street-corner hot dogs, and also their ability to express personal preference, which we lost a long time ago. It was frowned out of us when we were children. It seems so simple – say what you want, say what you think – but we gave up the ability in order to be unselfish and sociable. And having suppressed our likes and dislikes for so long, we are not sure what we want, or even who we are.

What I want is to be in New York in December, so here I am. The people I know in this city are wholehearted people who tell you what they prefer, the noodles in garlic sauce or General Tso's Seven Joys of Meat Loaf. If you step on their toes, they don't smile and step back and

then brood about it for six months, they say something terse and meaningful and let that be the end of it.

If they feel like crying, they do that. It's OK to cry in New York. You can sit on the subway, tears running down your cheeks, and no one will think less of you. Try this sometime. People may offer you some of their medication, or tell you about something going on in their life that's even worse. You could suddenly find yourself with three or four new best friends.

Our jolly old Santa Claus was a New York invention. The Dutch brought over a gaunt, stern-faced Santa who looked over your activities with a hairy eye and maybe gave you a box of chocolates or maybe a kick in the pants. The Santa of *A Visit From St. Nicholas* is a New York version, fat and his belly jiggles when he laughs. He opens up his big bag and pours out the goods.

We the people of the tundra feel that if we asked for something – say, a peppermint stick – that would mean we'd never taste peppermint again. "A peppermint stick! Who do you think you are?" Santa would yell. "Greedy little wretch. Go back to your stool in the corner and finish your gruel."

Christmas is a New York type of holiday. It's pure Christian entrepreneurship. Pure muscle. The early church fathers intended to give the faithful a big feast day very close to the pagan feast day of Saturnalia, sort of like one chain putting up a store next to a competitor. It worked. Paganism went belly up, and it was all Christmas, Christmas, Christmas, 24/7 coast to coast. Dickens shilled for it, Irving Berlin, and it's all about pleasure, food, bright lights, high spirits, glittering trinkets, razzmatazz. It is pure Broadway.

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THE MAN WHO INVENTED CHRISTMAS

Kathryn Harrison

(Excerpted from a review of *The Man Who Invented Christmas: How Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol" Rescued His Career and Revived Our Holiday Spirits*, by Les Standiford, in *The New York Times*, 12/7/2008)

The public's extraordinary and lasting embrace of *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens's short novel, is but one evidence of the 19th century's changing attitude toward Christmas. In 1819, Washington Irving's immensely popular *Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* had "glorified" the "social rites" of the season. Clement Moore's 1823 poem *The Night Before Christmas* introduced a fat and jolly St. Nick whose obvious attractions eclipsed what had been a "foreboding figure of judgment" as likely to distribute canings as gifts. Queen Victoria and her Bavarian husband, Albert, "great boosters of the season," had installed a Christmas tree in Windsor Castle each year since 1840, encouraging a fad that spread overseas to America by 1848. ...

Christmas, more than any other holiday, offered a means for the adult Dickens to redeem the despair and terrors of his childhood. In 1824, after a series of financial embarrassments drove his family to exchange what he remembered as a pleasant country existence for a "mean, small tenement" in London, the 12-year-old Dickens, his schooling interrupted – ended, for all he knew – was sent to work 10-hour days at a shoe blacking factory in a quixotic attempt to remedy his family's insolvency. ... And because Dickens's tribulations were not particular to him but emblematic of the Industrial Revolution – armies of neglected, unschooled children forced into labor – the concerns that inform his fiction were shared by millions of potential readers.

A Dickens novel (*Oliver Twist*, *Little Dorrit*, *Bleak House*) announces more than cloaks its agenda to reveal social injustice, especially the plight of those two "abject, frightful, hideous, miserable" children peering out from under the robe worn by the Ghost of Christmas Present. "This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want," the Ghost tells the quaking Scrooge. "No perversion of humanity . . . has monsters half so horrible and dread." Dickens intended to make the sufferings of the most vulnerable of the underclass so pungently real to his readers that they could not continue to ignore their need, not so much for charity as for the means to save themselves: education. At least this was his conscious purpose – his rationalization. The deeper truth is that even genius of the magnitude of Dickens's can't free an artist from his demons; it can only offer him an arena for engaging them.

The months leading up to the publication of *A Christmas Carol* in December 1843 were not happy ones for Dickens. The most popular writer in England – in the world – was falling further into debt as he struggled to

support a large family that included his spendthrift father. ... Having accepted an invitation to speak, on October 5, at a fund-raiser for the Manchester Athenaeum, Dickens was obliged to return to the city that had, in 1838, "disgusted and astonished" him. Considered "the world's first modern industrial city," Manchester presented the kind of success that pricked even the most phlegmatic social consciousness, a portrait of such squalor among factory workers that the two years Friedrich Engels spent observing its citizens may well have altered history.

Dickens, galvanized by the response of his Athenaeum audience – "rapt" – and by a renewed vision of the cost of disdaining the plight of children, returned to London having conceived what would be the first project he completed as a whole rather than in serial parts. For six weeks he worked feverishly, delivering a manuscript to the printer in late November, for publication a few days before Christmas. Standiford, the author of four other nonfiction books, tidily explains the appeal of *A Christmas Carol*, its readership "said at the turn of the 20th century to be second only to the Bible's."

Replacing the slippery Holy Ghost with anthropomorphized spirits, the infant Christ with a crippled child whose salvation waits on man's – not God's – generosity, Dickens laid claim to a religious festival, handing it over to the gathering forces of secular humanism. If a single night's crash course in man's power to redress his mistakes and redeem his future without appealing to an invisible and silent deity could rehabilitate even so apparently lost a cause as Ebenezer Scrooge, imagine what it might do for the rest of us!

