



# THE SECULAR CIRCULAR

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

[www.SBHumanists.org](http://www.SBHumanists.org)

MAY 2013

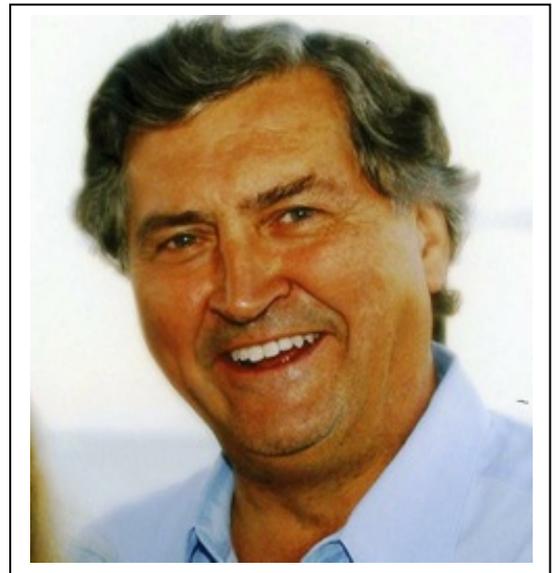
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## May Program:

### Dr. Paul Marshall

## Blasphemy Laws and Free Speech

It was only when the late Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for the death of the novelist Salman Rushdie that many westerners realized the dangers of being accused of blasphemy or "insulting religion" in the Muslim world. Currently, accusations of "blasphemy," "apostasy," or "insulting Islam" are increasingly used by authoritarian governments and extremist forces in the Muslim world to acquire and consolidate power. These accusations, which traditionally carry the death penalty, intimidate not only converts and unorthodox groups, but also political and religious reformers. Despite the repressive effects of these restrictions, many Western governments are adopting similar restrictions. They are usually called "anti-hate speech" or "discriminatory speech" laws. However, they are de facto blasphemy laws in the West, and threaten to stifle commentary on and within Islam and other religions.



Paul Marshall is a Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom in Washington D.C. He is the author and editor of more than twenty books on religion and politics, especially religious freedom, including most recently, *Silenced: How Apostasy and Blasphemy Codes Are Choking Freedom Worldwide*.

Dr. Marshall is sponsored by **Mary Wilk**.

**When:** Saturday, May 18, 2013

**Where:** Patio Room at Vista del Monte. (**Park ONLY in spaces marked "VDM".**)

**Time:** Doors open at 2:30pm. Program begins at 3:00 pm

**Cost:** \$2 members/\$5 non-members

**Dinner:** See **Judy Fontana's** article below.

**For More Info:** [Activities@SantaBarbaraHumanists.org](mailto:Activities@SantaBarbaraHumanists.org) or call 769-HSSB

## Welcome New Members!

**Paul & Joanne Nay**, Santa Barbara

### Activities Judy Fontana

Don't forget to make reservations for the dinner following the program on May 18. We have been having a great turnout of around thirty people and the conversations and fellowship are great. This month's menu is whole wheat rolls, apple spinach baked chicken, fresh catch, steamed rice, pasta, steamed cauliflower and broccoli, tomato provencal and assorted desserts. Wine, beverages, tax and tip are included in the price of \$22 per person. RSVP [judithannfontana@yahoo.com](mailto:judithannfontana@yahoo.com) or 967-7911.

Don't forget to put our Summer Solstice Party on your calendar. Save the date, June 15, for a great barbecue, fun and games at Stow Grove Park in Goleta.

### The Justifying Mind: a Cognitive Neuroscience Perspective on the Origins of False Beliefs Robert Bernstein

Dr. Indre Viskontas, speaker at our April meeting, plays the skeptic role opposite believer Randall Sullivan on the Miracle Detectives TV series. In real life she is a skeptic and a scientist (and has many other talents!) and surprisingly says that believers also want to know the truth. But it is easy to be fooled about the truth. We are good at seeing patterns even when they don't exist.

We love stories and stories are a buzzword in Hollywood and in corporate America. We tell stories to remember. One surprise: even if we are told the end of a story with a "spoiler" we can still enjoy the story. Research showed that many people enjoy a story even more when they already know the ending.

Our experiences and memories are full of gaps and we often fill them in with confabulations. Most are harmless and many are even accurate, though often displaced in time, as usually happens when we fill in the blind spot in our visual field. But sometimes they are wrong, even pathologically wrong. We don't notice our ignorance and believe our confabulation is actual knowledge. She took us through the pathology of Korsakoff's Syndrome to illustrate extreme examples of confabulation.

Patient Joe wakes up in the hospital and he is asked what he did over the weekend. He said he took his children to the zoo and describes what they did there in detail. But Joe has been in the hospital for weeks and his children are 38 and 40 years old. Morris Moscovitch at the University of Toronto calls it "Honest Lying". Confabulators don't know that they don't know. Admitting ignorance is a higher order skill.



