



The Secular Circular

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

www.SBHumanists.org

FEBRUARY 2021

Please join us for our February Speaker Event on Zoom...

The Apostate Prophet

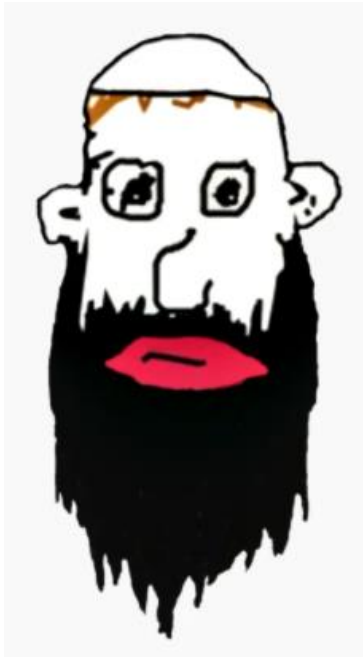
Our Speaker: Ridvan Aydemir, better known online as The Apostate Prophet (or simply “AP”), is an Ex-Sunni Muslim, Turkish-German YouTuber known for critiquing Islam and other religions.

With 256,000 subscribers and over 300 on-line videos, his is a powerful and courageous voice.

Ridvan was born to a Turkish family in Germany. He moved to Turkey as a teenager where he went to high school and served his mandatory military service. Ridvan emigrated to the United States and is now living freely in the West.



Ridvan Aydemir a.k.a. “AP”



“I’m a learned former Muslim who focuses on factual and fair criticism of my former religion, Islam, in the light of experience, knowledge, and reasoning accompanied by a healthy amount of satire...Don’t take it personally.”

Program: Ridvan will speak about a variety of topics including

- recent cases & consequences for ex-Muslims,
- the contrast between being ex-Christian and ex-Muslim,
- the de-secularization of Turkey,
- the dilemma in opposing Islam for atheists in the West,
- progress being made; hopes for the future.

Saturday February 20, 2021 at 3:00pm PST.

Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81267182593>

The HSSB Secular Circular – February 2021

February COVID-19 Update

Dave Flattery will present an update on the *State of the COVID-19 Global Pandemic* with a special focus on virus mutations.



Dave Flattery

When: Sunday February 14 at 3pm Pacific / 6pm Eastern. All are welcome. **Zoom link:** <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82598900099>.

Dr. Anabel Ford:

Heroes of the Maya Forest – 1/16/21

By Robert Bernstein

UCSB Professor Anabel Ford offered the Humanist Society a history of Maya Forest agriculture that continues to this day and that can teach us lessons to use in sustainability in our modern world.

She has very kindly shared her presentation [slides](#). [Note: If you would like to watch the presentation, you can find it [here](#) on the new **HSSB YouTube channel**. **Closed captioning** is available. Click on the CC icon at the lower right of the YouTube video window to enable closed captioning].



Her research is centered on a site called El Pilar which straddles the border of Belize and Guatemala. The site is part of a Peace Park Initiative along a frontier that had been in dispute by both nations.

The study area is much larger than the Peace Park, extending through the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico, the region of famed Maya sites such as Chichen Itza.



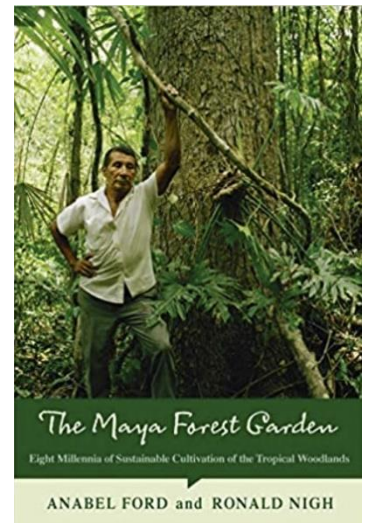
Dr. Anabel Ford's Area of Study

Ford does not claim to be an authority on everything about the Maya Forest. She works with citizen scientists in the region and collaborates with scholars from diverse fields, including Ronald Nigh. Nigh is an ethnologist who co-authored their book, *The Maya Forest Garden: Eight Millenia of Sustainable Cultivation of the Tropical Woodlands*.

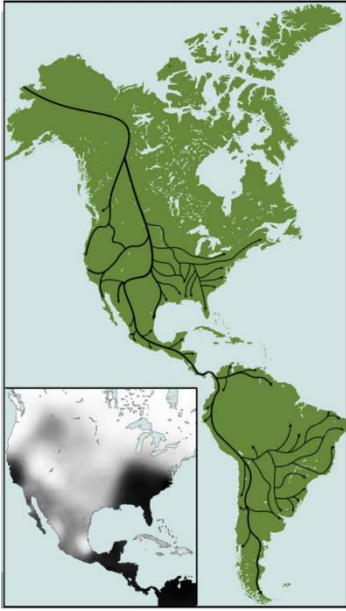
Dr. Ford had to learn to navigate the forest trails as the locals do. They use the sun as a reference.