THE POOP ON CHRISTMAS

(Excerpted from *ThisIsTrue.com Best of 2008*)

In a tradition going back to the 17th century, nativity scenes in Spain's Catalonia region typically don't just include a manger, but rather the entire town of Bethlehem. That is, in part, to make it harder for the people who delight in finding the *caganer* – or "pooper." The figurine depicts a man or woman, often someone well-known, in the act of defecating. Terra I Mar, which makes the figurines, offers 150 styles of *caganers* and sells 20,000-25,000 of them each year. In 2008, two of the most popular figures were (now-Ex) President George W. Bush and Pope Benedict XVI.

CHRISTMAS: 1924

Thomas Hardy

"Peace upon earth!" was said. We sing it,
And pay a million priests to bring it.
After two thousand years of mass
We've got as far as poison gas.

Forwarded by Robert Ondricek

ATHEISM: A CLASS DISTINCTION?

Carlo Strenger

(Excerpted from "Atheism: class is a distraction" on guardian.co.uk, 10/9/08, forwarded by Bob Murtha)

For some reasons it seems to be anathema to say that there might be an intrinsic reason for the correlation between educational level and the rejection of religion: atheism takes training, and is more difficult. We accept that in medicine, physics and mathematics, but, for reasons of political correctness, it is very much considered a faux pas to say the old 19th-century thing: it takes education to develop a worldview based on science. It would be even more outrageous to say that the reasons for choosing atheism over religion might actually be valid, as the so-called new atheists have dared to claim. It seems that it has become something of a class-thing (not necessarily socio-economic, but of belonging to the politically-correct elite) to bash Dawkins, Dennett and Hitchens.

Let's look at some facts and arguments, then. According to a Pew survey, 85 percent of humanity is religious in some way, and that's probably a low estimate, since nobody knows the true figures about China. This doesn't mean that religion is true (it can't, because religions contradict each other), but that there are strong cognitive and motivational factors that give religions an evolutionary advantage in the market of ideas. A scientific worldview is cognitively and emotionally more difficult, and hence at a disadvantage.

Cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner has shown that there is an essential difference between the unschooled mind which picks up certain things without formal training and the mature, schooled mind. The unschooled mind acquires sensorimotor and interpersonal skills, language – and stories. The human mind is naturally inclined to think in anthropomorphic terms. A child is more prone to explain the behavior of dots on a computer screen through intentions and beliefs than through the workings of a computer program.

Religions primarily function through stories that are easily remembered, because they're counterintuitive. We more easily remember stories about people going to heaven, resurrecting the dead and splitting the waters of the sea, because these events (called "miracles" in religious parlance) run against what we know about the world. Hence religions are easily taught from age 3 onwards, and, as Richard Dawkins has pointed out angrily, it is very difficult for humans to let go of stories that have been inculcated by the authority figures we depend on as children.

Complex theories like classical physics (let alone relativity and quantum physics) and evolutionary theory can only be taught once the mind achieves the ability to abstract thought (what Piaget called "formal

operations"), i.e.: in adolescence. Understanding these theories requires training, and they are always at a disadvantage vis-a-vis anthropomorphic stories used by most religions.

The disadvantage of the scientific worldview becomes stronger when we include motivational factors. Modern experimental existential psychology has shown to what extent we humans are incapable of accepting our mortality and the sheer contingency of our existence. We try everything to hang on to worldviews that protect us from the terrifying knowledge that we might as well not have existed, that each of us will cease to exist as an individual with death, and that our species is but a passing episode on a tiny planet in a minor solar system in one of hundreds of billions of galaxies.

This puts religions at an enormous evolutionary advantage, because their worldviews almost invariably give humans a special place in the universe. Our existence is wanted by the creator, and we are here for a reason. The greatest advantage of religions is that almost all major religions promise some form of immortality. Given our terror of death, this puts religions at a huge advantage over the scientific worldview.

None of what I have said here is new except for recent data. It has become quite fashionable to bash Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens et al and to call them "new atheists" as if they say something new. It is even more fashionable to think that atheism betrays a lack of cultural sensitivity or sophistication, exemplified by Terry Eagleton's moniker "Ditchkins," used to make fun of Dawkins and Hitchens. But basically they restate the very cogent analyses of thinkers like David Hume, Marx, John Stuart Mill, Nietzsche and Freud that explain why humans hang on to the strangest beliefs despite evidence to the contrary.

The critics of the new atheists like Terry Eagleton and Karen Armstrong keep arguing that the true function of religion is not to state facts about the world, but to structure our lives through rituals and to open our eyes to the transcendent dimension. I beg to differ: while a small minority look for spiritual experience and ritual without buying into the factual assertions of religion, in the end most religious people just have certain beliefs about the world that are comforting, and that's why they stick to their faiths.

So why, at the onset of the 21st century, is it so difficult to say in this ongoing discussion that religion is psychologically comforting and that this is the reason it has such a strong hold on the human mind? I think it is primarily because of the cultural imperative of political correctness not to offend the religious, and the mistaken belief that such pseudo-respect will prevent strife – even though appeasement has often been counterproductive, as in the case of the fatwa against Rushdie, the relentless

fight of the Bible-belt against liberals and evolution in the US, and the ruthlessness of messianic right-wingers in Israel in colonizing the West Bank.

While some critics of the “new atheists” have made valid arguments, primarily that their optimistic humanism is far from realistic, they are missing out on a simple point: adhering to a scientific worldview requires discipline; it requires giving up on the certainties of childhood and the belief in ultimate protection. I don’t know whether doing so turns us into better human beings, but it certainly makes us intellectually more responsible.

THE SECULARIST CASE AGAINST “ATHEISM 3.0”

Austin Dacey

(From his “On Faith” column in The Washington Post)

A new, milder “Atheism 3.0” is on the market, teaching a more forgiving attitude towards faith. Bruce Sheiman, author of *An Atheist Defends Religion*, maintains that humanity is better off with it than without it. Although a recent Religion News Service classifies me and my book *The Secular Conscience* among the 3.0s, I have to say that I’m not all that happy with the taxonomy.