**Ken Tucker, Dr. Indre Viskontas**

Photograph by Robert Bernstein

When Alzheimer's patients are asked to copy the Rey-Osterrieth complex figure, a complicated line drawing, some have no trouble copying it while looking at it. But when they try to redraw it from memory, often their drawings have little resemblance with the actual figure. They don't

notice the creative flourishes and are happy with their confabulations. Neurologically speaking, the deficits seem to be in how the frontal lobes and hippocampus communicate with each other.

Further examples of confabulation come from “split brain” patients whose inter-hemisphere connections have been cut. The speech side of the brain has no access to the motivations of the other side and it makes up explanations for certain behaviors. But pathology is not needed to see confabulation.

Johansson et. al. did an experiment where people were asked to select which of two women in photos was more attractive. With sleight of hand, some of the photos are swapped and the subject is asked to explain why the one originally not chosen is more attractive. The subject rarely notices the switch and happily explains his choice. In one case the subject explains how he likes the earrings on the one he chose. Even though the earrings were on the one he did not choose.

Dr. Viskontas showed us an example of “remote viewing” — the ability to gather information about an unseen target using paranormal means — from her TV show. The remote viewer had to describe a photo hidden in an envelope. We see the photo of a woman at the top of a slide with a child in her lap. The remote viewer starts naming qualities: “I see blue.” “Green.” “A place where children are playing.” “Plastic.” “Spiky things like pine needles.” “A view from over an edge.” It seems convincing and the believer is convinced. But Dr. Viskontas goes on to show us three random photos and re-plays the description, showing all the hits for those photos. Most photos include blue sky and some greenery. Children can be found playing in many places. There were just as many hits for the random photos as for the target photo.

Our memories quickly fade and remembering is therefore a constructive process, often involving confabulation. This ability can be adaptive and underlies creativity. But we need to be aware we are doing this. We need to fact check our memories. Why do we like magicians? Not so much to be fooled as to be surprised. We are “infovores” and

information is all about surprises. The best stories have surprises all along the way. But we forget many of them so we can enjoy it all over again.

Stories and confabulation are a part of being human. But when it comes to knowing facts of a crime or of a public policy decision we must be vigilant. Vigilant about the difference between what is true versus what is just a good story.

Thanks to Dr Viskontas for making us vigilant!

## **Atheists Giving Aid to Victims of Boston Marathon Bombing**

### **Letter to HSSB:**

Dear American Atheists California Affiliate,

The recent tragedy at the Boston Marathon is the focus of an Atheists Giving Aid donation campaign. I suggest you notify your members about this campaign. This is an important resource for our community.

<http://www.weareatheism.com/donate/atheists-giving-aid-boston-marathon-tragedy/>

Larry Hicok  
Northern Calif State Director  
American Atheists

## **Godless in Boston Mourn, Too Greg M. Epstein**

Humanist chaplain at Harvard University  
Special to CNN, April 18, 2013

After two days of holding back my own feelings to focus on the needs of a community in mourning, what finally split my heart in two was scrolling through the list of donations to the fund raising page for Celeste and Sydney Corcoran, a mother and daughter among the tragically injured at the Boston Marathon.

Celeste, the mother, has volunteered for my congregation. She’s basically an aunt to a senior

member of our staff. So I cried for the two-sidedness: A member of our community lost her legs below the knees, and nearly lost her daughter. And, in one day, nearly 4,000 people donated more than \$250,000 to support them. They seemed to be saying, through their gifts, "Please do this for me too if anything should ever happen to me or my family."

As a chaplain, I'm struggling to make sense of this tragedy just like any other member of the clergy. And like faith communities across the country, the thousands of people I work with are doing what needs to be done when tragedy strikes close to home. We're offering one another comfort. We're calling around to the point of exhaustion, trying to figure out who needs help and how we can provide it.

The only difference is, we are a community of atheists — a congregation of Humanists.

You've probably read the statistics: With 18% of the nation's population now nonreligious, America is less religious today than ever before. This especially applies to young Americans, up to a third of whom now have no religion. That number may be closer to half on many of the college campuses throughout Boston, like the one where I work.

What you may not have noticed, however, is that in addition to the religiously unaffiliated, or "nones" as sociologists have taken to calling them, a new and very significant group of Americans has been emerging — the nonreligiously affiliated. Relatively quietly, many thousands of mostly young Americans who identify as atheists and agnostics have been coming together to form civically active, thoughtful secular community groups that now dot nearly our whole nation.

Sometimes you hear about the debates these groups hold with religious leaders. But while Richard Dawkins and the like are eloquent and controversial speakers on behalf of atheism, most such debates are actually organized by religious organizations. The vast majority of what Humanist and secular communities do is positive,

uncontroversial and entirely American. We serve. We meet throughout the year. We help one another raise good kids. We celebrate life, and we grieve death.