Humans arrived in the region more than 12,000 years ago. They were free of encumbrances, like beasts of burden, and adapted with skill, knowledge, and practice.

Humans were skilled with stone and fire. They expanded rapidly across the Americas as hunters and gatherers and adapted to the changing climate from the Pleistocene Ice Age to the Holocene thermal maximum. It only took 2,000 years to reach the southern tip of South America at Tierra del Fuego.



Book by Anabel Ford & Ronald Nigh showing Chaco on the cover with the mahogany tree that will provide for his retirement.

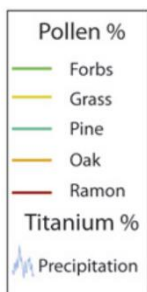
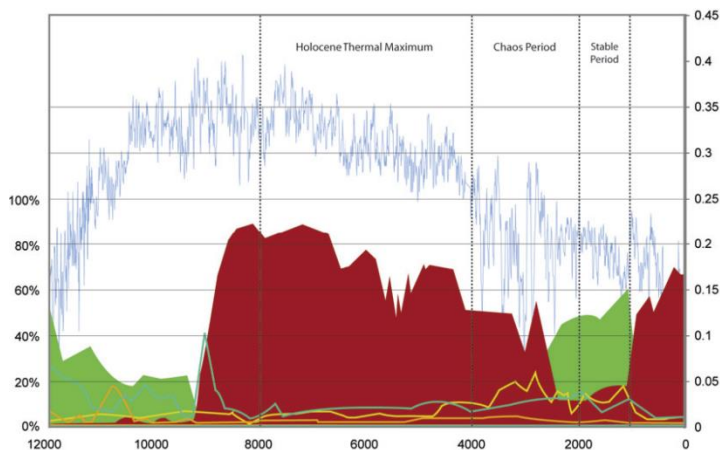


Human migration from Asia through the Americas (population distribution map modeled after Steele, Adams, & Slukin 1998)

When Ford first learned of this region as a student it was thought that no one lived in the Maya Forest area 12,000 years ago, but, she states, “That is impossible.”

Climate change has been the theme of the region: 12,000 years ago, the area was unlike the forest we see today; it was cold and dry, like an arid savanna with pine.

8,000 years ago, as the climate warmed and precipitation increased, this began to change.



12,000 Years of Climate. Cold & dry >8000 years ago with annual plants and few trees. Warm & wet since then with megathermal plants.

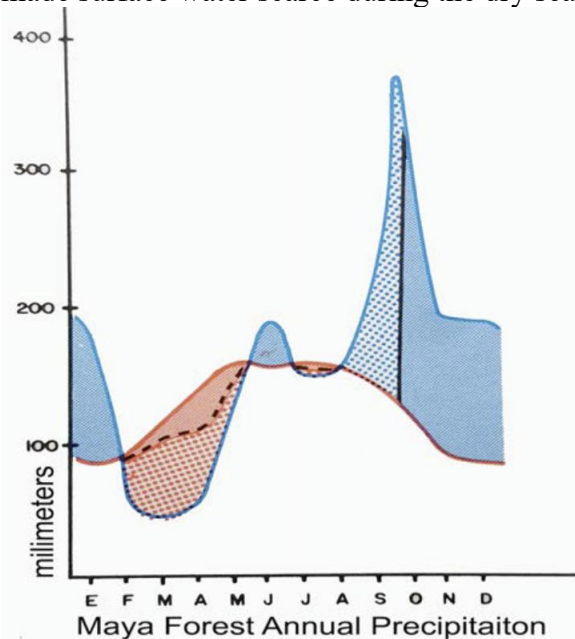
It became warm and wet, with no dry season. We know this history by looking at layers in the ground.

Titanium trace element deposits serve as a proxy for rainfall.

Breadnut or Ramon is an important plant in this region. It is the only dominant tree that is wind pollinated. Wind-blown pollen is what makes you sneeze. Wind-pollinated plants make up only 1% of tropical forest and only about 10% of angiosperms (flowering plants) today.

About 4,000 years ago came climate changes impacting the predictability of rainfall. This brought development of permanent houses and use of ceramics in this region. People were settling down in communities rather than being nomadic.

