

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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December, 2010

Merry Christmas/Hanukkah/Kwanzaa/Humanlight/Solstice/Festivus – *there!* Does that cover it? We do, herein. We read holiday histories, suggest great holiday gifts, and pretend to congratulate Jesus. We nominate another Dumbth, tweak the Post Office and – what the hell, indict most of the Supreme Court. We check out a new church, sing an atheist hymn, visit big ideas in big cities, salute secular Norway, parse our partnership with plant life, and conclude with a vexing question. – JR

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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS, BOTH OF THEM

John Steele Gordon

(Reprinted from an unidentified essay by Mr. Gordon, the author of *An Empire of Wealth: The Epic History of American Economic Power*, and forwarded to *PIQUE* just after last Christmas by Bill Lippe.)

Christmas famously “comes but once a year.” In fact, however, it comes twice. The Christmas of the Nativity, the manger and Christ child, the wise men and the star of Bethlehem, “Silent Night” and “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” is one holiday. The Christmas of parties, Santa Claus, evergreens, presents, “Rudolph” and “Jingle Bells” is quite another. But because both celebrations fall on December 25, the two are constantly confused. Religious Christians condemn taking “the Christ out of Christmas,” while First Amendment absolutists see a threat to the separation of church and state in every poinsettia on public property and school dramatization of *A Christmas Carol*.

A little history can clear things up.

The Christmas of parties and presents is far older than the Nativity. Most ancient cultures celebrated the winter solstice, when the sun reaches its lowest point and begins to climb once more in the sky. In ancient Rome, this festival was called the Saturnalia and ran from



December 17 to December 24. During that week, no work was done, and the time was spent in parties, games, gift giving and decorating the houses with evergreens. (Sound familiar?) It was, needless to say, a popular holiday.

In its earliest days, Christianity did not celebrate the Nativity at all. Only two of the four Gospels even mention it. Instead, the Church calendar was centered on Easter, still by far the most important day in the Christian year. The Last Supper was a Seder, celebrating Passover, which falls on the day of the full moon in the first month of spring in the Hebrew calendar. So in A.D. 325, the Council of Nicea decided that Easter should fall on the Sunday following the first full moon of spring. That's why Easter and its associated days, such as Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, are “movable feasts.”

It is a mark of how late Christmas came to the Christian calendar that it is not a movable feast, but a fixed one determined by the solar calendar established by Julius Caesar and still in use today (although slightly tweaked in the 16th century). By the time of the Council of Nicea, the Christian Church was making converts by the thousands and, in hopes of still more converts, in 354 Pope Liberius decided to add the Nativity to the church calendar. He also decided to celebrate it on December 25. It was a marketing ploy with a little political savvy thrown in.

History does not tell us exactly when in the year Christ was born, but according to the Gospel of St. Luke, “shepherds were abiding in the field and keeping watch over their flocks by night.” This would imply a date in the spring or summer when the flocks were up in the

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hills and needed to be guarded. In winter they were kept safely in corrals. So December 25 must have been chosen for other reasons. It is hard to escape the idea that by making Christmas fall immediately after the Saturnalia, the Pope invited converts to still enjoy the fun and games of the ancient holiday and just call it Christmas. Also, December 25 was the day of the sun god, Sol Invictus, associated with the emperor. By using that date, the church tied itself to the imperial system.

By the high Middle Ages, Christmas was a rowdy, bawdy time, often inside the church as well as outside it. In France, many parishes celebrated the Feast of the Ass, supposedly honoring the donkey that had brought Mary to Bethlehem. Donkeys were brought into the church and the mass ended with priests and parishioners alike making donkey noises. In the so-called Feast of Fools, the lower clergy would elect a "bishop of fools" to temporarily run the diocese and make fun of church ceremonial and discipline. With this sort of thing going on inside the church to celebrate the Nativity, one can easily imagine the drunken and sexual revelries going on outside it to celebrate what was in all but name the Saturnalia.

With the Reformation, Protestants tried to rid the church of practices unknown in its earliest days and get back to Christian roots. Most Protestant sects abolished priestly celibacy (and often the priesthood itself), the cult of the Virgin Mary, relics, confession and . . . Christmas.

In the English-speaking world, Christmas was abolished in Scotland in 1563 and in England after the Puritans took power in the 1640s. It returned with the Restoration in 1660, but the celebrations never regained their medieval and Elizabethan abandon.

There was still no Christmas in Puritan New England, where December 25 was just another working day. In the South, where the Church of England predominated, Christmas was celebrated as in England. In the middle colonies, matters were mixed. In polyglot New York, the Dutch Reformed Church did not celebrate Christmas. The Anglicans and Catholics did.

It was New York and its early 19th century literary establishment that created the modern American form of the old Saturnalia. It was a much more family- and especially child-centered holiday than the community-wide celebrations of earlier times. St. Nicholas is the patron saint of New York, and Washington Irving wrote in his *Diedrich Knickerbocker's History of New York* how *Sinterklaes*, soon Anglicized to Santa Claus, rode through the sky in a horse and wagon and went down chimneys to deliver presents to children.

The writer George Pintard added the idea that only good children got presents, and a book dating to 1821 changed the horse and wagon to reindeer and sleigh. Clement Clarke Moore in 1823 made the number of reindeer eight and gave them their names. Moore's

famous poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas," is entirely secular. It is about "visions of sugar plums" with nary a wise man or a Christ child in sight. In 1828, the American Ambassador Joel Roberts Poinsett brought the poinsettia back from Mexico. It became associated with Christmas because that's the time of year when it blooms.

In the 1840s, Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, which does not even mention the religious holiday (the word church appears in the story just twice, in passing, the word Nativity never). Prince Albert introduced the German custom of the Christmas tree to the English-speaking world. In the 1860s, the American cartoonist Thomas Nast set the modern image of Santa Claus as a jolly, bearded fat man in a fur-trimmed cap. (The color red became standard only in the 20th century, thanks to Coca-Cola ads showing Santa Claus that way.)

Merchants began to emphasize Christmas, decorating stores and pushing the idea of Christmas presents for reasons having nothing whatever to do with religion, except, perhaps, the worship of mammon.