So I don't relish the opportunity — or the need — to say that right now, our community is grieving too, just like any other Boston-area congregation. Boston, in fact, is home to one of the biggest secular/Humanist/atheist/nonreligious communities in the world. (Sure, we don't know what to call ourselves. But then again neither does the LGBT — or is it GLBT? — or LGBTQ? — community, and that hasn't stopped them from thriving.) We meet every week. We're getting ready to open up a large community center. We sponsor service programs where we invite interfaith groups to help us package thousands of meals for hungry kids.

What is so disappointing to see people do, then, is blame the horrific and traumatizing events of this Monday on the godless, or on godlessness, as way too many on Twitter and elsewhere have been doing. As one young woman in our community said to me, "It's hard enough to deal with senseless grief, but when people write things like 'Why do people have to be so godless to want to kill innocent people?' it makes me feel like I'm not safe either, like we're being singled out for prejudice."

Obviously when people say "I'll pray for you" or "May God grant you strength," they're only expressing their own sincere convictions. But while not everyone holds those same beliefs, we all want to be acknowledged in a way that feels right to us.

And when political leaders like Gov. Deval Patrick or President Obama try to make sense of these moments by assembling interfaith services, it is admirable — far better for a politician to bring different religions together than to only recognize one religion's view of loss as valid. But for goodness' sake, must the nonreligious continue to be excluded from such gatherings? I've seen Humanists knock on the door recently at the interfaith celebrations of political conventions, or after tragedies like Hurricane Sandy or Newtown. We wanted to help and were turned away. I hope

this is where people realize: We are part of the community too. We care and want to offer our support just as much as anyone. We, too, are in shock and grief.

Secular people place our faith in the human ability to value life over death. We believe in committing ourselves to love and care and help as indiscriminately as possible, because that is what makes our lives worthwhile. We try our best, despite our doubt, to ensure that the good will that comes from tragedy will ultimately exceed the bad.

All that said, I don't have a clue what Celeste's beliefs are, and I don't care. I just hope she and Sydney and everyone else injured get well. After all, would you believe for a second that every Christian pastor knows whether or not every visitor to his or her congregation truly believes in the Ascension? Nor should they. The point of a congregation, to me, is just to care about the people in it, and better yet, to help bring people together to care about one another. Our community is including everyone, religious or not, in our thoughts and hopes at this tough time. It would mean a lot to us if others do the same.

## **Existentialism: A Philosophy for Secular Humanists**

**James A. Haught,  
Editor of Charlestown (WV) Gazette**

[Reprinted from Free Inquiry, Apr/May 2013.  
Excerpted by **Dick Cousineau**.]

When I came of age in the 1950s and slowly began to think about life, I decided that the universe didn't care whether we live or die or whether we were virtuous or sinful. Nature simply doesn't give a damn. Our very existence is hit or miss, and some people are born with high IQs into privileged families, while others struggle against disadvantages and hardship from birth. Regardless of the circumstances of our birth, we're all doomed to age, sicken, and die. That's our only equality. When life is over, the question lingers; was there any point, really? Was it all meaningless? What was

achieved by the lifelong hassle of earning money, raising children, fending off illnesses, and then finally succumbing? I decided the answer is that each person's life is intensely real and vital to him or her while it is in progress.

That was my confused and bemused condition in the 1950s, when existentialism burst into the world scene like a tidal wave of new thinking. It said, yes, life is absurd and ultimately pointless. We find ourselves living lives, but we don't know why we are here. We are doomed to die without ever knowing why we were thrown into the world. The only thing we have is our individual lives, which are temporary. We exist, period, which provides the name "existentialism". We are condemned to live inside our own minds and skulls separated from others. No matter how much chaos and cruelty are around us, each of us has no choice but to formulate values and then decide how we will behave, personally. We must craft an "authentic" life for ourselves, regardless of what the surrounding society does.

Somehow existentialism seems a perfect philosophy for secular humanists, nonconformists who can't embrace the majority's god-chanting, war-feverish, and chest-thumping and the entrenched unfairness of the society all around them. It's for the thinkers who see the world as half loony, so they each seek a private path, outside the mainstream, trying to be honest and devoted to the values that seem right for them.

During my youth existentialism captivated me, but maybe I devised my own personal concept of it—my own concoction that did not mesh with even the views of the experts. Actually, come to think of it, that's probably the way most secular humanists form their own worldviews.

## **Herb Silverman in Ventura Ray Stone**

Recently Herb Silverman addressed a group of Ventura atheists about his new book, *Candidate Without a Prayer*, which describes his 1990 run for governor of South Carolina, an office for which,

according to that state's constitution, as an atheist he was ineligible to hold.

Herb is best known in the secular world as founder of the Secular Coalition for America. He also taught mathematics for many years at the College of Charleston, in South Carolina. When a friend told him that atheists could not hold public office in that state, he asked the ACLU how to get rid of that unlawful indignity, and was told that to test the law would take some atheist to run for and win a public office. Herb thought long and hard about running for Governor, and even though he felt he didn't "have a prayer", he decided to do it. Of course, he lost. This was 1990.

