



# The Secular Circular

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

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

JUNE 2023

***Please join us for TWO EVENTS this month!***

## **HSSB Summer Soltice Picnic at Stow Grove, Park Area 3**

It's that time of year again! Join us for our annual Summer Solstice Picnic.

All are welcome. Bring a plate, cutlery, and a side dish or dessert to share. We will provide tri-tip, a vegetarian option, and beverages. Play some corn hole or bocce ball, then challenge yourself with our brainteasers and great conversation.



**When: Saturday June 17, noon-3:00 p.m. Where: Stow Grove Park, La Patera, Goleta, Area 3.**  
RSVP to [judithannfontana@yahoo.com](mailto:judithannfontana@yahoo.com) \$5 donation Questions? Call or text 805 280-9175

## **Ending Homelessness Hybrid Event – At Live Oak UU and on Zoom**

There are roughly 1,900 unhoused community members in our county each night. Helping end homelessness is something Humanists and Unitarian Universalists care about. Come hear about ending homelessness from a panel of local experts. See the successes of Santa Barbara's Tiny Homes program and of our countywide homeless response system. Learn how we can support affordable housing and shelter to be developed in our community. This is an opportunity to interact with the experts involved in this effort. "If you haven't heard these speakers yet, you're in for a real eye-opening treat," says Marian Shapiro.

**When: Sunday June 25, 3pm-5pm**

**Where: In person at Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 820 N. Fairview Ave., Goleta, CA 93117 (just above Cathedral Oaks)**

**OR participate on-line. Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.**

**"Solving the homelessness crisis is within our reach if we embrace innovative strategies. I'm proud of our community for coming together to create new, dignified housing opportunities for some of our most vulnerable neighbors." – Gregg Hart**



**Jeff Gaddess, PhD**

**Dignity Moves Project Manager**

Partners with Santa Barbara County creating new, first-of-a-kind, interim supportive housing communities.



**Assemblymember Gregg Hart,**  
former County Supervisor and  
Chair of the county's Elected  
Leaders Forum to Address  
Homelessness.



**Lucille Boss, Encampment  
Response Coordinator,** County  
of Santa Barbara. Working to  
connect the unsheltered with  
shelter, services, and housing.

**The History and Theology of Mormonism:  
Contextualizing The Book of Mormon  
Musical 5-20-23**

*By Robert Bernstein*

Humanist Society President Judy Flattery introduced this talk on Mormonism by noting these relevant Affirmations of Humanism:

- We attempt to transcend divisive parochial loyalties based on race, religion, gender, nationality, creed, class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, and strive to work together for the common good of humanity.
- We deplore efforts to denigrate human intelligence, to seek to explain the world in supernatural terms, and to look outside nature for salvation.
- We believe in enjoying life here and now and in developing our creative talents to their fullest.
- We are engaged by the arts no less than by the sciences.

She then introduced the speaker, Professor Richard Phillips. Phillips grew up in a Mormon household and completed his required mission. He went on to receive a PhD in sociology at Rutgers University. He is now a professor at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville.

Phillips began his talk with more details on his background. He wanted to be a seminary teacher. He chose to study at a secular university so he would be exposed to challenging ideas, better arming him to defend his Mormon faith.