I’ll not mention that this “truth-must-lie-somewhere-in-between” narrative trips all too easily off of journalistic fingers. Should we agree that God is half dead? Nor will I dwell on the implicit assumption that Atheisms 1.0 and 2.0 have passed into planned obsolescence and that 3.0 constitutes some kind of scheduled improvement on them both. I’ll be damned if I can imagine an upgrade to Hume or Baron d’Holbach, and Hitchens is no slouch either.

For me, the interesting thought is not so much that God does not exist, it is that he need not exist. The pertinent question is not whether we are better off with or without religion, but whether religion matters quite as much as either answer would have us suppose. To take this stance is neither to correct atheism nor to reject religion. It is to change the subject to secularism.

To hang this on something concrete: In what section of the bookstore do atheism books belong? You may have noticed the appearance of a new section called Atheism at many booksellers in recent years. Curiously, at least in the case of the Borders Books in Manhattan where I went to get Hitchens’ *The Portable Atheist*, this section comprised a few shelves of books located in the Religion aisle. But, as the saying goes, isn’t atheism a religion like not collecting stamps is a hobby?

The case for putting atheism in the religion aisle is, I suppose, that it represents a subset of views on religion; namely, the subset of views that say no to it. Undeniably, atheism is what logicians call a negation: it is not the case that God exists. But logical form alone is not enough to tell us whether a claim is merely critical or negative in

any pejorative sense. Consider: It is not the case that you have anything to fear. Atheist assertions take place within the context of cultural conversations. Whether a contribution to a conversation is merely negative depends on what the conversation is about. ...

We should ask, what is the proper context of the current conversation about atheism and religion? What is the larger cultural project within which it should be seen? As Charles Taylor has observed, ours is a secular age, an age in which belief is no longer axiomatic but optional. We educated peoples of the rich, industrialized democracies inhabit a disenchanted universe, a world unperturbed by occult powers. It doesn’t get to cheat and bring things about by magic, but must resort to some natural, causal mechanism. The remaining anti-secular, anti-naturalistic messages of some contemporary Christians, whether from Saddleback or Vatican City, are not the dictates of a triumphant force but the cries of an animal grown more desperate because it is cornered. After five centuries of surrendering to non-religious institutions the dominion over cosmology, biology, medicine, education, entertainment, the arts, and civil society, they are desperate to retain some sliver of continued relevance.

Relative to this secular conversation, it is the supernatural theists who occupy the subset of naysayers – evolution can’t account for living things, physics doesn’t explain why the universe exists at all, human kindness and fairness will collapse without transcendent reinforcement, and all the rest. Here it is the believers who are the skeptics, doubters about the foundations of modernity, and it is the atheists who are attempting to rebut their criticisms and shore up the construction project. The “Atheism 3.0” label may be motivated by a desire for fresh intellectual options, but it confines secular critiques to a conversational agenda set by religion (with a peculiarly Western conception of religion at that).

In my book I don’t go after God. Why go after God when you can come before him? I argue that the free individual conscience comes first, before God, before society. Conscience cannot be found in duty to God, for it is conscience that must judge where one’s duty lies. The commitment to the free conscience, and to the open society that makes space for it – this is secularism.

Secularism is neither atheist nor theist, neither religious nor anti-religious. It’s orthogonal to God. Rather than dividing up the world’s citizens on the basis of putative religious affiliation, it asks, What do they really care about? How do they actually go about making up their minds about how to live? And wherever education and affluence are on the rise, it finds that traditional religions are increasingly irrelevant to the answers. These are big stories. And, if I may say so, we would do well to be talking about them.

If the secularists were the ones running the book-

store, you might find the religious titles in the philosophy or science aisles, instead of the other way around.

I'M A CONFIRMED INDIFFERENT

Terry Sanderson

President, National Secular Society (UK)

(Reprinted from Newsline, the newsletter of the National Secular Society (UK), at www.secularism.org.uk, 11/6/09)

Just as the confrontation between atheism and religion escalates, I have decided that I don't want to be part of it. I have come to the conclusion that I am not an atheist or a believer, but an Indifferentist. (Not the Catholic kind of indifferentism, which makes it just another way of opposing religion, but proper indifferentism that means not giving a monkey's).

My Indifferentism means that I couldn't care less whether there is a God or not. I really couldn't give a damn (my dear), whether Jesus was a historical figure or a figment of someone's fevered imagination. I am uninterested in Islam; unconcerned about Hinduism; apathetic about Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Mormonism and all the other belief stuff with which people burden themselves. I care not a fig about the Pope's opinions on heaven and earth, although my newspaper never tires of telling me what they are. The ayatollahs are, as far as I'm concerned, just blokes spouting.

What if Jesus did walk on water – I couldn't give a tinker's. What if the Angel Moroni really did dictate the Book of Mormon to Joseph Smith? So what? What difference does it make to me or the world at large come to that? I'm apathetic about the battle of slogans on buses. There probably isn't a God or there definitely is a God. I couldn't give two hoots either way. I'm just grateful that the atheists and the evangelists have contributed a significant amount of cash to keeping the transport system running.

And besides which, I've still got to decide what to have for dinner tonight. Theology gets me yawning. I consider H.L. Mencken had it right when he said: "Theology is the effort to explain the unknowable in terms of the not worth knowing." And Thomas Paine said it even better: "The study of theology, as it stands in the Christian churches, is the study of nothing; it is founded on nothing; it rests on no principles; it proceeds by no authority; it has no data; it can demonstrate nothing; and it admits of no conclusion."

Someone very wise once said to me that if science disappeared from the world, we would still be living in caves. But if theology disappeared from the world, no one would notice.

So why all the excitement about it? Why do grown men spend their entire lives devoted to it when there are hundreds of episodes of "Coronation Street" to catch up with? So why, my critics might ask, am I the president

of the National Secular Society? Surely that's a bunch of atheists trying to bring religion down and destroy the simple beliefs of simple people?