Undaunted, he then applied to be a Notary Public and was turned down each time he applied. Now he could bring suit which he did. After five years of litigation and \$100,000 of public funds expended by the state, the South Carolina supreme court unanimously found in his favor, and the constitutional clause requiring an oath to God for public employment was deemed unconstitutional. This was in 1997.

In Ventura, Herb recalled his Oxford debate against Rich Lowry, editor of National Review, in 2005 on the proposition: "This House believes that American religion undermines American values". During the debate he described the time he requested to present the invocation to a meeting of the Charleston city council, and half the council members walked out. Needless to say, his invocation made no reference to anything supernatural.

Summarizing in the debate, Herb stated: "In the melting pot called America, we are one nation under the Constitution (or maybe under Canada), but not one nation under God. In fact, given how the religious right opposes the teaching of evolution, or any scientific or social view that conflicts with a literal interpretation of the Bible, we

are really becoming one nation under-educated. And this is not an American value to be proud of."

A large portion of that debate can be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NUZYiNLBwI>

## What Atheists can learn from the Gay Rights Movement

### Herb Silverman

[Reprinted from Washington Post, "On Faith". April 3, 2013.]

I'm not gay. But I am jealous. How did homosexuality shift in public opinion from less respectable than atheism to more? And what can the atheist movement learn from the LGBT movement?



**Herb Silverman**

The psychiatric community considered homosexuality a mental disorder until 1974, and it wasn't until 2003 that the U. S. Supreme Court declared sodomy laws (same-sex sexual activity) unconstitutional. When the public is polled about a willingness to vote for a well-qualified person for president who happens to be gay or atheist, gays are now ranked ahead of atheists.

The most obvious and effective lesson atheists are learning from gays (including all LGBTs) is to come out of the closet. Attitudes toward gays changed rapidly when people learned that their friends, neighbors, and even family members were gay. Attitudes about atheists are slowly changing as atheists are slowly coming out.

Gays are more likely to come out publicly because it's easier for atheists to remain in the closet. There aren't many excuses to give your mother (or anyone else) about why you've been living for years with someone of the same-sex and not dating.

Like most Americans, I gave little thought to fundamentalist, soul-saving Christians until they

began to focus on politics. I've never been a closeted atheist, but I was an apathetic atheist for most of my life. While a graduate student in New York and later a math professor in Massachusetts in the 1970s, my friends and I had more important things to discuss than religion. For instance, our sex lives. Most of my friends were probably apathetic atheists, and some of them, unfortunately, felt the need to be closeted gays.

The LGBT movement deserves enormous credit for framing and publicizing their issues, forming a big tent that allows for cooperation between activist and laid back gays, and developing a well-organized community with a constituency recognized by politicians. And so it should be with atheists, which is a goal of the Secular Coalition for America and its member organizations.

Read [remainder of article](#) at Washington Posts' On Faith.

### **Bart Ehrman from Fundamentalist to Agnostic**

Bart Ehrman is a distinguished professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is the author of many books about Bible history, including the best-seller "Misquoting Jesus." As a young man studying at the Moody Bible Institute, he was an evangelical Christian who believed the Bible was the inerrant word of God. But later, as a student at Princeton Theological Seminary, he started reading the Bible with a more historical approach. He analyzed the contradictions among the Gospels, and lost faith in the Bible as the literal word of God. He now describes himself as an agnostic.



**Bart Ehrman**

In 2009 Ehrman published *Jesus Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible*. In March of 2010 he was interviewed by Terry Gross for NPR's *Fresh Air*. Below are

excerpts from that interview. (Excerpted by Al Melkonian and Ray Stone. The audio of the show, as well as a complete transcript of the interview can be found at

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124572693>)

First, about *Jesus Interrupted*:

I think it's important to know that each of the authors of the New Testament had a different message. What people tend to do is combine the various teachings of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John so that if Matthew portrays Jesus in one way and Mark portrays him in a different way, what people do is they conflate the two accounts so that Jesus says and does everything that he says in Matthew and in Mark. But when you do that, you, in fact, rob each of these authors of their own integrity as an author.

Recognizing that there are discrepancies is a key to their interpretation because it shows that they each have a different message, and that you can't smash the four Gospels into one big Gospel and think that you get the true understanding.

In Mark's version of Jesus's death on the cross, Jesus dies in agony, unsure of the reason he must die, and he asks God: Why have you forsaken me? Whereas in Luke, he prays: Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing. People don't realize that these are very different portrayals. When you read Mark's account very carefully, Jesus seems to be in shock. He doesn't say anything the entire time. He's mocked by everybody - by the Roman soldiers, by people passing by. And at the end, his only words are his cry of dereliction, as it's called: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And then he cries out and dies.