With the increased mobility provided by railroads and increasing immigration from Europe, people who celebrated Christmas began settling near those who did not. It was not long before the children of the latter began putting pressure on their parents to celebrate Christmas as well. "The kids down the street are getting presents, why aren't we?!" is not an argument parents have much defense against.

By the middle of the 19th century, most Protestant churches were, once again, celebrating Christmas as a religious holiday. The reason, again, had more to do with marketing than theology: They were afraid of losing congregants to other Christmas-celebrating denominations. In 1870, President Grant signed into law a bill making the secular Christmas a civil holiday because its celebration had become universal in this country. It is now celebrated in countries all over the world, including many where Christians are few, such as Japan.

So for those worried about the First Amendment, there's a very easy way to distinguish between the two Christmases. If it isn't mentioned in the Gospels of Luke and Mark, then it is not part of the Christian holiday. Or we could just change the name of the secular holiday back to what it was 2000 years ago.

Merry Saturnalia, everyone!

## **JESUS AND MO AND THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS**

(Transcribed from [jesusandmo.net/2009/11/26/time](http://jesusandmo.net/2009/11/26/time))

*Jesus*: I got persecuted again yesterday. Someone said "Season's Greetings" to me.

*Mohammed*: Ya, Allah, terrible. Yuletide is *weeks* away.

*Jesus*: Very funny, Mo. Seriously, it's time people rediscovered what the holiday is really all about.

**Mo:** The winter solstice?

**Jesus:** No! The *true* meaning of Christmas. You know – true, correct, actual, in accordance with the facts, real.

**Mo:** Sorry, you'll have to remind me.

**Jesus:** It's my pretend birthday.

**Mo:** Oh, yes, that's true.

## THE HANUKKAH STORY

David Brooks

(Reprinted from Mr. Brooks' OpEd column, "The Hanukkah Story," in The New York Times, December 11, 2009)

**T**onight Jewish kids will light the menorah, spin their dreidels and get their presents, but Hanukkah is the most adult of holidays. It commemorates an event in which the good guys did horrible things, the bad guys did good things and in which everybody is flummoxed by insoluble conflicts that remain with us today. It's a holiday that accurately reflects how politics is, how history is, how life is.

It begins with the spread of Greek culture. Alexander's Empire, and the smaller empires that succeeded it, brought modernizing ideas and institutions to the Middle East. At its best, Hellenistic culture emphasized the power of reason and the importance of individual conscience. It brought theaters, gymnasiums and debating societies to the cities. It raised living standards, especially in places like Jerusalem.

Many Jewish reformers embraced these improvements. The Greeks had one central idea: their aspirations to create an advanced universal culture. And the Jews had their own central idea: the idea of one true God. The reformers wanted to merge these two ideas.

Urbane Jews assimilated parts of Greek culture into their own, taking Greek names like Jason, exercising in the gymnasium and prospering within Greek institutions. Not all Jews assimilated. Some resisted quietly. Others fled to the hills. But Jerusalem did well. The Seleucid dynasty, which had political control over the area, was not merely tolerant; it used imperial money to help promote the diverse religions within its sphere.

In 167 B.C., however, the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, issued a series of decrees defiling the temple, confiscating wealth and banning Jewish practice, under penalty of death. It's unclear why he did this. Some historians believe that extremist Jewish reformers were in control and were hoping to wipe out what they saw as the primitive remnants of their faith. Others believe Antiochus thought the Jews were disloyal fifth columnists in his struggle against the Egyptians and, hence, was hoping to assimilate them into his nation.

Regardless, those who refused to eat pork were killed in an early case of pure religious martyrdom.

As Jeffrey Goldberg, who is writing a book on this period, points out, the Jews were slow to revolt. The

cultural pressure on Jewish practice had been mounting; it was only when it hit an insane political level that Jewish traditionalists took up arms. When they did, the first person they killed was a fellow Jew.

In the town of Modin, a Jew who was attempting to perform a sacrifice on a new Greek altar was slaughtered by Mattathias, the old head of a priestly family. Mattathias's five sons, led by Judah Maccabee, then led an insurgent revolt against the regime.

The Jewish civil war raised questions: Who is a Jew? Who gets to define the right level of observance? It also created a spiritual crisis. This was not a battle between tribes. It was a battle between theologies and threw up all sorts of issues about why bad things happen to faithful believers and what happens in the afterlife – issues that would reverberate in the region for centuries, to epic effect.

The Maccabees are best understood as moderate fanatics. They were not in total revolt against Greek culture. They used Greek constitutional language to explain themselves. They created a festival to commemorate their triumph (which is part of Greek, not Jewish, culture). Before long, they were electing their priests. On the other hand, they were fighting heroically for their traditions and the survival of their faith. If they found uncircumcised Jews, they performed forced circumcisions. They had no interest in religious liberty within the Jewish community and believed religion was a collective regimen, not an individual choice.

They were not the last bunch of angry, bearded religious guys to win an insurgency campaign against a great power in the Middle East, but they may have been among the first. They retook Jerusalem in 164 B.C. and rededicated the temple. Their regime quickly became corrupt, brutal and reactionary. The concept of reform had been discredited by the Hellenizing extremists. Practice stagnated. Scholarship withered. The Maccabees became religious oppressors themselves, fatefully inviting the Romans into Jerusalem.

Generations of Jewish Sunday school teachers have turned Hanukkah into the story of unified Jewish bravery against an anti-Semitic Hellenic empire. Settlers in the West Bank tell it as a story of how the Jewish hard-core defeated the corrupt, assimilated Jewish masses. Rabbis later added the lamp miracle to give God at least a bit part in the proceedings.

But there is no erasing the complex ironies of the events, the way progress, heroism and brutality weave through all sides. The Maccabees heroically preserved the Jewish faith. But there is no honest way to tell their story as a self-congratulatory morality tale. The lesson of Hanukkah is that even the struggles that saved a people are dappled with tragic irony, complexity and unattractive choices.