The area came to have a dry season from February to June (“Yaxk’in”) and two wet seasons annually: one from June to September (“Chaak Ikal”), which was influenced by the warm hurricanes from the Caribbean, and a second one from November to February (“Ikal Ixpelon”), which was influenced by the cold Atlantic winters. Despite having two wet seasons, the permeable limestone in the region made surface water scarce during the dry season.



Early settlements were small. Around 3,000 years ago we see a few temples. By 2,000 years ago, civic centers began to develop in this area.

The time from 1400-1100 years ago is called the Late Classic Period of the Maya. It is what we think of as the Maya Period when such sites as Chichen Itza, Tikal, and El Pilar were built and

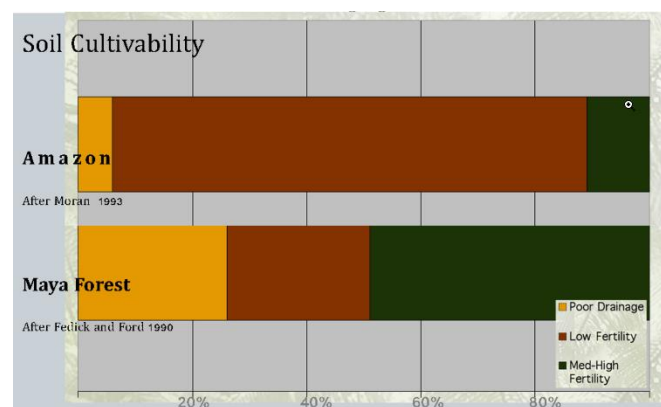
fully occupied. Typical communities were at a density of about one house per acre, each with its own garden.

The Terminal Classic period was from 1100-800 years ago. For some reasons, people in the area stopped maintaining their civic centers. The reason for this is in dispute. Dr. Ford likened it to ghost towns in the western U.S. or areas in city centers like Detroit which has torn town thousands of buildings and replaced them with gardens.

One of the most important points that Ford makes is about the term "arable" land. The term is often to mean "land that can be farmed" but it really means "land that can be plowed". The Maya had planting techniques that did not require plowing.

Ford talked about the people who live at El Pilar. Alfonso Tzul said they learned little of their history in school. They were taught that the Maya were a thing of a past that went away. He came to realize that they didn't go away: "We are the Maya!"

Why did the people who came to the Americas thousands of years ago stop in the El Pilar area in the first place? Because it is an area of fertile soil. In contrast, the Amazon rainforest soil has no bedrock under it and overall is not very fertile.

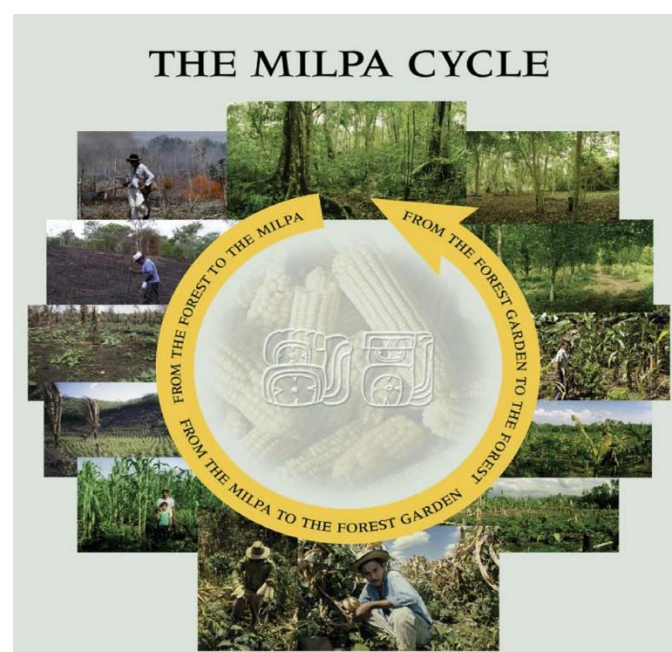


The Maya forest uplands are fertile. A limestone base has an abundance of calcium and other minerals which are good for growing maize (corn). The area does not just produce food. Ford compared the forest with our Costco, although that demeans the forest! She offered this chart of plants

that provide medicines, construction materials, roof thatching, kitchen tools, latex, paper, and poison.