It's a story filled with pathos and emotion, and Jesus is clearly in great agony going to his

death, but in Luke, Jesus isn't silent while being crucified. When they nail him to the cross, he prays for those who are doing this: Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.

He actually has an intelligent conversation with one of the others being crucified. One of the others mocks Jesus, and the second person tells the first to be quiet because Jesus hasn't done anything to deserve this. And he turns his head to Jesus and he says Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And Jesus replies: Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.

The most telling thing of all is that in Luke, instead of crying out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me, Jesus says, Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

And then, of course, people bring in what Matthew and John have to say. And you end up with this massive account which is unlike any of the Gospels. They have written their own Gospel.

In Mark's Gospel, probably the first Gospel, Jesus says very little about himself. He talks about how he must go to Jerusalem and be rejected and be crucified and then raised from the dead. But he never identifies himself as divine, for example. He never says, I am the son of God. The only time in Mark's Gospel that he admits that he's the Messiah is at the very end, when he's put on trial, and the high priest asks him, are you the Messiah? And he says yes, I am.

But in John's Gospel, virtually the only thing Jesus talks about is who he is, what his identity is, where he came from - he came from above with the Father — where he's going — he's returning to the Father. And he, himself, is in some sense, divine. This is completely unlike anything that you find in Mark or in Matthew or Luke. And historically, if Jesus actually went around saying that he was God, it's very hard to believe that Matthew, Mark and Luke left out that

part, as if it wasn't important to mention. But in fact, they don't mention it. And so this view of the divinity of Jesus on his own lips is found only in our latest Gospel, the Gospel of John.

Ehrman talks about his own belief.

When I started off studying the Bible, I had this born-again experience in high school and had become an evangelical Christian. In some ways, I suppose, I would've been classified as a fundamentalist. I believed that the Bible was completely inerrant, that there were no mistakes in it whatsoever. When I took Greek in college, I decided that I wanted to pursue the study of the Greek New Testament — largely for religious reasons, because I thought these are the words that God has given us, and I want to know these words in the original language.

And so I went off to study the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, at Princeton Theological Seminary, because the leading scholar in that field, a man named Bruce Metzger, happened to teach there.

The faculty at Princeton did not share the view that the Bible was the inerrant word of God. They were all Christians, and many had very high views of Scripture, but they were not fundamentalists or even strong evangelicals. Many of them recognized there are lots of discrepancies in the Bible and that the Bible might convey the word of God, but the very words were not dictated by God in any way.

I resisted that view for a long time and went on and did my Ph.D. at Princeton, with Bruce Metzger. But the more I studied the Bible, the more I realized there were errors in it. Many were very small, little details here and there, discrepancies between the Gospels and discrepancies between the New Testament and the Old Testament. And I got to a point where they couldn't be reconciled. Many were just clear contradictions.

This had a serious effect on my faith which was rooted in an inerrant revelation from God. And I began realizing that, in fact, this revelation was not inerrant. And once I started seeing errors, I started finding them everywhere.

For about 15 years, I continued to be a very devout Christian. I went to church every week, confessed my sins, believed in God, believed Christ was the salvation for the human race, and all the rest. But I did start developing a different view of the Bible — that I started seeing it less as a literal word from God, and more as a set of books that contained important spiritual teachings by religious people, some of whom were religious geniuses, like the apostle Paul, for example — or the authors of the Gospels, who had real insight into the spiritual world, into the truth, and they had different insights into the truth — so that Mark's views were different from Matthew's because Mark had a different perspective than Matthew. I continued to be a Christian of a more liberal persuasion.

The reason I left the faith, ultimately, had nothing to do with my historical study of the Bible, per se. What really did me in was the subject of this other book I wrote, *God's Problem*, the problem of suffering. I just came to a point where I no longer could believe that there was a good and powerful God who was in control of this world, given the state of things here.

What happened to my beliefs about heaven and hell is that I came to see where these ideas came from, not from heaven soon after Jesus's death, but that they were that humans came up with these views of heaven and hell.

And in my book, I explain how that happened, that doctrines of heaven and hell developed within early Christianity; that they weren't actually the teachings of Jesus or of his earliest followers, but they were later developments, as were the doctrines of the trinity, for example, or the divinity of Christ.

When I was still a Christian I thought that if I became an agnostic, I would have no grounds for ethical behavior. I'd have no moral compass. And I thought that that would probably lead me to become a "completely licentious reprobate". But that turned out to be completely wrong.

I think I actually have more of a sense of the meaning of life now than I ever had as a believer. There are lots of reasons to behave ethically. I think many of us are simply hardwired to want to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to try and do unto others as we'd want them to do unto us. And I think that since life is all there is — this life is it, that after we die, we no longer exist — that we should grab life for everything that it can give us. We should live life to its fullest and enjoy it as much as we can because this is not a dry run for something else. This is it. And we should help other people who are suffering now so they, too, can enjoy life. In fact, my giving up on the sense of an afterlife has made this life for me much more meaningful.