## THE SUPREMES TAKE INSTRUCTION FROM THE ARCHBISHOP

John Rafferty

*"... Governments are constituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed ..." – the Declaration of Independence*

*"We the People ... do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."*

*– Preamble to the U.S. Constitution.*

*"The democratic state does not so much confer the most fundamental human rights and the duties of citizenship as acknowledge their existence and source in a power beyond the state, namely in God himself." – Archbishop J. Augustine Di Noia, Vatican Secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.*

So what? So some Catholic archbishop denies the separation of church and state in America with reasoning he yanks from some bodily orifice – what else should we expect?

We might expect the guardians of our Constitution, the justices of the Supreme Court, to ignore or challenge him. Instead, five of nine Justices listened attentively to this troglodyte at the 2010 edition of the "Red Mass" that for nearly 60 years has been celebrated on the Sunday just before the Court goes back into session.

Make no mistake: Chief Justice Roberts and Associate Justices Scalia, Thomas, Alito (all Catholics) and Breyer (Jewish) were no innocent audience on October 3 – they *knew* what was coming. They *knew* they would hear an anti-humanist diatribe, a homily from the pulpit that, as Sandhya Bathija summed up in the Americans United blog, "abortion should be banned, gay people should be denied marriage rights and governmental policy should be based on religiously grounded concepts." And, as Dahlia Lithwick pointed out on Slate.com, "There is no record of any justice in attendance furiously mouthing the words 'That's not true' as these admonitions were delivered."

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg swore off the Red Mass a few years ago, after hearing a homily she characterized as "outrageously anti-abortion." And this year Justices Sotomayor, Kennedy and Kagan all stayed discretely at home with the Sunday papers.

But a five-man majority turned out to hear Di Noia, who has written that humanism and secularism constitute "an ideology of evil" and which, in his Red Mass homily, he called "anti-humanism of the most radical kind." Instead, he extolled "positive law," which "rests on certain principles the knowledge of which constitutes nothing less than participation in divine law itself ... ."

"Divine law?" "Positive law"? And the eighteenth-century concept of "natural law," to which Justices Scalia and Alito often refer? What do any of those made-ups

mean? We are citizens of a society in which the state is supposed to be *us* – "we the people." Where is the contradictory evidence that there exists a "power beyond the state, namely in God himself"?

And why did a majority of our Supreme Court justices – who in the current session will consider Don't Ask, Don't Tell, lower court rulings on gay marriage, and new assaults on both *Roe v. Wade* and on the *Lemon* test precedent that limits state involvement with religion – sit in silent attendance on Archbishop Di Noia's anti-humanist, anti-rational, anti-American claptrap?

Roberts, Scalia, Thomas, Alito and Breyer: remember the names when decisions come down next spring.

And one more: Di Noia.

I believe in evidence. I believe in observation, measurement, and reasoning, confirmed by independent observers. I'll believe anything, no matter how wild and ridiculous, if there is evidence for it. The wilder and more ridiculous something is, however, the firmer and more solid the evidence will have to be. – Isaac Asimov

## FLIES, ELEPHANTS, CITIES & IDEAS, OR, WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK

Steve Johnson

(Excerpted from Mr. Johnson's book, *Where Good Ideas Come From*, excerpted on [delanceyplace.com](http://delanceyplace.com), 10/20/10)

Scientists and animal lovers had long observed that as life gets bigger, it slows down. Flies live for hours or days; elephants live for half-centuries. The hearts of birds and small mammals pump blood much faster than those of giraffes and blue whales. But the relationship between size and speed didn't seem to be a linear one. A horse might be five hundred times heavier than a rabbit, yet its pulse certainly wasn't five hundred times slower than the rabbit's. After a formidable series of measurements ... [Swiss scientist Max] Kleiber discovered that this scaling phenomenon stuck to an unvarying mathematical script called "negative quarter-power scaling." If you plotted mass versus metabolism on a logarithmic grid, the result was a perfectly straight line that led from rats and pigeons all the way up to bulls and hippopotami. ...

The more species Kleiber and his peers analyzed, the clearer the equation became: metabolism scales to mass to the negative quarter power. The math is simple enough: you take the square root of 1,000, which is (approximately) 31, and then take the square root of 31, which is (again, approximately) 5.5. This means that a cow, which is roughly a thousand times heavier than a woodchuck, will, on average, live 5.5 times longer, and have a heart rate that is 5.5 times slower than the woodchuck's. As the science writer George Johnson once observed, one lovely consequence of Kleiber's law is that

the number of heartbeats per lifetime tends to be stable from species to species. Bigger animals just take longer to use up their quota. ...

Several years ago, the theoretical physicist Geoffrey West decided to investigate whether Kleiber's law applied to one of life's largest creations: the superorganisms of human-built cities. Did the "metabolism" of urban life slow down as cities grew in size? Was there an underlying pattern to the growth and pace of life of metropolitan systems? Working out of the Santa Fe Institute ... West assembled an international team of researchers and advisers to collect data on dozens of cities around the world, measuring everything from crime to household electrical consumption, from new patents to gasoline sales.

When they finally crunched the numbers, West and his team were delighted to discover that Kleiber's negative quarter-power scaling governed the energy and transportation growth of city living. The number of gasoline stations, gasoline sales, road surface area, the length of electrical cables: all these factors follow the exact same power law that governs the speed with which energy is expended in biological organisms. If an elephant was just a scaled-up mouse, then, from an energy perspective, a city was just a scaled-up elephant.

But the most fascinating discovery in West's research came from the data that didn't turn out to obey Kleiber's law. West and his team discovered another power law lurking in their immense database of urban statistics. Every datapoint that involved creativity and innovation—patents, R&D budgets, "supercreative" professions, inventors—also followed a quarter-power law, in a way that was every bit as predictable as Kleiber's law. But there was one fundamental difference: the quarter-power law governing innovation was positive, not negative. A city that was ten times larger than its neighbor wasn't ten times more innovative; it was seventeen times more innovative. A metropolis fifty times bigger than a town was 130 times more innovative.

Kleiber's law proved that as life gets bigger, it slows down. But West's model demonstrated one crucial way in which human-built cities broke from the patterns of biological life: as cities get bigger, they generate ideas at a faster clip. This is what we call "superlinear scaling": if creativity scaled with size in a straight, linear fashion, you would of course find more patents and inventions in a larger city, but the number of patents and inventions per capita would be stable.