Actually, no it isn't. The NSS wants to ensure that religion doesn't take over the world and force itself on to the lives of us Indifferents. My indifference to the beliefs of the believers is shared by a huge tranche of the population of this country. When they define themselves as "subscribing to no religion" in the many surveys that try to measure the level of religious belief, they are actually saying: "It doesn't interest me. There are better things to do with my time." Don't believe a word of it when they say they're "spiritual but not religious" – that's just a polite way of saying "religion bores the hell out of me but I like people to be nice to each other."

It is the rights of such people that the NSS seeks to protect. We want their right to Indifference to remain unsullied and intact – unless, of course, they make a voluntary decision to compromise it. Their couldn't-carelessness about "faith" is precious to them and they are entitled to cleave to it without discrimination.

This means that religion should not be able to run our shared institutions – schools, the government, the police, local authorities, hospitals, social services etc. etc.

Religion has a place for those who want to believe it and, unfortunately, pious Christians and Muslims are duty bound to try to proselytize. If they knock on your door or accost you in the street you can, at present, tell them to go away. The best way to get rid of them is to sigh resignedly, look at your watch, roll your eyes, sigh, shrug your shoulders and pick lint off your coat as they talk. When they ask the yawning-stifling Indifferent the inevitable question about what they believe, he or she will say: "Eh? What did you say? Sorry, I was miles away." This is true Indifferentism in action and it will overwhelm and demoralize even the most fervent evangelist.

But pleasant as many believers may be, they shouldn't have the right to corner us Indifferents and our children. They shouldn't be able to force us to listen to their tiresome message when we've got urgent knitting to do. They shouldn't be able to force their dreary, repetitive ideas on to our children in places where they can't escape (schools, scouts, youth clubs, summer camps etc).

I don't think faith is silly, I don't think it is anything. I just don't think about it. As long as it stays strictly where it belongs – in the head of its adherents and its places of worship – religion is fine for those who want it (it's difficult to accept that they "need" it).

For the rest of us – all we ask is that the Popes and Archbishops, Rabbis and Muftis should reserve their authoritarianism for their own followers and leave the rest of us out of it.

SHSNY BOOK CLUB: DECEMBER - FEBRUARY

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10, 6:30 - 8:00 p.m.

**The SHSNY Book Club meets at
The Muhlenberg Branch Library
209 West 23 Street (at 7th Ave.)**

to discuss

ACQUIRING GENOMES:

***The Theory of the Origins
of the Species***

by Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan

**SORRY NO PICTURE - THE BOOK COVER WOULD NOT
REPRO IN BLACK-AND-WHITE**

From one of the great iconoclasts of modern biology, Lynn Margulis, comes a groundbreaking new theory of the origins of species. How do new species evolve?

Lynn Margulis and her science-writer son Dorion Sagan take a radically new approach to this question – symbiogenesis. They show that speciation events are not, in fact, rare or hard to observe. Genomes are acquired by infection, by feeding, and by other ecological associations, and then inherited. Essentially, the debate between neo-Darwinists and Margulis hinges on the definition of a species, and the manner in which a new one appears.

To Margulis and Sagan, the neo-Darwinist model, which asserts random gene mutation as the source of inherited variations, is “wildly overemphasized,” and to support their view, they delve deeply into the world of microbes. They detail the anatomy of cells with and without nuclei, positing a process of genome ingestion that creates a new species. — *Paperback*

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

Every SHSNY Book Club Meet 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.

What book(s) would you like to read and discuss?

Anyone can suggest any book that would be of interest to our secular humanist readers, and everyone's opinion is valued. Final choices are made by our Book Club Editor, Elaine Lynn, but please email your suggestions to editor@shsny.org

Thursday, January 14

6:30 – 8:00 p.m.

**The Muhlenberg Library
209 West 23 St. (at 7th Ave.)
*THE NEW ATHEISM: Taking a
Stand for Science and Reason***

By Victor J. Stenger

Best-selling Stenger (*God: The Failed Hypothesis*) reviews and expands upon the principles of New Atheism and answers its critics. He demonstrates in detail that naturalism — the view that all of reality is reducible to matter and nothing else — is sufficient to explain everything we observe in the universe, from the most distant galaxies to the inner workings of the brain that result in the phenomenon of mind. — *Paperback*

**February: Date/Place TBA
*DENIALISM: How Irrational
Thinking Hinders Scientific
Progress, Harms the Planet, and
Threatens Our Lives*
by Michael Specter**

New Yorker staff writer Specter reveals that Americans have come to mistrust institutions and especially the institution of science more today than ever before. As he sees it, this amounts to a war against progress, and makes an argument for a new Enlightenment, the revival of an approach to the physical world that was stunningly effective for hundreds of years.

**Great Holiday Gift Idea
*DARWIN'S UNIVERSE:
Evolution from A to Z*
by Richard Milner**

An “encyclopedia of evolution” and “the single best volume ever published” (Michael Shermer) — by our Darwin Day/Anniversary Dinner speaker — just out, and a beaut!

SHSNY CALENDAR: DECEMBER - FEBRUARY

MONDAY, DEC. 7, 7:00 p.m.
SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)
JULIA SWEENEY:
LETTING GO OF GOD:
Breaking Up is Hard to Do



Comedian Sweeney reflects on religion, her search for God and her eventual non-belief. After two Mormon missionaries who knock at her door pose a simple question, the debate begins.

From her roots as a Catholic to her flirtations with Buddhism and New Age "philosophies," Sweeney takes viewers on a smart and humorous spiritual journey as she seeks out truth and deals with the family fallout from her skepticism. As she says to an imaginary God she's at last parting with near show's end: "It's because I take you so seriously that I can't bring myself to believe in you."

Coming Attractions

January 4: "1984," Orwell's terrifying vision of the future.

February: "Religulous," Bill Maher's funny take on the three big religions.

March/April: What do you want to see? Come and tell us.