### **More "What's Going On?" Andrew Hankin, live (we think) from Italy**

**More about Nones:** NPR (1/14/2013) Morning Edition explores the "nones" — Americans who say they don't identify with any religion. Demographers have given them this name because when asked to identify their religion, that's their answer: "none."

In October, the Pew Research Center released a study, 'Nones' on the Rise, that takes a closer look at the 46 million people who answered 'none' to the religion question in 2012. According to Pew, one-fifth of American adults have no religious affiliation, a trend that has for years been on the rise. (A more recent Gallup poll shows the uptick in religious nones slowed a bit from 2011 to 2012.)

In a nutshell, the group:

- comprises atheists and agnostics as well as those who ally themselves with "nothing in particular";
- includes many who say they are spiritual or religious in some way and pray every day;

- overwhelmingly says they are not looking to find an organized religion that would be right for them;  
 - is socially liberal, with three-quarters favoring same-sex marriage and legal abortion.

Perhaps most striking is that one-third of Americans under 30 have no religious affiliation. When comparing this with previous generations under 30, there's a new wrinkle, says Greg Smith, a senior research at Pew. "Young people today are not only more religiously unaffiliated than their elders; they are also more religiously unaffiliated than previous generations of young people ever have been as far back as we can tell," Smith tells NPR Morning Edition co-host David Greene. "This really is something new."

Full report:

<http://m.npr.org/news/Politics/169164840?start=445>

**The American Humanist Association's** legal center filed a lawsuit April 24th, 2013 against Northwest Rankin High School in Flowood, Mississippi, challenging the school's recent mandatory student assemblies (that presented a Christian message) as a violation of the separation of church and state. The Appignani Humanist Legal Center learned from Northwest Rankin High School students that a mandatory assembly was held, during school hours on April 9th, where a representative of the Pinelake Baptist Church spoke of finding "hope" in "Jesus Christ." According to students present, those who attempted to leave were prevented from doing so. At the end of the presentation, the speakers led the students in a Christian prayer.

Full story and how to help the American Humanist Association's work:

<http://www.americanhumanist.org/news/details/2013-04-humanists-file-suit-against-public-school-that-held>

## Letter to Editor, Santa Barbara News Press

It started out as a nice weekend, Santa Barbara style, a splash of much needed rain on Easter Sunday, good company, good food and all seemed right with the world—until I came across the article by David Moore on Christianity (March 31, Voices).

Three-quarters of Americans describe themselves as Christians, but it seems they are "sexists, tribalists, classists, nationalists, homophobic" and many other bad things. In short, they are unmitigated sinners. That's a surprise, as many of my friends are Christians and they don't seem a bad lot—not perfect, but good people on the whole. Perhaps they should try a different religion, one with less doom and gloom that does not carry this huge burden of guilt. Or better yet, release themselves entirely from doctrines and myths and join the Humanists.

Humanists believe that the solutions to the world's problems lie in human thought and action rather than divine intervention, and we advocate the application of the methods of science and free inquiry, tempered by human values, to the problems of human welfare. Humanism affirms the worth and dignity of the individual and the right of everyone to the pursuit of happiness and the good life, compatible with the rights of others.

**Colin Gordon**

April 17, 2013

## 37 Percent of People Completely Lost Mark Morford

[Reprinted from the San Francisco Chronicle, March 12, 2013; AlterNet.com, 3/20/2013; PIQUE, Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York, May, 2013.]

Six percent of Americans believe in unicorns. Thirty-six percent believe in UFOs. A whopping 24 percent believe dinosaurs and man hung out

together. Eighteen percent still believe the sun revolves around the Earth. Nearly 30 percent believe cloud computing involves... actual clouds. A shockingly sad 18 percent, to this very day, believe the president is a Muslim. Aren't they cute? And Floridian?

Do you believe in angels? Forty-five percent of Americans do. In fact, roughly 48 percent – Republicans and Democrats alike – believe in some form of creationism. A hilariously large percent of terrified right-wingers are convinced Obama is soon going to take away all their guns, so when the Newtown shooting happened and 20 young children were massacred due to America's fetish for, obsession with and addiction to firearms, violence and fear, they bought more bullets. Because obviously.

In sum and all averaged out, it's safe to say about 37 percent of Americans are just are not very bright. Or rather, quite shockingly dumb. Perhaps beyond reach. Perhaps beyond hope or redemption. Perhaps beyond caring about anything they have to say in the public sphere ever again. Sorry, Kansas.

Did you frown at that last paragraph? Was it a terribly elitist and unkind thing to say? Sort of. Probably. But I'm not sure it matters, because none of those people are reading this column right now, or any column for that matter, because reading anything even remotely complex or analytical is something only 42 percent of the population enjoy doing on a regular basis, which is why most TV shows, all reality shows, many major media blogs and all of Fox News is scripted for a 5th-grade education/attention span. OMG LOL kittens! 19 babies having a worse day than you. WTF is up with Justin Timberlake's hair?!?