West's power laws suggested something far more provocative: that despite all the noise and crowding and distraction, the average resident of a metropolis with a population of five million people was almost three times more creative than the average resident of a town of a hundred thousand.

## WAIT, ONE LAST (BELATED) DUMBTH NOMINEE

There it was, discovered only in early November, a handwritten note in the file folder behind the Next Issue folder, which is why one of America's leading crazies is only now getting her 2010 Dumbth nomination.

On March 24, at a fundraiser in her Minnesota home Congressional district that was, as is her wont, closed to the press (but not to personal hand-held devices), Michele Bachmann was recorded justifying her many nutty remarks about the President. Specifically:

*"I said I had very serious concerns that Barack Obama has anti-American views. And now I look like Nostradamus."*

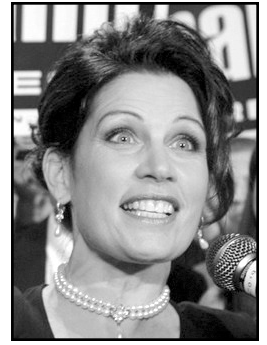
Well, no, you look like someone who *believes* in Nostradamus. Congratulations on your nomination.

### **Last call for nominations:**

Representative Bachmann joins a list of eight other distinguished Dumbth nominees, including: 1) early betting-line favorite and failed Senate candidate Christine O'Donnell, for the double-barreled blast of assertions that "there is just as much, if not more, evidence supporting" the Biblical six-day creation story as there is for "physics," and "Evolution is a myth, why aren't monkeys evolving into people?"; 2) Fox News' Brit Hume, who blamed Tiger Woods' marital-infidelity problems on his Buddhism; 3) Christian Broadcaster (and Lifetime-Achievement-in-Dumbth winner) Pat Robertson, who blamed the Haitians themselves for last January's earthquake because their ancestors "swore a pact to the Devil"; 4) actor Danny Glover, who blamed the same earthquake on global warming; 5) actor Craig T. Nelson, who said of government bailouts, "I've been on welfare and food stamps ... did anyone help me?"; 6) Democratic Congressman Hank Johnson, who worried that sending more sailors to Guam might cause that small island to tip over; 7) California Republican senate hopeful (he lost) Chuck DeVore, who advertised that "Jack Bauer," the fictional hero of the TV show "24," would endorse him; and 8) perennial Dumbth hopeful Newt Gingrich, who asserted that "secularists" (us) represent a greater threat to America than "Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union."

Your friendly neighborhood Editor will probably cull that field of nine to a more ballot-manageable five or six for the January issue, but if you have a candidate with an anti-rational, based-on-nothing, hare-brained statement to nominate, email editor@shsny.org, or write to the P.O. box on page 1 – before December 20.

Ballots in January, and the winner to be announced at our Darwin Day Dinner February 12 – see page 6.



# SHSNY CALENDAR: DECEMBER 2010 - FEBRUARY 2011

**Special Book Club Event**  
**THURSDAY, DEC 2, 6:30 pm**  
**RICHARD MILNER**  
**Darwin Scholar & Entertainer**  
**joins**

**The SHSNY Book Club at**  
**The Muhlenberg Library**  
**209 West 23 St (7th Ave.)**  
**to discuss his new book:**  
***Darwin's Universe:***  
***Evolution from A to Z***

Historian of science Richard Milner will regale us with amazing but true tales from the history of science, taken from his hot-selling and acclaimed book, *Darwin's Universe*, a brilliant new encyclopedia of all things Darwin.

Mr. Milner is a master storyteller, and his talk will feature



adventures with 19th century dinosaur diggers, slave owners, orchid-breeders, missing links, psychics, coral reefs and dinosaur poop (coprolites).

Richard will also offer us a sneak peek into his book in progress, *Charles R. Knight, The Artist Who Saw Through Time*, and will be happy, after his prepared talk, to discuss and answer your questions about evolutionary theory and its history.

*The SHSNY Book Club*  
*is open to all ... and free!*

*Every SHSNY Book Club is*  
*a Book Swap, too.*

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

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

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

**Book Club: Thurs, Feb 3, 6:30**  
**at the Muhlenberg Library**  
***THE AGE OF EMPATHY:***  
***Nature's Lessons for a***  
***Kinder Society***  
**by Franz de Waal**

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

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

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

**TUESDAY, DEC 21, 7:00 pm**  
**(Early drinks specials 6-7 pm)**  
**2ND ANNUAL**  
**REASONABLE NEW YORK**  
**SOLSTICE HOLIDAY PARTY**  
**The HUDSON HOTEL**  
**356 West 58 St. (8-9th Aves)**

Come celebrate as the world turns on 12/21 — and the days begin to lengthen again — with our fellow freethinkers in the Reasonable New York coalition: Center for Inquiry-NYC; Dinner & Philosophy Now; Flying Spaghetti Monster Meetup; Jolly 13 Club; New York City Brights; New York City Skeptics; New York Philosophy; New York Society for Ethical Culture; Richie's List ... and us, the Secular Humanist Society of New York.

200 or more of us will gather on the glamorous Hudson Hotel's Sky Terrace to admire the sweeping views, to meet, mingle and share the (secular) season's spirit.

Details on cost, etc., will be posted on [www.reasonablenewyork.org](http://www.reasonablenewyork.org), at [www.shsn.org](http://www.shsn.org) and/or 212-308-2165, and/or our MeetUp site at <http://humanism.meetup.com/155/> and on Richie's List, too, at <http://atheists.meetup.com/515/> ... probably by the time you receive this issue of PIQUE.

**And coming Saturday Feb. 12:**  
**Our 3rd Annual**  
**SHSNY ANNIVERSARY &**  
**DARWIN DAY BANQUET**  
**Golden Unicorn Restaurant**  
**(in the heart of Chinatown)**

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

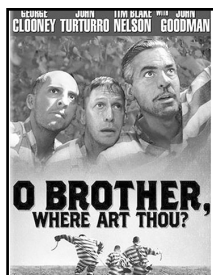
Meanwhile — *Save the date!*



# SHSNY CALENDAR: DECEMBER 2010 - FEBRUARY 2011

**MONDAY, DEC 13, 7:00 pm**  
**SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**  
**"O BROTHER,**  
**WHERE ART THOU?"**

George Clooney and two other convicts (John Turturro and Tim Blake Nelson) break out of jail and embark on an epic journey in 1930s Mississippi that bears more than a few similarities to Homer's *Odyssey* — think alluring riverside sirens and a one-eyed sheriff (John Goodman) — while inadvertently becoming a singing sensation, The Soggy Bottom Boys, performing "old-timey" music. By the Coen brothers, this 2000 comedy is "full of clever ideas, irresistible music, and sharp dialogue."



**SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.**  
 Check out Stone Creek's menu and prices online at [stonecreekny.com](http://stonecreekny.com)  
**January 10: Agora**

**SUNDAY, DEC 19, 12 NOON**  
**OUR MONTHLY SHSNY**  
**BRUNCH GET-TOGETHER:**  
**NEW RESTAURANT!**

We'll gather again at BXL East, 210 East 51 Street, just east of 3rd Avenue, for outstanding Belgian fare, with dishes ranging from \$7 to \$16, and *prix-fixe* Sunday Brunch (including a drink) for \$18. Check it out at [bxlcafe.pregraphic.com/](http://bxlcafe.pregraphic.com/)

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

**Notice: New time - 12 noon!**

*Notice: No meeting in December.*

**GREAT LECTURES**  
**TUES, JAN 25, 7:00 pm**  
**"THE ATHEISM TAPES"**  
**Stone Creek Bar & Lounge**  
**140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)**

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

Great Lectures leader Bob Murtha will lead off with the interview of philosopher Colin McGinn, followed by a general discussion: What do you think? Subsequently, we'll hear Richard Dawkins, philosopher Daniel Dennett, playwright Arthur Miller, theo-



logian Denys Turner and physicist Steven Weinberg, each discussing their personal intellectual journeys, offering illuminating analyses of nontheism from a wide range of perspectives.

**Great Lectures Night is FREE.**

**TUESDAY, DEC 7, 6:30 pm**  
**MIXED MARRIAGE**  
 a "Voices of Reason" panel  
 sponsored by **CFI-NYC &**  
**All-Souls Unitarian Church,**  
 and led by  
**Susan Jacoby**

Nearly two in five marriages in America are "mixed." What does that mean for religion, secularism, and for children?

Free and open to the public, at  
**All Souls Unitarian Church**  
**1157 Lexington Ave (at 80th St)**



## OTHER EVENTS

### Sundays:

*Religion on the Line*  
 6-9:00 a.m. — WMCA, 770 AM  
*Equal Time for Freethought*  
 6:30 p.m. — WBAI-NY 99.5FM  
*Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*  
 6:30 p.m. — Channel 13

### Wednesdays:

*Atheism History Week - 5:30 p.m.*  
 Hosted by SHSNY President John Rafferty. On MNN Channel 67 and RNN Channel 110 in Manhattan, and simultaneously anywhere via live streaming on your computer at [www.mnn.org](http://www.mnn.org)

### Thursdays:

*NYC City Atheists TV - 7:00 p.m.*  
*Atheist Book Club - 7:30 p.m.,*  
 hosted by SHSNY VP/Secretary Elaine Lynn. Both on MNN Channel 67 and RNN Channel 110 in Manhattan, and simultaneously anywhere via live streaming on your computer at [www.mnn.org](http://www.mnn.org)

### Fridays:

*Drinking With Atheists* — Meet, at a venue to be announced, with like-minded friends for a fun evening of conversation. Details at: [www.meetup.com/RichiesList/](http://www.meetup.com/RichiesList/)

### Various Dates & Times:

*Agnostic A.A.* — Seven A.A.-endorsed meetings. Schedules: [agnosticAAnyc.org/meetings.html](http://agnosticAAnyc.org/meetings.html)

## FOR UPDATES ON ALL SHSNY EVENTS ...

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

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

## OUR PARTNERS AND PALS: THE PLANTS

### A précis of *The Botany of Desire*

by Michael Pollan

Donna Marxer

Michael Pollan's *The Botany of Desire: a Plant's Eye View of the World*—the SHSNY Book Club's November reading—explores the nature of domesticated plants from the dual perspective of humans and the plants themselves. Pollan presents case studies that mirror four types of human desires that are reflected in the way that we selectively grow, breed, and genetically engineer our plants. The *apple* reflects the desire of sweetness, the *tulip* beauty, *marijuana* intoxication and the *potato* control.

Pollan narrates his own experience with each of the plants, which he then intertwines with an exploration into their social history. Each section presents an element of human domestication, or the “human bumblebee,” as Pollan calls us. The stories range from the true story of Johnny Appleseed to Pollan's first-hand research with sophisticated marijuana hybrids in Amsterdam to the paradigm-shifting possibilities of genetically engineered potatoes.

Bees and plants have a “coevolutionary” relationship. Plants can't move but their parts can, so we and the bees move them. We are human “partners” of the plants since our cooperation works (mostly) to the plants' advantage. Darwin recognized human intervention only too well but he referred to it as “artificial selection” as opposed to natural. That distinction no longer holds. Today, all of nature is in the process of domestication, and Pollan sees that the plants, by appealing to our human desires, are also in control, not consciously perhaps but ... and thereby hangs the tale.

#### *The Apple: Sweetness*

Pollan begins that tale with the saga of Johnny Appleseed, who resembles a modern hippie in more ways than one. He hollowed out a double-hulled log boat that fit him on one side and a ton of apple seeds on the other, set off on the Ohio River and planted thousands of apple seeds along the way, many of which ended up on homesteaders' lands.

One trouble (blessing) – the trees bore wild apples, so bitter they were called “spitters” and were good for only one thing: making hard cider. Only trees raised from grafts bore sweet fruit, not John (Appleseed) Chapman's bag. But the low-alcohol cider that morphed into brandy and high-alcohol applejack was just the ticket for coping with harsh frontier life. Everybody, women and children, too, consumed an average of a tenth of cider per day on the prairie; it was often more healthful than water.