Admission to SHSNY Movie Night is free, but Stone Creek's management expects a "one drink minimum" per person for the use of their back room.

Check out the Stone Creek menu and prices online at www.stonecreeknyc.com.

SUNDAY, DEC. 20, 12:30 p.m.
OUR MONTHLY SHSNY
BRUNCH GET-TOGETHER
 We'll gather again at Wild Ginger restaurant ("Asian fusion at its best"), 226 East 51 Street, between 2nd and 3rd Avenues.

Everyone interested in getting together with like-minded humanists and rationalists for good pan-Asian food and lively talk in a charming East-side setting, is welcome. Bring friends!

Order off the menu; individual checks.

January brunch: 1/17

Save the date:

MONDAY, DEC. 21, 6:30-10 p.m.
Join NYC's Rationalist Groups
for our first-ever
WINTER SOLSTICE PARTY
at the New York Society for
Ethical Culture

2 West 64 Street (at CPW)

The gang's all here — or will be — for the first-ever Winter Solstice Party hosted by most of the groups of Reasonable New York. Join your fellows and sisters of the Secular Humanist Society of New York, and our good friends in the Center for Inquiry/New York City, Dinner & Philosophy Now, Flying Spaghetti Monster MeetUp, Jolly 13 Club, NYC Brights, NYC Skeptics, NY Society for Ethical Culture and Richie's List. Come — it's going to be fun.

Catered Buffet

Live Entertainment

"Good without God" Poster

Auction for Charity

\$40 p/p (at the door)

Cash Bar

For information updates, check <http://reasonablenewyork.org/> or www.shsny.org

Save the date:

WEDNESDAY, FEB. 3, 6:30 p.m.

for a

CHINESE BANQUET
DARWIN DAY DINNER

and

SHSNY 21ST ANNIVERSARY
CELEBRATION

with

Guest Speaker/Entertainer

Darwin Scholar

RICHARD MILNER

and the presentation of the

5TH ANNUAL

SHSNY DUMBTH AWARD

Halfway (sort-of) between SHSNY's anniversary (Jan 28) and Darwin Day (Feb 12) we'll gather at Red Egg restaurant downtown to celebrate both history-making events. We'll feast at a sumptuous Chinese banquet — from Dim Sum and Dumplings to Grand Marnier Prawns and Sauteed Steak Cubes (lots of veggie choices, too) — cast the final votes for the recipient of the not-so-coveted SHSNY 2009 Dumbth Award, and enjoy the wit and insights of Darwin scholar, author and first-class entertainer (his "Musical Evening with Charles Darwin" was one of our best evenings) — Richard Milner.

Cost for the evening, all inclusive, is \$50 per person (at the door), with a cash bar. To reserve your place(s) at the table, e-mail editor@shsny.org, or leave a message (with a call-back number) at 212-308-2165, and tell us how many will be in your party.

FOR UPDATES ON OTHER FREETHOUGHT EVENTS

... check *Richie's List* at atheists.meetup.com/515 and/or our SHSNY MeetUp site at humanism.meetup.com/155/

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO “RHYMES-WITH-SHMASHMORTION”?

Anton Spivack

*And then she heads for the clinic and she gets some
static walkin' through the doors;*

*They call her a killer, and they call her a sinner,
and they call her a whore.*

*God forbid you ever had to walk a mile in her shoes
'Cause then you really might know what it's like to
have to choose. – “What It's Like” by Everlast*

Unplanned pregnancy has become a hot issue in the mainstream media recently, with films such as *Knocked Up*, *Waitress*, *Juno*, and *17 Again*; television series like *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*; the reputed “pregnancy pact” of seventeen high school girls in Gloucester, MA, and the tabloid focus on the unplanned pregnancies of Britney Spears’s sister Jamie Lynn and Sarah Palin’s daughter Bristol. My concern is that I see this not as what conservatives claim is the “glamorization of unwed motherhood,” but as how abortion has become all but taboo in mainstream media, and compulsory motherhood the only viable option.

This has not always been the case. In the 1970s, when *Roe v. Wade* made abortion legal in the U.S., it was not unusual for characters in television and film to undergo abortions without regret, and even argue in favor of doing so. A prominent example is Norman Lear’s iconic sitcom *Maude*. In one memorable two-part episode, “Maude’s Dilemma,” made the year before the *Roe* ruling, the title character finds she is pregnant at age 47 and grapples with the decision of whether or not to keep the baby. Ultimately her husband assures her that abortion is the “right thing” to do. (And she does, “off story” during the summer hiatus between seasons). It was the first time a character on a prime-time television series had an abortion, and did so without looking back.

Today, possibly due to years of backlash from the Christian Right, we have regressed, and no one in the mainstream media could get away with presenting abortion as the “right thing.”

In nearly every major film and television show, an unplanned pregnancy is resolved in one of three ways: either the pregnancy is the problem of a minor character or secondary plotline, it turns out to be a false alarm or ends with a miscarriage, or – the most frequent route – the woman makes the firm decision to carry the baby to term, even if her decision is unreasoned. In *Nine Months*, the woman, with her career and relationship at stake, asserts, “There’s not one good reason that I should keep this baby. But I still want to.” By having the woman choose against abortion, film and television makers create the illusion of appealing to opposite viewpoints.

But this is merely an illusion. In the mainstream media, abortion is presented only as a last resort, and

even then must result in infertility, medical problems and, most often, a lifetime of guilt, usually considered deserved. Even though this myth of “Post-Abortion Syndrome,” “Post Abortion Stress Syndrome,” or “Post-traumatic Abortion Syndrome” has been widely debunked, it is still presented in the media as a fact. Even the otherwise-progressive *Boston Legal* TV show promoted this notion; in the fifth-season episode “Roe,” female law partner Shirley claims, “I can tell you from personal experience, anyone who has an abortion – you never get over it, trust me, no matter how pro-choice.”