Common Name	Scientific Name	Pollinator Syndrome	Primary Uses
Bay Leaf	Sabal morrisian*	insects	Food, Production
Breadnut	Brosimum alicastrum*	wind	Food, Fodder
Cabbage Bark	Lonchocarpus castilloi	insects	Construction
Chicle	Manilkara zapota*	bats	Food, Latex
Cohune	Attalea cohune *	insects	Food, Construction
Drunken Baymen	Zuelania guidonia	bees	Medicine
Fiddlewood	Vitex gaumeri	bats	Construction
Give-and-Take	Cryosophila stauracantha	beetles	Production
Guaya	Talisia oliviformis*	bees	Food
Gumbolimbo	Bursera simarouba*	bees	Medicine
Hogplum	Spondias radlkoferi	insects	food
John Crow Redwood	Simira salvadorensis*	moths	Construction
Mahogany	Swietenia macrophylla	insects	Construction
Mamee Cirila	Pouteria campechiana	insects	Food
Mayflower	Tabebuia rosea	bees	Construction
Monkey Apple	Licania platypus	moths	Food
Mylady	Aspidosperma cruentum	insects	Construction
Wild Mamey	Alseis yucatanensis	moths	Construction
Wormwood	Piscidia piscipula	bees	Poison
Zapotillo	Pouteria reticulata	insects	Food, Latex

Ford went on to talk about the Milpa Cycle.



"From the Forest to the Milpa, From the Milpa to the Forest Garden, From the Forest Garden to the Forest"

We hear the term "slash and burn" agriculture and think it sound brutal: like "rape and pillage"! But the slashing and burning is only four years of a 20-year cycle.



Yum ik'ob, Fire Tender, Chichimila' Yucatan, Mexico

Yum ik'ob is the fire tender. This is a skilled profession. "Ik" means "wind". They set back-fires to limit the spread. The area can be very dry and people who don't know what they are doing can do real damage.

In a good burn, plenty of trees remain. There are shoots; it is not all dead. Some trees do better after a fire. A certain palm was an example. We can eat the heart of that palm.



Quintana Roo, Mexico

As noted earlier, this area is not suitable for plowing. There are too many rocks. It is not "arable" but that does not mean it can't be farmed. The farmers plant with a stick as in this image:



Planting in rocky soil: plowing is not required for farming in the Yucatan.



Diego, Maya Forest Gardener with corn and beans

She showed an image of seemingly dead corn, but in fact, the corn ears are preserved on the stalks and beans grow up the stalks, so it is very much alive.

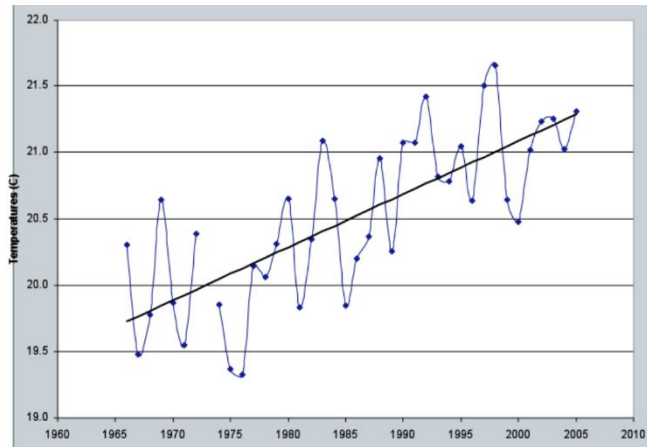


Allspice forest garden keeps ground beneath clear

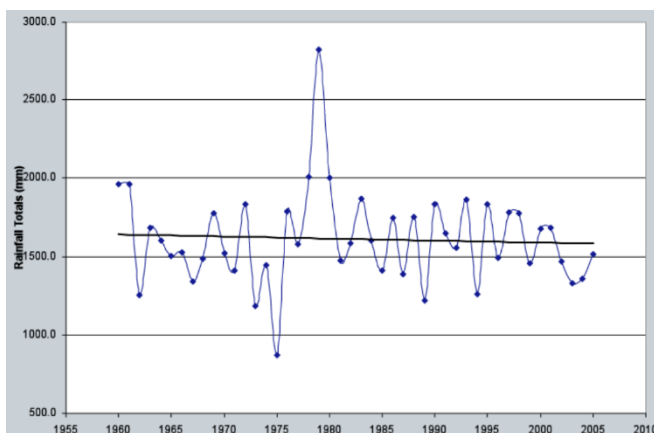
The farmers also plant perennials. Today this might include bananas, but there were other perennials in ancient times.

The Climate Crisis represents a challenge as seen below. Not only is the temperature rising, but the

land is experiencing greater extremes in precipitation than in the past. Monocrops are not helping the situation.



Rising Temperatures, °C : 1966 - 2005



Precipitation Extremes, mm Rainfall: 1966 - 2005

Viceroy Tomás López Medel was one of the Spanish conquerors. He declared that the natives should become more like the people in Spain. He said that agriculture was dirty and should not be near the houses. He destroyed the gardens, the very means of survival for the Maya people!