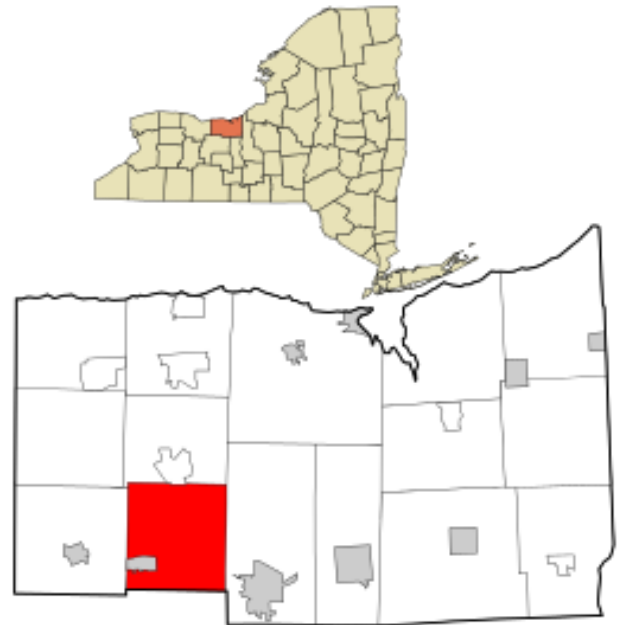
But that is not how things turned out. In college he studied Greek and Hebrew. He realized that secular scholars had a point. This eroded his faith and he left the church of his youth. He became an academic of religion. He kept close ties with his Mormon family and friends. He also

said that he “maintained respect for the faith”. I followed up on this comment after the talk.

His talk covered four aspects of Mormonism:

- Origins of Mormonism
- History and development
- Theology
- Contemporary situation in the political and cultural landscape.

Mormonism began in the Finger Lakes region of New York, near Rochester. In the early 1800s, this was the Western frontier!



This was an era of market revolution, industrialization, and capitalism. The Erie Canal, an enormous undertaking, was completed in 1825. It links the Great Lakes to the Atlantic via the Hudson River. That project brought an influx of speculators along with economic and social upheaval.

In agrarian New York state, all aspects of life were intertwined: family, religion, commerce, and community. Village life was homogeneous. The canal brought an influx of outsiders which led to religious upheaval. People were exposed to new religions. People considered changing

religions. Religious pluralism was corrosive to religious belief. Religion went from being taken for granted to being contested. “One of us or both of us is wrong. We have to defend our beliefs.” This was all new.



Antebellum New York was based on a parish system. You went to church with your neighbors, the same as you went to your neighborhood school. Itinerant clergy appeared who were not attached to a specific church or geographic location. They won followers through their charismatic teachings. People began to join a religion based on taste rather than on neighborhood. This meant that neighbors belonged to different religions. This period was called the “Second Great Awakening”.

The origin of Mormonism is murky. The founder was Joseph Smith, the son of a farmer and small businessman. He was from Vermont, and moved to the Finger Lakes region. Smith was concerned by this pluralism and wondered which church to join.

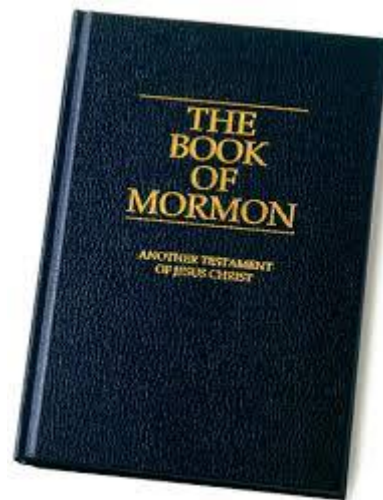
Smith asked God and in 1820 he had a vision. He saw Jesus and God the Father. Their message: All the churches are wrong and corrupt. Joseph Smith will restore true gospel, the primitive Christianity taught by Jesus.

This story has evolved over time. It was written down in 1838. Earlier versions made no reference to deciding which church to join. Historians are divided. There is a second origin story that sounds like it came out of left field, a theological puzzle: Where did Native Americans come from?

Smith noted that Western Europeans were very smart and technologically advanced. Yet, it took until the 1500s to settle North America using their ingenuity. Native Americans were thought to be technologically inferior... so how did they get here? This raised a theological problem for Smith. Maybe there were two Adams and two Eves? It seems like a weird problem to obsess over, especially as a religious question.

The 1830 Book of Mormon offered an answer. It had influence as it offered an interesting and “satisfying” answer. Today we know that the Native Americans arrived over the Bering Strait during the last Ice Age around 14,000 years ago. They walked across, some continuing all the way to Tierra del Fuego.