Anyone who even suggests terminating a pregnancy is promptly shot down, or presented as unlikable. A character may entertain the notion of having an abortion, or even head to the clinic, but must always decide against it sooner or later. In many cases, abortion is not even referred to by name. The film *Knocked Up* refers to the dreaded A-word as a “rhymes with shmashmortion.” This may have been intended as a joke about society’s touchiness on the subject, but the film itself is guilty of what it satirizes. When the pregnant female lead Allison consults her mother (a cold-hearted shrew and not even named) for advice, Mom claims that Allison’s sister, in the same situation, “took care of it,” and went on to have “a real baby.” This callousness prompts Allison to carry the baby to term. The bottom line presented by today’s mainstream media is that abortion is an option, but one only a selfish bitch would make – and you’ll be sorry if you go through with it.

Once the decision not to abort is made, the issue is swept away in joyful scenes of maternity-clothes shopping, baby showers (how come unwanted pregnancy seems to happen mostly to well-off white girls?), and finally a heartwarming birth scene in which the baby doesn’t cry or drool – the only real changes brought on by unplanned pregnancy are all for the best. Perhaps the media does not wish to alienate potential viewers by taking strong sides or stirring up controversy. I have heard the argument that “there’s no story if she aborts,” and it is true that pregnancy does make for interesting, if overdone, conflict. Maybe a key battlefield of the culture wars is just not welcome in lighthearted comedies like *Knocked Up*, *Waitress*, and *Juno*, and perhaps the decision to keep the baby is not the focus of the story. But is the decision of whether or not to carry the baby not a meaty enough conflict?

“It’s just stories, so what’s the harm?” you might ask. The harm, as I see it, is this: we live in a world where women are still unduly stigmatized for undergoing a common surgical procedure; where complacency is threatening women’s hard-won reproductive freedoms, which are being eroded by laws requiring waiting periods, biased counseling, parental consent and forced ultrasounds, and by bans on certain procedures.

If you keep the baby or carry it to term, you can at least gain applause from the pro-life crowd for taking the “selfless” route. Jamie Lynn Spears’ decision to keep her baby at age 16 may be a consequence – after all, would you want to buy an album from a baby-killer? And it’s difficult to accept Bristol Palin’s claim that keeping her baby was her own decision – if one of your Mom’s selling points as a VP candidate is her pro-life stance, a daughter’s abortion would be really bad politics.

It all comes down to sexism. In real life, a woman can only get pregnant three or four days out of a thirty-day cycle, and even on those days she only has about a 25 percent chance of conceiving. Yet if a woman in a mainstream film or television show engages in sexual activity outside of a loving relationship even once, it will almost always result in an unwanted pregnancy (usually for a teenage girl who previously asserted she couldn’t get pregnant the first time). This high probability in fiction seems to result less from a need for a dramatic storyline than the necessity to punish the woman for being sexually active. Only by raising the child, or at least carrying it to term, and then swearing off sex – as in the case of Juno or Amy Juergens in *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* – can redeem herself from a “bad girl” to a “good girl.” This notion of women having to bear unwanted children as punishment, a key point of the pro-life argument, is simply a gender bias.

Despite what “liberal” Hollywood – kowtowing to the Religious Right – would have us believe, unmarried girls and women having sex don’t “deserve” pregnancy, abortion is not a “selfish bitch” choice, and unplanned pregnancies do not always lead to happy endings.

A BIBLICAL EDUCATION

John Rafferty

I have tried to read the Bible, as best I can remember, at least four times. Once when I took a Bible as Literature course in college (during which I met my first wife, when neither of us could stop laughing at the kissass nerd in the first row who kept referring to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah as “loose livers”). Twice more when I decided, “this time, seriously, I’m going to do it” (one of those times with Bill Moyers’s excellent *Genesis* at my elbow). But the first time was when I was a Bible salesman.

Seriously.

Ron Smerechniak – friend from the first day of first grade – and I were looking for short-term employment during the summer between discharge from the Army and return to college on the G.I. Bill. The “*Big money – fast!*” ad in *The Times* drew us in, and after a morning’s “training,” we each toted a briefcase holding a huge red-leatherette-covered and gold-stamped Bible “*with the words of Our Lord highlighted in red.*” We took freight

elevators to the top-floor lofts of lower Broadway, our territory, and rang the bells of the caged-in sweatshops.

Boss Voice: “What?”

Ron and/or John: “We’re selling the Catholic Bible.”

Boss Voice: “Get the hell out of here.”

Chorus of Latina voices: “Let them in, Jew bastard!”

So we’d (usually) get in – but could never make a sale of the \$29.95 monster (five dollar cost to Murray, our boss, who sold them to us for ten, along with avuncular advice: *Don’t take checks!*). The ladies were glad of the break, competed with each other in trying to embarrass us with salacious flirting, *ooh*-ed and *ahh*-ed over the book, but never bought.

“Here, try these for an add-on,” Murray said one morning, “rosaries with genuine water from the Holy Land in the beads. I pay a buck-and-a-half, you pay five, and you sell ‘em for fifteen.”

With no expectations, we each put a half dozen in our briefcases. But an hour later, at the end of another no-sale session, I couldn’t fit the Bible back into the briefcase until I took out the six little boxes.

Woman: “What are those?”

Me: “Uh ... rosaries with genuine water from the Holy Land in the beads.”

Woman: “I’ll take two.”

Me: “They’re ... um ... fifteen dollars each.”

2nd Woman: “Gimme two, too.”

We sold all the rosaries and with \$60 profit each in our pockets – big money in 1955 – we ate sandwiches on a park bench and talked about our “success.” I don’t remember which of us said it first, but we agreed: “This is bullshit – I can’t do this.”

When we turned in our briefcases and Bibles I was vaguely aware that I’d only read as far as page four. As I say, that was my first attempt.