Dr. Ford talked about an image in the April 1986 National Geographic that was supposed to represent Maya agriculture. Although well intentioned, it got it very wrong. She said the rendering looked like a Mennonite farm with its straight lines! The Maya do not try to keep the forest at bay. The forest is their pleasant home, providing protection from the hot sun.

Ford is concerned that the Heroes of the Maya Forest who know and have lived these skills are dying out. She showed a slide of 15 Maya forest gardening experts, four of whom have died. Bill Gates is trying to record what is known before it is lost, but Maya forest gardening is a skill that has to be practiced or it will be lost.

The area looks so different from a westerner's idea of a farm that even the government thought it was abandoned because the farmers' plots were very steep and looked overgrown. Ford had to write a letter explaining that it is still very much in use with many useful fruit trees, production palms, and undergrowth that enhanced habitat for animals.

Her own house is unique for having trees all around. She is mystified why others in the neighborhood don't want trees around their houses. They need to try it!

She talked of going hunting with Chenchó. He sets up a hammock where the animal lives and waits. When the animal arrives, he knocks it out. He explained how he finds water. You look for the damselfly. It needs flowing water.

She learned a new aesthetic. Chichen Itza in the 1830s was covered with vegetation. It is bare now. It never would have been bare when it was thriving. Clearing out these ancient places actually harms the newly exposed stucco and stone. The trees are needed as shade to preserve the surfaces.

I asked what lessons are applicable today in our own country. She offered these observations: paving everything is a problem. Shade is good, it conserves water. Have a diversity of trees. Support small land holders by shopping at the Farmer's Market.

She noted that the Maya plant where the water is rather than bringing it in.

Audience member Helen said she had visited Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve in Yucatan. She was pleased that only Maya give tours which is good ecotourism. Ford noted that El Pilar is not just

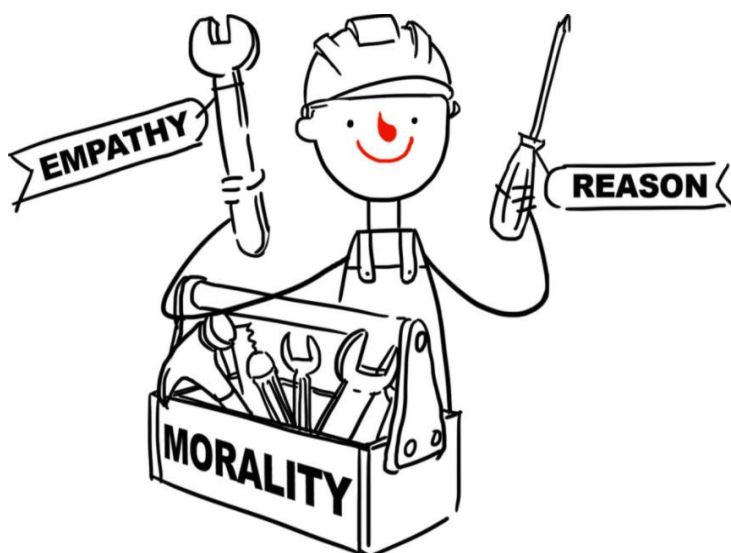
about ecotourism, but it is part of it. Its design is not to support mass tourism but to promote a living museum for local education, regional interactions, and international exchange.

Ford spoke of food "sovereignty" rather than food "security". Farmers who diversify crops with a broad portfolio can support their families and also produce surplus for sale. If they plant half for commercial use and half for local use, they may not face shortages of food or capital.

Ford would like to bring some of the El Pilar farmers here to speak and teach. She is talking with the UCSB Chancellor to present an award and is looking for sponsorships.

Mayan is spoken all over the greater Yucatan, but in lowland Guatemala and Belize most speak Spanish; in Belize there is also English based Creole.

Please go to <http://exploringsolutionspast.org/> for more information about El Pilar or visit their [Facebook page](#).