But this was unknown in the early 1800s. According to *The Book of Mormon* (BOM) as explained by Phillips and in this Wikipedia entry:



Lehi was a prophet who lived in Jerusalem during the reign of king Zedekiah (approximately 600 BC). Lehi was an Israelite of the Tribe of Joseph, and father to Nephi, another prominent prophet in the Book of Mormon. Lehi and Nephi led their family out of Jerusalem, and across the sea to the “promised land” (the Americas). He is also the namesake of the modern-day city of Lehi, Utah.

Lehi gave important teachings to Nephi, which Nephi recorded on metal plates. Lehi had another son Laman. Nephi was righteous, and Laman was wicked. They formed two nations. The Lamanites were dark-skinned. They wiped out the Nephites. The Native Americans are the descendants of the surviving Lamanites according to *The Book of Mormon*.

Joseph Smith somehow found these metal plates created by Nephi. This was the basis for the BOM. The original BOM was not much like the current BOM. It was all about the origin of Native Americans.



On April 6, 1830 Mormonism officially began. It was not very distinct from other Christian sects. It was similar to the Methodist religion in the area. Smith claimed to be in direct contact with the Divine and wrote down his revelations.

He gathered followers and established a settlement in Cleveland. This was the real Western frontier. With Smith as their leader, they ran into trouble. They were clannish and antagonized the locals.

In this era before credit cards and banks it was difficult to get enough cash for transactions. There was no shortage of goods, just shortages of cash, which had to come from far away.

Smith's church helpfully printed its own money, valued at exactly the same value as the dollar. It could be used in their stores as a dollar proxy. But Smith couldn't resist the temptation to print more money than the actual dollars their money

represented. This caused a run on the bank and a currency collapse.



People were understandably very angry and Smith's Ohio community collapsed. They moved to what is now Kansas City, Missouri. Once again they ran into trouble with the neighbors.

The Mormons were Abolitionists, opposing slavery. This didn't sit well with the slave owners in Missouri.

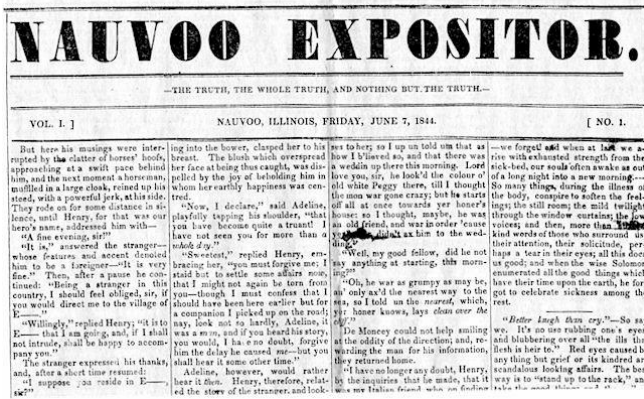
The Mormon church practiced economic communalism. Earnings were pooled, then doled out equally. This created distrust among the neighbors.

The neighbor's biggest concern was Mormon block voting. The Mormons were able to get candidates to promise favors for them in exchange for their block vote. It was all about their own self interest. The Missouri settlement was abandoned. They created a new settlement in Illinois, which they named Nauvoo from the Hebrew for "new" or "modern". There they practiced polygamy.

Phillips noted as a sociologist that charismatic leaders often practice polygamy. He gave David Koresh as an example: "God wants you to have sex with me." Some argue it was just Smith institutionalizing his philandering; others claimed it was about building a dynasty. No one knows when it started or how many wives Smith had. His wives were known to range from 14 to 40s in age.