But the temperance movement squelched the booze business and the apple was reborn as a wholesome treat. And this is where sweetness comes in: sugar was not so

plentiful in the past, and a sweet apple became treasured. Today Red and Golden Delicious strains are dominant, but nothing is perfect, tartness is often missing, and these tamed, successful apples are genetically nearly used up. Chapman did a great service by setting out all those apples in the wild, preserving a vast gene pool.

Enter the Plant Genetic Resources Unit in Geneva, New York, an apple museum that grows and preserves the wild apples. Preserving wild plants is a good idea, as Pollan frequently emphasizes.

#### *The Tulip: Beauty*

Pollan tells us that plant life was uniformly green until the angiosperms came along. Flowers have been seducing insects, birds and humans ever since. Indeed, he speculates that “our ancestors who noticed flowers and had a gift for botanizing” had a leg up on other foragers for, if flowers appear, can fruit be far behind?

Pollan links flowers with the recognition of time, because they always bring with them the recognition of how ephemeral their beauty is.

Flowers in the wild led to the development of gardens. Anyone who hangs out in gardens has to be impressed with the sensuality of bees lolling around in flowers, and that eventually leads to provoking the sensuality in humans – the thrill of color, the seduction of scent. Man as well as insect becomes the willing slave of flowers, carrying their message and insuring their health and beauty.

Pollan describes a drab, flat, gray 17th century Holland that greeted the brilliant tulip with joy. Suddenly this dreary Calvinist landscape was fired with these imports from the Ottoman Empire (“tulip” comes from the Turkish for “turban”). “Tulipomania” thrived in France and England but the Dutch became intoxicated, to the point of creating the “tulip bubble” market.

As tulips mutated and became more valuable, “broken” varieties with feathery incursions of contrasting color were the most valued. The culmination of this coloration was the vaunted *Semper Augustus*, one bulb of which was sold for 5,500 florins. Translated into today's money, one could buy a first-class mansion in Amsterdam in the high rent district for that amount.

The tulip bubble crashed, as all bubbles do, and so did broken tulips. Much later it was found that broken varieties are created by a virus which eventually wiped them out. Today we know what *Semper Augustus* looked like because Rembrandt painted it.

#### *Marijuana: Intoxication*

“Psychoactive” plants were probably discovered by animals first, Pollan says, when their frisky behavior was observed by humans. Witches and alchemists nurtured plants and mushrooms in their medieval gardens.

Cannabis has been around for a long time, but the American product started out as a very inferior one.



Conversely, as the laws against growing the plant have become stricter, the product has improved to the point where the sinsemilla blossom now goes for \$500 an ounce, making cannabis America's leading cash crop. This happened because when American hippies traveling through Afghanistan brought back seeds of *Cannabis indica* and crossed it with the American *sativa*, ... the rest is 60s history. Is that a smart plant, or what?

The author recounts his forays in Amsterdam, where marijuana is legal to consume, but not to grow openly. He describes a secret operation of indoor gardening with extremely high yields of the drug grown in a tiny space.

Pollan suggests the fact that some cultures accept and even promote drugs that others abolish has little to do with their actual properties, but that "It's hardly surprising that something as magical as a plant with the power to alter people's feelings and thoughts would inspire both fetishes and taboos." He suggests that there is a link between plant matter and human spirituality. These plants were present at the creation of most religions. Can plants promote transcendence? Probably, but "the natural history of religion has not yet been written."

#### **The Potato: Control**

This final section deals with the industrialization (or attempt thereof) of the potato, that in combination with milk gives us the protein that allowed the Irish to thrive on their potato diet until the disaster of the 19th century's uncontrollable potato blight.

Pollan begins with a description of the vertical Inca potato farms in the Andes. The best potatoes in the world were and are still produced there, and it is because of biodiversity. The land and variable climate and altitude make each level of a farm different, so a different variety of potato is grown on each level and direction. This makes for healthy and diversified crops in a wild variety of colors: purple, blue, pink, red. Another indication that keeping things wild and listening to nature is a virtue in growing plants.

In sharp contrast is the genetic control that agribusiness is using to "improve" the product. Pollan goes on at length to describe the NewLeaf potato, a variety that is immune to the Colorado potato beetle, once controlled by Bt insecticide (an expensive and time-consuming process). Monsanto has developed a patented potato that has the *Bacillus thuringiensis* gene inserted in it. The beetles that attack it just fall and die and pretty soon quit trying. Monsanto calls the patent "intellectual property" (I'm not kidding) and prosecutes anyone who makes unauthorized use of the product.

The market? McDonald's makes their perfect french fries with the protected NewLeaf Russet Burbanks. Or did. Because of some bad publicity, McDonald's has stopped using NewLeaf and its production is "on hold."

Pollan is concerned. Although Bt spray disperses, Bt

absorbed into the soil does not, and NewLeaf's Bt ends up in the soil, perhaps forever. Also, the Pure Food and Drug Administration does not consider it within its purview to rule on genetic interference, calling it an EPA matter. The EPA considers Bt safe, whatever the form. But it's not clear sailing for genetic control, at least not yet.

And there is still the organic farmer, using the crop rotation and variation methods similar to that of the Incas. Nature still offers the lesson of keeping at least some of the garden wild.

## **OPIATES ARE THE RELIGION OF THE PEOPLE, NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND**

**Michael Pollan**

[Excerpted from *The Botany of Desire*]

What a natural history of religion would show us is that the human experience of the divine has deep roots in psychoactive plants and fungi. Karl Marx may have gotten it backward when he called religion the opiate of the people. This is not to diminish anyone's religious beliefs; to the contrary, that certain plants summon spiritual knowledge is precisely what many religious people have believed, and who's to say that belief is wrong? Psychoactive plants *are* bridges between the worlds of matter and spirit or, to update the vocabulary, chemistry and consciousness.

What a trick this is for a plant, to produce a chemical so mysterious in its effects on human consciousness that the plant itself become a sacrament, deserving of humankind's worshipful care and dissemination. Such was the fate of *Amanita muscaria* among the Indo-Europeans, peyote among the American Indians, cannabis among the Hindus, Scythians, and Thracians, wine among the Greeks and early Christians.

## **THE "MOSQUE" KEEPS INSPIRING LETTERS**

*To the Editor:* We have all had a bellyful of the "Mosque controversy," but after reading the references to it in November PIQUE, and re-reading some of the comments in the October issue, I must clear my chest of some aggravating feelings.