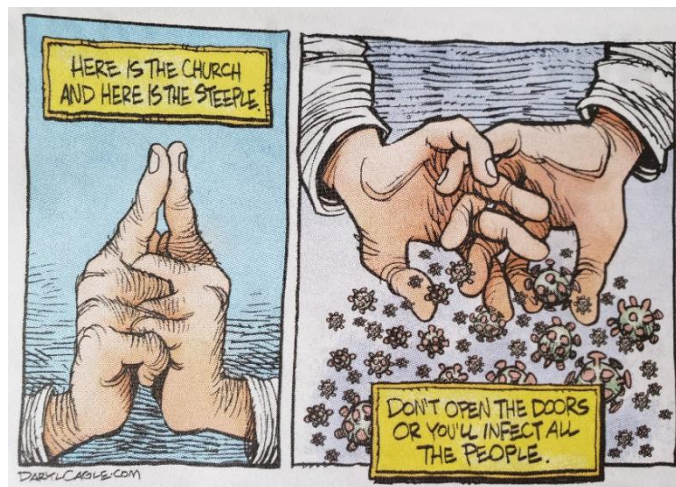


Source: UnderstandingHumanism.org.UK

Dr. Darrel Ray: The Psychology of Religion in a Pandemic - January 10, 2021

By Robert Bernstein

"Ministers are dying to get people into church. Literally. They are dying." So began Darrel Ray's talk to the Humanist Society on how the pandemic is affecting religion and vice versa.



Source: *Freethought Today*, December 2020, pg. 23.
Published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation

In 2010 he gave a talk here on his just-published book, "The God Virus". He predicted a lot, but things turned out to be orders of magnitude worse! He didn't specifically predict Trump or the pandemic.

The God Virus idea is based on biologist Richard Dawkins' idea of memes back in the 1970s: an analogy to genes. A meme is a unit of culture propagated from one head to another.

A virus has one purpose: To get into the body, reproduce and infect more bodies.

"Have you ever been taken over by another organism?" Humanist President Judy Flattery replied, "Not that I am aware of." Ray said that means the takeover was successful!

Rhinoviruses are cold viruses. You can't stop sneezing. That is what the virus does to you to get

to the next person. Rabies is less trivial. The rabid animal goes crazy and bites its victims, spreading the disease to the next host.

Parasites survive by infecting the next host. They don't care if the host dies. Think of malaria or the bubonic plague. The God Virus or God Parasite is analogous.

Brains are repositories of religion. The religion is parasitic on those brains. It doesn't do the host any good. Mormons give away 10% of their money and spend time helping their church.

Toxoplasma gondii is a parasitic protozoan usually carried between rats and cats, but it can infect humans, too. When it infects a rat, it changes the brain of the rat to change its behavior. They lose their natural fear of cats.

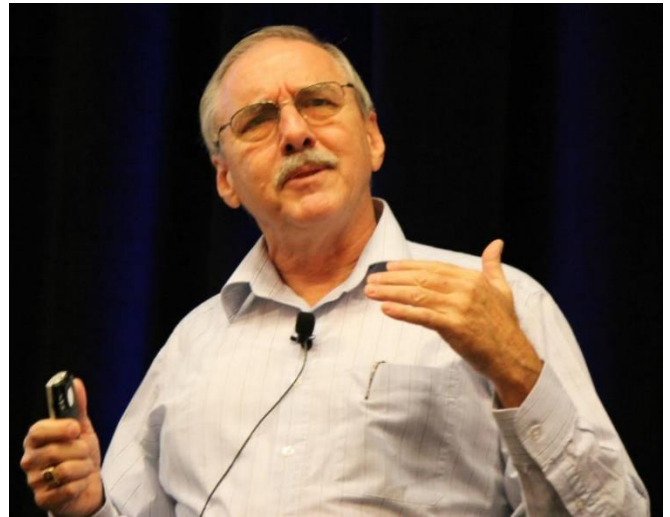
This makes it easy for them to get eaten by cats. And the disease organism can only reproduce in cats. Rats go on to get infected from cat feces to complete the cycle.



Source: Maggie Fox, [Cat poop parasite controls minds early -- and permanently, study finds](#), 9/18/13

The virus actually makes the rats suicidal. The God Virus can have similar effects. He has often heard that atheists are perverts. But what could be more perverted than nuns or priests renouncing sex? In this case it is a form of genetic suicide as those infected with the God Virus fail to reproduce.

Now think of the relationship between pandemics and religion. During the time of the bubonic plague, religion encouraged self-flagellation, burning of imagined witches and persecution of Jews. Religiosity increased.



Dr. Darrel Ray

But religion also spread disease. Religious conquistadors came to North America with guns, steel, and germs. The germs killed many more natives than the guns did. The natives were told they were dying because they were not following the correct religion, so the disease, in turn, spread the religion.

It is notable that the natives who are infected with the God Virus often become more religious than the conquerors.

Religions also build hospitals. They get people during times of stress. Think of the Salvation Army, which targets homeless people.

This doesn't just apply to Western religions. The Ghost Dance culture peaked in the early 1890s among Native Americans who had been decimated by disease. They thought they were protected by their new god and they would be able to take back their land and culture. It did not work.