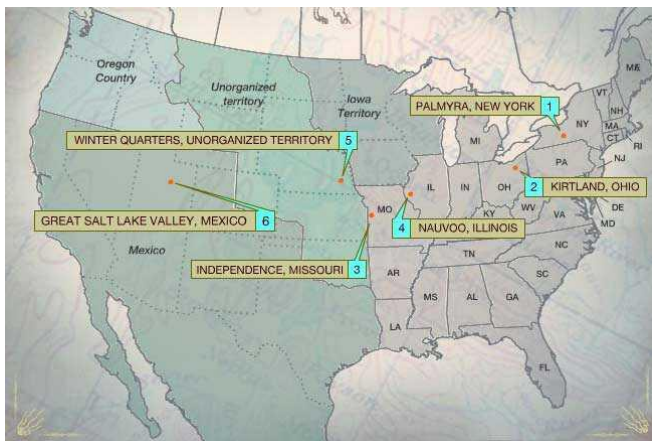
Rumors began to fly. Defectors printed a newsletter called the *Nauvoo Expositor*. Smith

WVU Archives &amp; Special Collections



ordered the destruction of the press. This was a bridge too far. He was arrested and put in jail. A mob assassinated Smith and his brother before the trial could take place. This was in 1844, just 14 years after founding Mormonism.

There was no clear succession plan. Smith was not expecting to die so soon. Mormonism split into fragments, some of which still exist. Some followed Smith's son. Most followed Brigham Young, who led his followers outside the border of the US at that time to the Salt Lake Valley in what is now Utah. That area was left alone during the rising tensions before the Civil War.



The Mormons in Utah practiced polygamy openly. Since everyone was of the same religion, they reestablished the parish system. Remnants of this still exist today.

The Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887 ended polygamy. This led to schisms. Today, there are still some polygamists around St. George, Utah.

Phillips went on to talk about Mormon theology. It has unique innovations different from other Christian sects. Mormons do not accept the Trinity. God has a body and mind separate from his son, Jesus. They are essentially humans.

Mormonism teaches that people had lives before their time on Earth. They lived with their Father in heaven. When people come to Earth, a veil of amnesia has them forget about this pre-mortal life.

Before the Earth began there was a conference in this pre-mortal life. The Father wanted humans to come down to earth in bodily form. There were two plans for how to accomplish that.

- Jesus' plan was for humans to have free will and to see if they could pass the test of following the Ten Commandments.
- Satan's plan was to force everyone to return.

These competing plans led to a civil war in heaven. The result was that Satan and a third of the beings in heaven were cast into hell. Phillips noted that there are other anachronistic parts of Mormonism that are related: some fighters in this heavenly civil war didn't fight valiantly enough. They were sent to Earth as the descendants of the cursed murderer, Cain. This is where Black people came from, according to Mormonism. In 1978 Blacks were allowed to join the church.

Mormons believe that there is only one true church. It is imperative to join this one church to get back to heaven. This involves certain rituals.

One is "Endowment" which involves wearing ritual underwear at all times.

Mormons must be married and the marriage must be between a man and a woman.

Their idea of heaven does not involve a fiery hell.



Instead, there are three degrees of “glory”. The wicked go to one level, but it is still “glory”. Good believers of other religions go to the “terrestrial” level and good Mormons go to the “celestial” level. They become like God. They create their own worlds. God was once human; good Mormon humans can become God.

Mormonism is unique in US history as a religion that dominates an entire state. Three quarters of Utah residents are Mormon. They were able to ban Pornhub in the state. Everyone in Utah is prohibited from working on Sunday. You can’t even mow your lawn.

Provo is very dense with Mormons. People have to be wary of what they put in their shopping carts, lest a neighbor report them for some inappropriate purchase, including coffee, which is banned in the religion. It is a coercive environment.

What about the *Book of Mormon Musical*? It focuses on the young missionaries: 18-19 year old boys. All young Mormon boys must do a missionary mission for two years. They are sent all over the world. The conversion rate is quite low. It is more about helping the missionaries stay in the church than it is about conversion of others.

Even with the low conversion rate, there are 17 million members of the LDS church, scattered across every inhabited continent. It is a wealthy religious group.

Phillips then took questions.

He was asked about the retention rate among younger members. In the 1990s they had a better retention rate than most religions. Salt Lake City is a nice place to live. Many people moved there from LA and other places. Now it is only about half Mormon. This accelerated young people leaving Mormonism.