First of all, I have always respected and admired John Rafferty's opinions in PIQUE and his contributions to SHSNY, an organization that could hardly exist without him. However, I am shocked at some of his comments. His references to the superficial items such as the nomenclature of the Cordoba cultural center and mosque as a "mosque," the "Ground-zero" designation of its location not appearing on subway maps (it is not a geographic term), and especially his contempt for the architecture of the Twin Towers are not appropriate in the discussion of a massive human tragedy such as 9/11. Who cares about the buildings? We mourn to this day the 3,000 lives that were so mercilessly extinguished,

and in September of 2011, the 10th anniversary, the tears will flow again all over America.

John's references to the "cigarette-carton" design of the towers and the difficulty of renting space in them sounds almost like "good riddance," which I'm sure he didn't intend. I would attribute it to poor judgment or timing.

I must quote from a sermon by Shlomo Lewis, an Atlanta rabbi, because it was so well phrased, and surprisingly insightful, coming from a cleric.

*"Should there be a synagogue in Hebron on the site where Baruch Goldstein gunned down twenty-seven Arabs at noonday prayers? Should there be a museum praising the U.S. Cavalry on the site of Wounded Knee? Should there be a German cultural center in Auschwitz? Should a church be built in the Syrian town of Ma'arra where Crusaders slaughtered over 100,000 Muslims? Should there be a thirteen-story mosque and Islamic Center only a few steps from Ground Zero?"*

*"Despite all the rhetoric, the essence of the matter can be distilled quite easily. The Muslim community has the absolute, constitutional right to build their building wherever they wish. I don't buy the argument – 'When we can build a church or a synagogue in Mecca they can build a mosque here.' America is greater than Saudi Arabia. And New York is greater than Mecca. Democracy and freedom must prevail.*

*"Can they build? Certainly. May they build? Certainly. But should they build at that site? No – but that decision must come from them, not from us. Sensitivity, compassion cannot be measured in feet or yards or in blocks. One either feels the pain of others and cares, or does not.*

*"If those behind this project are good, peace-loving, sincere, tolerant Muslims, as they claim, then they should know better, rip up the zoning permits, and build elsewhere."*

I, too, would welcome the construction of a Muslim cultural center open to the public like the 92nd Street Y, to promote cooperation and understanding – not only in New York, but also in London, Paris, and even Madrid, but not at the railroad station.

I regret that my bedfellows include individuals like Rush Limbaugh, Pat Robertson and others of their persuasion. But during World War II, our ally was one of history's most notorious monsters, Josef Stalin. That's the nature of politics.

– Al Henick

**Comment:** *I regret, too, that Mr. Henick has allied himself with the Limbaughs, Robertsons and Shlomo Lewises of the right who, in spite of what they say, would turn us into Saudi Arabia. I repeat: it's not about Muslims, it's about Americans, and our commitment to our Constitution and freedom. – JR*

## ATHEISTS DON'T HAVE NO SONGS

Steve Martin

*(A hilarious performance, with The Steep Canyon Rangers, is on YouTube – just type the title into the search box.)*

Christians have their hymns and pages,  
"Hava Nagila" is for the Jews,  
Baptists have "The Rock of Ages,"  
Atheists just sing the blues.

Romantics play "Clair de Lune,"  
Born-Agains sing "He is Risen."  
But no one ever wrote a tune  
For godless ex-is-tentialism.

Poor atheists, there's no Good News,  
They'll never sing a song of faith.  
In their songs they have a rule –  
The "G" is always lower case.

Some folks sing a Bach cantata,  
Lutherans get "Christmas Tree."  
Atheists' songs add up to nada,  
But they do have Sundays free.

The gospels sing – sing to heaven,  
Coptics have "The Book of Scrolls,"  
Neurologists can count up to seven,  
Atheists have rock-and-roll.

Christians have their hymns and pages,  
"Hava Nagila" is for the Jews,  
Baptists have "The Rock of Ages,"  
Atheists just sing the blues.

Atheists don't have no songs.

Poor atheists, there's no Good News,  
They'll never sing a song of faith.  
In their songs they have a rule –  
The "He" is always lower case.

Catholics dress up for mass  
And listen to Gregorian chants.  
Atheists just take a pass,  
Watch football in their underpants.

Atheists don't have no songs.

No man with a sense of humour ever founded a religion.  
-- Robert Green Ingersoll

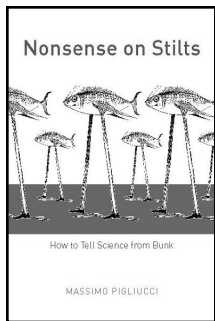
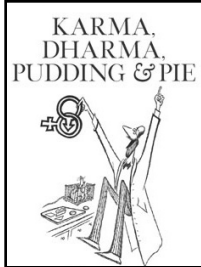
And if there were a God, I think it very unlikely that He would have such an uneasy vanity as to be offended by those who doubt His existence. – Bertrand Russell

## HOLIDAY GIFTS FOR FREETHINKERS

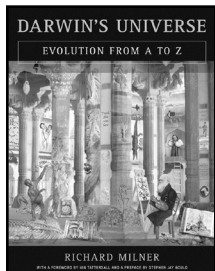
John Rafferty

Okay, we know, we know – you don't believe in any of it. But you still wind up giving and getting, don't you, and why not? Therefore, some ideas for your freethinking friends and family – or for some who need to have their thinking freed.

*Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie*, by SHSNY's own Phillip Appleman – award-winning poet “of Voltairean verve and clarity,” novelist and Darwin scholar. This, Phil's eighth book of poetry, is “a delightful romp through such lofty themes as sex, religion and aging.” Illustrations by the terrific Arnold Roth. Quantuck Lane Press, \$27.50 – available for \$15 on Amazon or B&N.



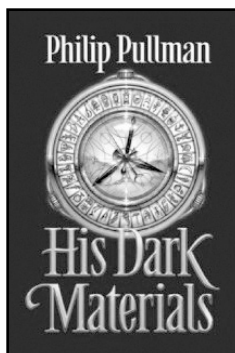
*Nonsense on Stilts: How to Tell Science from Bunk*, by SHSNY Honorary Member Massimo Pigliucci. This is the Chairman of the Lehman College (CUNY) Philosophy Department's latest witty, instructive assault on stupidity and fakery. Available in \$56 hardcover (University of Chicago Press), \$20 paperback (both discounted at Amazon and B&N) and a \$10 Kindle edition.