But now I’ve read *Genesis*, thanks to son Colin, who gave me *The Book of Genesis ILLUSTRATED by R. Crumb* (“All 50 Chapters. The First Book of the Bible Graphically Depicted! Nothing Left Out! Adult Supervision Recommended for Minors”) for my birthday. So the creator of Fritz the Cat and Mr. Natural, as well as *Big Ass* and *Self-Loathing Comix*, beloved of a generation of potheads, has illustrated all the fun and games in God’s Word for me.

Murder? Genocide, rape? Enslavement and forced servitude? Pandering and pimping? Incest, prostitution, fraud, outright theft? The Good Book has them all. By whom? The Good Lord’s favorites, mostly. And who does the Good Lord punish? The innocents, mostly. Ham’s descendents will be slaves because he accidentally saw his father naked, clueless Pharaoh and Abimelech are struck down because they unknowingly “lay with” Abraham’s wife – while twice-a-pimp Abraham and liar and cheat Jacob will both become “fathers of nations.”

And on and on – you know the stories, even if you

haven't read them. We *all* know them, and there is no point in rehashing. In editing PIQUE I operate on the assumption that readers already know that the book Ingersoll called "the real oppressor, enslaver and corrupter of the people," is no "Good Book," and so I reject (politely, I hope) most of the "Look, the Bible is wrong!" manuscripts I receive. What would be the point?

Other than occasionally sampling some of the poetry of the King James Version, what would be the point of me reading more? As I said on that park bench decades ago, "This is bullshit – I can't do this."

LAST CALL FOR DUMBTH NOMINATIONS

To qualify for SHSNY's annual Dumbth Award, a nationally-recognizable personality must be not just wrong, but wrong-headed – denying of or clueless about reality. Like our first winner, TV personality *Star Jones*, saying in 2005 that God "blessed her" by postponing the previous December's Indian Ocean tsunami until after her honeymoon. Or like 2006's *Pat Robertson*, who claimed God gave Israel's Ariel Sharon a stroke for negotiating with the Palestinians ... 2007 winner right-wing harridan *Ann Coulter*, who suggested that Jews in America "be perfected" by becoming Christians ... and this year's Darwin-denier *Ben Stein*, who claimed that "Dachau is where science leads you ... to killing people."

We have five outstanding candidates so far for our 2009 Dumbth Award. In alpha order, they are: nutcase Congresswoman *Michelle Bachman*, who claims that, "we're running out of rich people in this country"; TV weeper *Glenn Beck*, who exhorts us to, "Believe in something, even if it's wrong"; *Pope Benedict*, who believes that distributing condoms in Africa "increases the problem" of AIDS; *Senator John Thune*, who argues that when South Dakotans are allowed to carry their guns in New York, "Central Park is a much safer place"; and ace historian *Joe (the Plumber) Wurzelbacher*, who opined, "The founding fathers knew socialism doesn't work. They knew communism doesn't work."

Got a better example of stupid (and preferably funny)? Send it to editor@shsn.org by December 20 for inclusion on our January-issue ballot. Online voting will continue through January and in person at our February 3 Anniversary Dinner. The winner of the not-so-coveted horse's-ass trophy will be announced in March PIQUE.

WHAT THE POPE'S SUGGESTION THAT DISSIDENT FLOCKS IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND – WHO DON'T RECOGNIZE WOMEN OR GAY CLERGY – WOULD BE WELCOME BACK IN THE ROMAN CHURCH BOILS DOWN TO.

"You keep the liberals, we'll take the bigots."

CHANGE WE CAN'T – AND WON'T – BELIEVE IN

On November 10, while eulogizing the victims of the massacre at Fort Hood, President Barack Obama, who promised us "change" after eight years of George W. Bush, said:

"... this much we do know – no faith justifies these murderous and craven acts; no just and loving God looks upon them with favor. For what he has done, we know that the killer will be met with justice – in this world, and the next."

WHAT?!

DECEMBER NAMED NATIONAL AWARENESS MONTH

(Excerpted from theonion.com, 11/18/09)

WASHINGTON—In an effort to combat what organizers are calling "our current epidemic of complete and utter obliviousness," the American Foundation for Paying Attention to Things has declared December "National Awareness Month."

"All across the country, millions of men and women are dangerously unaware," AFPAT spokesperson Karen Teeling said during a press conference Monday. "What's worse, the vast majority of those suffering from this debilitating state of mind don't even know it." "Obliviousness doesn't discriminate," she said. "Adults, children, the elderly, those staring slack-jawed as their very existence rushes by – obliviousness can strike them all."

Defined as the ability to realize what one is doing, to whom one is doing it, and what the consequences of doing it or not doing it may be, awareness is considered to be a major factor in a number of modern human endeavors, among them: decision-making, prioritizing, and just basically walking around without always bumping into things.

JESUS AND MO SALUTE THE HUMANIST BUS & SUBWAY CAMPAIGNS

(Transcribed from *jesusandmo.net*, 11/19/09)

(*Jesus and Mo look at a poster of a child saying "Please don't label me – Let me grow up and choose for myself"*)

Jesus: I'm glad the humanists agree that children have to make their own decisions about faith. Kids should not be labeled with their parents' religion – every child must make up their own mind about the reality of God.

Mohammed (as they enter *The Cock & Bull pub*): Yes, they should be free to discover for themselves the one true path.

Barmaid: Great! So you think children should be taught critical thinking skills at school.

Jesus: Good God, no.

Mo: I don't think *that* would be helpful, barmaid.

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

The Big Apple Coalition of Reason posters – “A million New Yorkers are good without God. Are you?” – went up in twelve high-traffic Manhattan subway stations on October 23 (PIQUE, November), and stayed up for a month. They garnered the media attention we were hoping for – many hits to the websites of the participating organizations, including SHSNY – and were the subject of newspaper stories and TV reports across the U.S. and Europe.