It is this bizarre, circular, catch-22 kind of question, asked almost exclusively by intellectual liberals because intellectual conservatives don't actually exist, given how higher education leads to more developed critical thinking (you already know the vast majority of university professors and scientists identify as Democrat/progressive, right?) which

leads straight to a more nimble, open-minded perspective. In short: The smarter you are, the less rigid/more liberal you become.

Until you get old. Or rich. And scared. And you forget. And you clamp down, seize up, fossilize. And the GOP grabs you like a fungus.

Oh right! The question: How to reach the not-very-bright hordes, when they simply refuse to be reached by logic, fact, or modern mode? How to communicate obvious and vital truths (conservation, global warming, public health, sexuality, basic nutrition, religion as parable/myth, the general awfulness of Mumford & Sons) the lack of understanding of which keep the country straggling and embarrassing, the laughingstock of the civilized world?

And who are these people, exactly? And are they all really in Kentucky and Florida and Mississippi? Are they all in the Tea Party? Is failing education to blame? A dumbed-down media? Reality TV? In the wealthiest and most egomaniacal superpower in the world, why is the chasm so wide?

There is no easy answer, but there is a great deal of irony. It is a wicked conundrum that you and I can debate the definition of elitism, whether or not it's fair to criticize those who believe that, say, gay marriage means kids will be indoctrinated into homosexuality, or that evolution is still a theory, or that Jesus literally flew up out of a cave and into the sky, when the discussion itself is, by nature, elitist, exclusionary, requiring fluid, abstract thinking the very people we're discussing simply do not possess, and therefore cannot participate in.

Discussion of elitism is elitist. Intelligence can talk itself blue about what to do about all the dumb; the dumb will never hear it.

It's a fact even recognized by Louisiana's own Gov. Bobby Jindal, who had the nerve to defy his own state's (and his own party's) famously low IQ by saying, after the last election, "The GOP must stop being the stupid party. It's time for a new Republican Party that talks like adults."

Of course he's right. But where would that leave their base? And who will tell the megachurches? And does Jindal not know Louisiana is where they teach that the existence of the Loch Ness monster is evidence that evolution is a lie?

Brings to mind a stunning study about facts and truths. Have you ever heard it? It goes something like: Here is hard evidence, scientific evidence, irrefutable proof that something is or is not true. Here is dinosaur bone, for example, which we know beyond a doubt is between 60 and 70 million years old. Amazing! Obviously!

But then comes the impossible snag: If you are hard-coded to believe otherwise, if your TV network or your ideology, your pastor or your lack of education tell you differently, you will still not believe it. No matter what. No matter how many facts, figures, common senses slap you upside the obvious. You will think there is conspiracy, collusion, trickery afoot. The Bible says that bone is only eight thousand years old. Science is elitist. Liberals hate God. The end.

It is not enough to say people believe what they want to believe. They will also believe it in the face of irrefutable counter-evidence and millennia of fundamental proof.

This! This is what stuns and stupefies liberals and progressives of every intellectual stripe. We cannot understand. We cannot compute. We think, "Well, if more people just had the facts, just heard a reasonable and cogent argument or read up on the real science, surely they would change their minds? Surely they would see the error in their thinking?" Oh, liberals. All those smarts, and still so naïve.

Here is the body of Jesus! We found it! In a cave in a hole deep in an iron-gated alcove beneath the Vatican! Turns out he is not the Messiah after all! Turns out – look at those tribal tattoos! Those mala beads! That blond hair! – he's a wild non-dualist guru from parts unknown. Christianity is a total fabrication! Always has been, always will be.

Here is hard evidence coupled with an ocean of common sense that more guns equal only more violence and death! Stat after stat, mass shooting after mass shooting proving we have it all wrong about protection and fear. Also! At least 2,605 people have died by gun violence in America since the Newtown shooting. Can we ban them now? No?

Here is overwhelming evidence that global warming is ravaging us like a furious god, and not only are we complicit, not only have we blindly raced forth into the abyss, we are, if all goes according to current trends and speeds and attitudes, totally f–king doomed. Ah, unicorns. You look better every day.