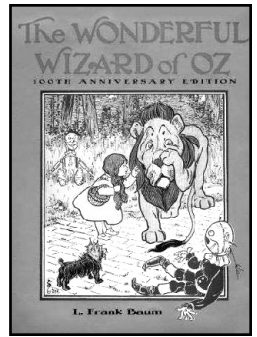
*Darwin's Universe: Evolution from A to Z*, is a brilliant (and brilliantly illustrated) new encyclopedia of all things Darwin by Darwin scholar, editor and several-times entertainer of SHSNY audiences Richard Milner. With a Foreword by Richard's childhood friend Stephen Jay Gould, it was the fastest-selling reference book on Amazon this summer. \$40 list, available for \$30.

### FOR KIDS:

*His Dark Materials Trilogy (The Golden Compass, The Subtle Knife, The Amber Spyglass)*, by Phillip Pullman, is the thrilling three-part fantasy adventure of a whip-smart little girl in an alternative Earth who escapes and helps defeat the powerful, thought-controlling Church. Boxed paperback set lists at \$22, is available for \$15.



*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz: 100th Anniversary Edition*, by L. Frank Baum. A little girl in a strange world is beset by malevolent force (an Evil Witch). Authority (a Good Witch) and popular opinion (the Munchkins) tell her to seek help from the all-powerful and all-knowing Wizard. But Dorothy's own good sense and skepticism unmask the charlatan behind the curtain. She and her friends find out that only they can solve their problems – there are no wizards. Hardcover \$25 – available for \$17.



### FOR EVERYONE:

*A year's subscription to PIQUE!* Give a gift of rationality that will last all year long. And help SHSNY at the same time! \$30 gets your friend or relative 11 issues of the same (ahem) brilliantly-edited newsletter you're enjoying right now. *Special Holiday Offer:* Buy two Gift Subscriptions for just \$40 – a \$20 savings. Do your shopping with one email to [editor@shsny.org](mailto:editor@shsny.org) or a phone call to 212-308-2165 (leave a call-back number).



## TO CONCLUDE OUR HOLIDAY EDITORIAL, A HEARTWARMING CHRISTMAS STORY

(Forwarded by Kevin McKenzie)

A postal worker came across a letter addressed in a shaky hand simply to “God.” Curious, and noting the sender's return address, he opened it. It read:

*Dear God: I am an 83-year-old widow, living on a very small pension. Yesterday someone stole my purse. It had \$100 in it, which was all the money I had until my next pension payment.*

*Next Sunday is Christmas, and I had invited two of my friends over for dinner. Without that money, I can't. You are my only hope. Can you please help me?*

*Sincerely, Edna*

The postal worker was touched. He showed the letter to all the other workers. Each came up with a few dollars, and soon they had collected \$96, which they put into an envelope and sent to the woman. For the rest of the day they all felt a warm glow about their good deed.

A few days after Christmas another letter came from the same old lady, addressed simply to “God.” All the workers gathered around to read:

*Dear God, How can I ever thank you enough? Because of your gift of love, I was able to fix a glorious dinner for my friends. By the way, \$4 was missing. It must have been those bastards at the post office.*  
*Sincerely, Edna*



## WHAT HAS SECULARISM DONE TO NORWAY?

(From National Secular Society (UK) Newsline, 10/22/10)

According to polls, Norwegians define themselves as up to 71 percent non-believers.

Has secularism hurt Norway? The Global Peace Index rates Norway the most peaceful country in the world. The Human Development Index, a comparative measure of life expectancy, literacy, education and standard of living, has ranked Norway No. 1 every year for the last five years. Norway has the second highest GDP per capita in the world, an unemployment rate below two percent, and average hourly wages among the world's highest.

## THE CHURCH OF DANAE, VERSION 2.0

Wiley Miller

(Transcribed from the comic strip Non-Sequitur, 11/6/10)

Six-year-old Danae has set up a recruitment booth for her new religion, the "Church of DANAE, Version 2.0," of course. Her father has just read the sign on the front of the booth:

"Warning! Critics will be put on *The List*."

**Dad:** Um, Danae? No, just, no ...

**Danae:** What? You're against world peace? I'm taking the doctrines of all the mainstream religions into one church to end all the fighting over who has the most peaceful religion.

**Dad:** What makes you think you'll avoid scrutiny through intimidation and veiled threats?

**Danae:** Which part of "mainstream religions" don't you understand?

## A CALL TO PIQUE READERS:

### WHAT WOULD BE YOUR ADVICE?

The Newsline of the National Secular Society (UK) on November 5 asked its readers for their answer to the all-too-common problem posed in the following letter to the advice column in a UK newspaper:

*"I'm furious after discovering recently that my mum's been taking my five-year-old son to church when he stays with her at the weekend. She brought me up a Catholic but I stopped going to mass years ago and my husband has no religion. When our son was born, we made the decision not to bring him up in any religion. We even had a naming ceremony instead of a baptism, which didn't go down well with my mother at all.*

*Last week, I bumped into one of my mum's friends and she said how nice it was to see my son, Jamie, in church on a Sunday. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Every two or three weeks, Jamie stays over with her on a Saturday night so we can go out.*

*My mum knows full well it goes against all our wishes. What's next – getting him christened on the sly? I want to tackle her about this but I'm worried it will open a huge can of worms as she doesn't like it when I challenge her beliefs. I also feel slightly guilty because she looks after him quite a lot and I don't want to lose a babysitter. What should I do?"*

What should she do? What would you do? PIQUE readers are requested to submit their answers, suggestions and fulminations to [editor@shsny.org](mailto:editor@shsny.org).

P.S: Won't this be fun? – JR

What Would be  
Your Advice?  
Page 12

Great Gift Ideas for  
Freethinkers  
Page 11

Let's party!  
Celebrate the Solstice  
with SHSNY and  
Reasonable New York!  
Page 6

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