Ministers are saying this now: "Come to my church and God will protect you from COVID". There are

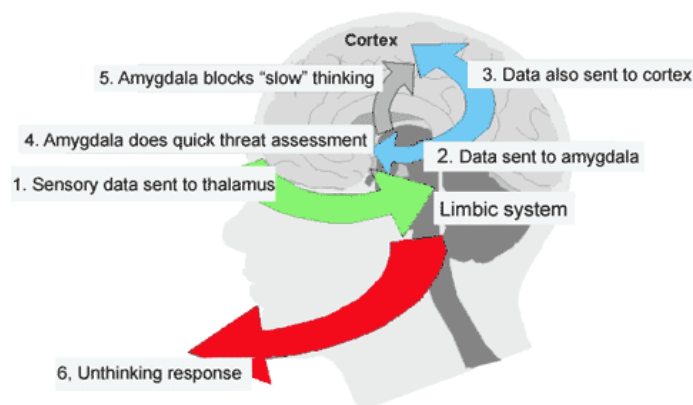
videos of priests berating members who died because they did not have enough faith.

One participant in the talk asked about the plague 700 years before the bubonic plague. Ray called it the Theodosian plague. He said it likely contributed to the fall of Rome as their Roman gods could not protect them and this also led to the rise of Christianity.

Unfortunately, there are no easy remedies. Just as some people are more susceptible to COVID than others, some are more susceptible to the God Virus and other memes than others.

When a Jehovah's Witness knocks on your door, it is as if they are "sneezing on you" to spread their God Virus.

Fox News has been perfecting this for 20 years. They do it by stimulating the amygdala which is the emotion and fear center of the brain. People who watch Fox every day are getting that "be afraid" signal constantly. This is not how we evolved to deal with the normally transient fight or flight situations in nature.



Amygdala Hijacking.

Source: Dani Basket. [The Amygdala Hijack & Me](#)

Dr. Ray was actually glad last year not to have had Thanksgiving with his Fox-viewing relatives!

Once one is infected with a meme, it leads to "social signaling". If all the signs in your neighborhood are Trump signs you get the tribal message.

Ray claimed that the terrorist attack on the U.S. Capitol was probably facilitated by the pandemic. Many ministers have talked of the "End Times" for decades and the pandemic was validating their talk. He noted that many signs at the Capitol were Jesus signs.

Conservatives also use disgust as a powerful motivator. The amygdala and insula respond to this signal. Religionists use these terms of filth and disgust as well. They use it to describe gays, immigrants, and those of other religions or cultures. Once a group is associated with that feeling it is hard to get rid of it.

Religions promote the idea that only their religion can cleanse you and that the "others" need to be killed off.

Leon Festinger developed the idea of "cognitive dissonance" in the 1950s. He studied a group that was dealing with an End Times prophesy that failed. You might think the people would abandon such a group when the End Times failed to occur. Instead, they said that their merciful God spared the world.

The same is happening with Trump, Ray explained. Now that he is a failure for them, they are on to the next variant of the meme: "Take the country back".

I asked if there is any way to reach these people. He said the technique is called "Street Epistemology". Anthony Magnabosco has a YouTube channel of videos of practicing these techniques and a [website](#) where you can learn the techniques, too.



The idea is to avoid getting into a fight. It is about listening and asking questions without trying to convert them.

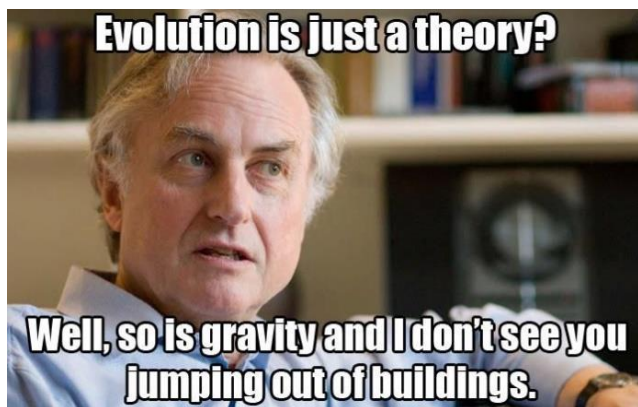
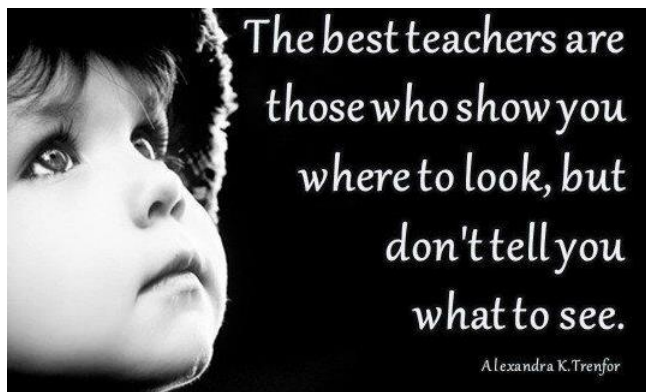
[Magnabosco's questions typically are: "What do you

believe?”, “Why do you believe that?”, and “How do you know it’s true?” As people fully answer those questions in a safe and non-threatening conversation, they may notice weaknesses in their own position or flaws in their own logic without feeling attacked or getting defensive. Magnabosco is masterful! – ed.]