A religion old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge. -Carl Sagan

## Non-HSSB Events of Interest

### Diane Krohn

#### Upcoming Events in California:

- May 5: Amy Jo Mattheis: *Jesus, an Atheist and a Woman Walk Into a Bar....* Center for Inquiry West, Los Angeles: <http://www.cfiwest.org/calendar/FeedYourBrain.htm#mattheis>
- May 19: Dr. Daphne Fairbairn: *Odd Couples: Extraordinary Differences between the Sexes in the Animal Kingdom.* Skeptics Society, Cal Tech, Pasadena. <http://www.skeptic.com/upcoming-lectures/>
- May 19: Paul Marshall: *Blasphemy and the Threat to Free Speech.* Center for Inquiry West, Costa Mesa. <http://www.cfiwest.org/groups/orange.htm#marshall>

- May 30-June 2: American Humanist Association 72<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference. Speakers include Katherine Stewart, Eddie Tabash, Sean Faircloth, Phil Zuckerman, among others. San Diego.  
<http://conference.americanhumanist.org/>
- June 2: Dr. Sheldon Kardener: *From Cradle to Apocalypse: The Danger of Not Outgrowing Childhood*. Center for Inquiry West, Los Angeles.  
<http://www.cfiwest.org/calendar/FeedYourBrain.htm#kardener>

### Upcoming Events Outside of California:

- May 17-19: *Imagine No Religion 3*, sponsored by CFI Canada, the James Randi Foundation, and the Kamloops Centre for Inquiry. Speakers include Daniel Dennett, Victor Stenger, Christina Rad, Taslima Nasreen, others, plus a skeptics magic show! Kamloops, Canada.  
<http://imagineno religion.ca/>
- May 17-19: *Women in Secularism 2: A Center for Inquiry Conference*. Speakers include Jennifer Michael Hecht, Greta Christina, Amanda Marcotte, Teresa McBain, Jamila Bey, and many others. Washington, D. C.  
<http://www.womeninsecularism.org/>
- June 21-23: Secular Student Alliance Annual Conference West. Speakers include Katherine Stewart, Greta Christina, Dave Silverman, Dan Barker, and many others. Las Vegas, NV.  
<https://www.secularstudents.org/2013con/Vegas>
- July 11-14: The Amazing Meeting 2013: A conference focused on scientific skepticism with a variety of presentations, workshops, and speakers. Las Vegas, NV.  
<http://www.amazingmeeting.com/>

### HSSB Contact Information

#### Officers:

*President:* Dick Cousineau

687-2371

[president@santabarbarahumanists.org](mailto:president@santabarbarahumanists.org)

*Secretary:* Diane Krohn

569-5503

[secretary@santabarbarahumanists.org](mailto:secretary@santabarbarahumanists.org)

*Treasurer:* Richard Martin

687-3563

[treasurer@santabarbarahumanists.org](mailto:treasurer@santabarbarahumanists.org)

#### Board Members at Large:

Wayne Beckman

Roger Schlueter

Judy Fontana

Claudia Solé

Helen Gordon

Nancy Wahl

Jean Olsen

Mary Wilk

#### Newsletter Editor:

Ray Stone

[Editor@santabarbarahumanists.org](mailto:Editor@santabarbarahumanists.org)

#### Newsletter Deadline:

Deadline for submissions to the Secular Circular is Midnight, the last day of each month.

HSSB meetings are held on the 3rd Saturday of each month at 2:30 pm, usually in the Patio Room of Vista del Monte, 3775 Modoc Rd., Santa Barbara. More information is available at our web site:

[www.SantaBarbaraHumanists.org](http://www.SantaBarbaraHumanists.org) or by contacting any board member. At meetings, a donation of \$2 from members and \$5 from non-members is appreciated. First-time visitors are welcome on a complimentary basis.

To send a copy of this newsletter to someone interested in our Society, please send their contact information to: PO Box 30232, Santa Barbara, CA 93130, or contact Mary Wilk at 967-3045, or [mwilk@cox.net](mailto:mwilk@cox.net). Newsletters are also available at the above web address.

Annual HSSB membership dues are \$36 for a single person, \$60 for a couple, and \$100 (or more) to become a Society Supporter. One may subscribe to our newsletter only for an annual fee of \$20.

Link to HSSB Photos:

<http://picasaweb.google.com/Humanist.Society.of.Santa.Barbara>

HSSB Phone: 769-HSSB



## HSSB Calendar

**Tuesday, May 14. Board Meeting,** 5:30pm. Home of **Mary Wilk.** Members invited to attend.

**Saturday, May 18. Monthly meeting.** Dr. Paul Marshall, *How Apostasy and Blasphemy Codes are Choking Freedom Worldwide.*

**Sunday, May 26.** (and the last Sunday of every month), 10am, **Secular Sunday Brunch** for humanists, atheists, agnostics, skeptics, freethinkers, singles, couples and families without religion. No cover charge; membership not required. Pay only for your food, drink and tips. Cody's Cafe, 4898 Hollister Ave. in the Turnpike Center, Goleta in the room to the right as you enter the restaurant. For information phone Board member, Mary Wilk at 805-967-3045.

**Saturday, June 15.** Summer Solstice Party. Barbecue, fun and games!

**Saturday, July 20. TBA!**

**Saturday, August 17. Monthly Meeting.** Marcia Coyle.



Humanist Society of  
Santa Barbara  
PO Box 30232  
Santa Barbara, CA 93130