The posters also elicited hundreds of e-mails from ordinary and not-so-ordinary subway riders. A few of those man-under-the-street reactions are excerpted here, spelling and grammar warts and all:

Hi, A quick question... what if the answer to the question is, “No”? - David Harrison

Congratulations and good luck with the campaign. Here in Sweden, thanks to generous donations, we were able to run a similar campaign this past summer which led to a lively public debate and a 20-25 % increase in our membership. We now have about 6,000 members nationally and 7 local chapters. - Ellis Wohlner

who do you think created humans and everything on this earth? do you think that everything just appeared out of thin air? or maybe we evolved from monkeys, lol, than who created the monkeys? you are condemning your soul to hell and yes there really is a hell and i can tell you that its many more times worse than life here on earth. there's much more despair in hell than you have ever felt in your life and its going to be like that for your soul for eternity, if you don't receive salvation through jesus christ the son of God. - Unsigned

I am a Catholic but I believe people have a right to choose whatever religion they wish to follow, whether it's none as well. - Douglas Plasencia

is it not wonderful that 1 million can be with out god and be prtected by the other 7 million who do - michael bulger

sorry, I think these ads are a bad idea.. all they will do is provoke religious folks -- especially the irrational religious fanatics -- into even more inflammatory rhetoric about how evil atheists are and stuff; nothing to be fearful of, of course.. but, just like I don't like religious folks preaching what we should believe, I don't like it when this is done on the part of atheists either..

yes, I always like the idea of pointing out how absurd it is to believe in myth and superstition and all that, but I still don't think it's a good idea to shout it off rooftops... Frances Del Rio

Really, it is just so sad that, in these very difficult times that you would feel it is appropriate

to advertise your small group of free thinkers. One million in NYC is so very misleading. Socially, people need “something” to believe in- albeit in some cases themselves.

While you may have a right in our society to express your thoughts, advertise your views, and attempt to draw in support of same, I find that I am saddened for you and those of you who feel the need to address personal issues in a public forum.

It is just so sad. - Allyson Sackman Nick

I don't have \$25,000 to donate, but if I can help your organization in any way, I would be happy to. Well done and good luck. - Guy Pickrell

Heard about your campaign in New York similar to the Humanist Bus campaign in London. Good luck - Tony Sansum

Hello.I am Andreea from Romania.I saw yesterday the campaign a milion new yorkers are good withoutGgod.You are soo wrong.God is love and He love us.He will punsih you and all who don't belive in Him.Bible will remove the sin or sin will remove the Bible. God is so good.Don't let be fooled by the Devil.God is ready to forgive you.

I am 52 years old and I saw in my life lots of “good” people who don't believe in God and I saw lots of “hypocrites” in different churches. I agree people can be ethical without God. To be ethical is an effect of education. - George Bundas

The bottem line is if you are smart, you would know better then to disprove religion. Id figure I would write this email to you for all the smart people in the world who know what really goes on, via pure logic.PS - Dont mind the spelling its 6am :) - Travis

Of course, an Editor who has to wade through a virtual mountain of e-mails (some novella length), including cockeyed Biblical references, political conspiracy theories and cockamamie theology, deserves to have a little fun sometimes, too.

To: John Rafferty

Your organization is the devils' work and you have no knowledge of the spiritual works that help keep this world together. It's sad that people like yourselves think that this world is all there is to our existence but at the end of your physical lives the surprise will be on you, hope you can deal with that. - Name Redacted

To: Mr. Name Redacted:

The medication doesn't work unless you take it every day. Have a good one. - JR

To: John Rafferty

Hey asshole, go stick it. Your organization is total bull-shit and you're delusional so make sure you take your meds. Have a crap day on me!

[Fact: On October 27, a three-judge French court found the Church of Scientology guilty of "organized fraud."]

CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY GUILTY OF ACTING LIKE A CHURCH

(From The Daily Mash, the UK satirical site, 10/28/09)

A French court's decision to fine the Church of Scientology for making outrageous promises based on absolutely nothing sent shockwaves of fear through the world's major religions. As the Scientologists were fined £500,000 for claiming eternal happiness was based on handing over a lot of money and that the human mind is engaged in a constant battle with insane aliens, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Hindus, Jews and Buddhists all began the search for a truly outstanding lawyer.

A Vatican spokesman said: "If every Catholic that we've lied to about virgin birth, miracles, limbo and heaven – and we're talking billions here – decides to sue us, we're going to have to sell all the artwork and quite a lot of the gold.

"We'll also have to lay-off thousands of priests. It's not good. Our guys aren't really cut out for any other line of work, unless there's a job where you do a two hour week telling people what bastards they all are and drinking a lot of Scotch."

A spokesman for the Council of Imams said: "As things stand, the bit about the 72 virgins is looking a tad shaky. "We're scouring the small print to see if there's a

get-out clause, but unfortunately there wasn't much in the way of tort law in the early Seventh Century."

And a spokesman for the Dalai Lama added: "Reincarnation was not designed to be legally robust so we may have to adapt it very slightly. For instance, rather than being reincarnated as a lizard or a pig, you may end up just being you again, but with a slightly larger nose or terribly dry elbows."

Meanwhile Scientologist Tom Cruise offered his support to his French colleagues, insisting: "When the insect people of Helatrobis enslave the Earth once more, who'll be laughing then? Me, that's who, and I'll do it a weird, unblinking way that will make you fear me."

DECEMBER 21, 2012

John Rafferty

Wait, the world is going to end in exactly three years and 21 days, *and no one told me?* The ancient Maya calendar ends, the Earth and the sun line up with the center of the galaxy, or something like that, and the planet Niburu, which the government has been hiding from us (we know they're hiding it because they never say anything about it), smashes into the Earth like a bowling ball into a head pin – *and everybody dies!* All of us! It's not only on the internet and in the tabloids, it's even a major motion picture. We all die – *and nobody told me?*

Who's responsible for this, Obama?

It is, isn't it? Obama, right? Damn socialist Muslim.

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Secular Humanist
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