Dr. Ray said that the right plays hardball while liberals play softball. Liberals need to learn to play hardball while keeping their values and liberals have to stop arguing with each other and offer a unified message. If we can agree on 90%, stop arguing and communicate the aligned message.

One must be sensitive to the "bandwidth" of the other person. Some people have very narrow bandwidth or tolerance for politics. If you overload it, the person will get angry and shut you out.

Personalities are strong things and don't easily change. Be kind. Be persistent in questioning. Be gentle.



Richard Dawkins Speaks with Religious High School Students *Submitted by Marian Shapiro*



In 2014, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins was a guest lecturer in a science class in a London religious high school. The students were genuinely engaged, stating their opinions, and asking tough questions. Dawkins spoke calmly and listened to the students' points of view and then responded in a thoughtful and straightforward manner. I wonder if any of these students later questioned their beliefs, having been in this class? Here is the [Dawkins video link](#).



"God finds all the prayers of mankind in his spam folder"

Source: NewYorker

On-Line Events of Interest to Humanists

- February 5: Minnijean Brown-Trickey: *Return to Little Rock: A Seminal Moment in American Civil Rights and Education*. UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [Minnijean Brown-Trickey](#)
- February 9: Yvon Chouinard: *Protecting Public Land*. An evening with the founder of Patagonia. UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [Yvon Chouinard](#)
- February 11: W. Kamau Bell: *Ending Racism in About an Hour*. UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [W. Kamau Bell](#)
- February 11: Speaking of Humanism: *Darwin as Apical Freethought Ancestor*. Presented by the American Humanist Association. [Darwin as Apical Freethought Ancestor](#)
- February 23: Dr. Mae Jemison: *Overcoming Obstacles, Breaking Barriers and Reaching for the Stars*. UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [Dr. Mae Jemison](#)
- February 23: Mark Reimers: *Critical Minds: How America Lost Its Mind: Can Science Shed Light on the Rise of Conspiracy Theories and Delusions?* Presented by the American Humanist Association. [Mark Reimers](#)
- March 4: Author Michelle Alexander: *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Era of Colorblindness*. [Michelle Alexander](#)
- March 11: David Rowell: *Critical Minds: Taking a New Look at Gender Equality*. Presented by the American Humanist Association. [David Rowell](#)
- March 14: Chef José Andrés: *Changing the World Through the Power of Food*. UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [Chef Jose Andres](#)

HSSB Contact Information

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

Our web site, www.SBHumanists.org, archives current and past issues of the Secular Circular. We also have a Facebook Page and a private Facebook Group.

Annual HSSB membership dues: \$36 for an individual, \$60 for a couple, \$100 for a Society Supporter, and \$300 (or more) for a Society Patron. Non-members may subscribe to hardcopy of this newsletter for an annual fee of \$20. E-mail copies provided to members and interested non-members at no charge.

To join HSSB: Send your contact information and a check for your membership dues made out to *Humanist Society of Santa Barbara*, to Mary Wilk, P.O. Box 30232, Santa Barbara, CA 93130. For further membership information contact Mary Wilk at mwilk@cox.net.

For more information about HSSB, contact any of the officers at the email or P.O. Box addresses shown above or call 805-769-4772.

Have the courage to start a conversation that matters



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

HSSB Calendar

Sunday February 14th, 3:00 pm. Dave Flattery *Update on COVID-19 Pandemic Models* Zoom link:
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82598900099>

Tuesday February 16th. HSSB Board Meeting. Click on the following link *as early as 4:45pm for dinner & socializing, meeting begins at 5:00.* <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>

Saturday February 20th, 3:00 pm. Ridvan Aydemir, *The Apostate Prophet*. Zoom link:
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81267182593>

Sunday March 14th, 3:00 pm. Dave Flattery *Update on COVID-19 Pandemic Models* Zoom link:
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82598900099>

Saturday March 20th, 3:00 pm. Dr. Darrel Ray. *Recovering from Religion, How We Help People in Their Journey from Religion* Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87320558703>

Saturday April 17th, 3pm. Dr. Mark Juergensmeyer. *Proud Boys and White Nationalists: Christian Terrorists?* Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88163951335>