When Phillips was 19, he didn’t want to go on the mission. There is a great deal of social pressure. Who wants to go to Guatemala for two years and knock on doors? But no young woman would date a young man who did not go on a church mission.

Now half the neighbors are not Mormon. This opens up other opportunities.

Growing up he was told that drinking always leads to alcoholism. When he went off to college he met nice people who had liquor in the house and were not alcoholics.

Mormonism is becoming like other churches. If you don’t like it, you can leave.

Cheryl said she went to the Salt Lake City church to research her family genealogy. She suspects she was added to their database without her consent.

Phillips said this is probably true. They do “salvation” rituals for people born before Mormonism was invented or for others who never had a chance to convert. They are probably doing this for your ancestors.

Another member asked about Phillips’ departure from the church. Phillips said it took a decade to completely leave. His mother is in her 80s and she still thinks it is just a “phase” he is going through. He tried to keep some belief, but found it impossible to believe in any religion.

He was asked why Mormons are all Republicans. It is cultural, not theological. It is about being anti-choice and against gay marriage.

Judy Flattery brought up the 60 Minutes piece aired on 5/14/23 about suspicious finances of the Mormon church. David Nielsen managed their investments with the high ideals. He resigned when he saw they had accumulated \$100 billion that they were not using for humanitarian causes.

Phillips said this is tied to their apocalyptic beliefs. They believe that in the end times, money will be needed to carry on operations. Like the end-timers who hoard guns and food, the Mormon church sees this as prudent financial management, not as greed.

Here is a transcript of that [60 Minutes report](#).

I asked what he meant about still having respect for the religion. He said that the religion has practical benefits. He and his friends didn't drink or smoke pot or become juvenile delinquents.

I compared this to my own upbringing. My father was an atheist research biologist. He taught my brother and me the dangers of smoking and drinking to excess. That worked for us.

Ron asked how modern Mormons deal with modern evidence about Native American ancestry. It seems that the Mormons updated their unusual history to allow that there was a mix of Lamanites and the people who crossed the Bering Strait.

Smart people are very good at inventing ways to believe things that are wrong. It is a feature of some personalities.

Judy Flattery asked about the *Book of Mormon Musical*. Phillips said the *Book of Mormon* show has been good for Mormonism. Any publicity is good publicity.

### **SouthPark's *All About Mormons***

Matt Stone and Trey Parker are the creators of both the long running *South Park* animated TV show and the *Book of Mormon Musical*, winner of 9 Tonys.

The first South Park episode to explore Mormonism was in 2003 (Season 7 episode 12) with *All About Mormons*, which involves a Mormon family moving to South Park. The character Stan learns about Joseph Smith from his new friends. It's one of South Park's most memorable episodes.



Angel Moroni appearing to Joseph Smith in South Park episode, *All About Mormons*.

### ***From Atheist Republic:* News on Mubarek Bala**

In a significant development, US Congressman Jamie Raskin has taken up the case of Nigerian atheist Mubarak Bala. Bala has been sentenced to 24 years in prison for allegedly insulting Prophet Muhammad.

Congressman Raskin, through the Lantos Commission's *Defending Freedoms Project*, aims to bring attention to Bala's unjust imprisonment and advocate for his release. Bala's case highlights the dangers of theocracy and the suppression of freedom of expression and thought.

Congressman Raskin emphasized the urgent need to defend these fundamental human rights globally and called on Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari to issue a pardon for Bala.



The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, alongside other organizations such as Freedom Now and the European Parliament, has also rallied behind Bala's cause, demanding accountability and urging the repeal of blasphemy laws.

Mubarak Bala, the former President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, continues to appeal his conviction while human rights organizations work tirelessly to secure his freedom. Bala's sponsorship by prominent politicians and institutions worldwide underscores the urgent need for the protection of free expression and freedom of belief for atheists.

Armin Navabi and Susanna McIntyre discuss this news here:

<https://youtu.be/AZSbOEgA86E>

### **Remembering The Life of Thomas Paine on the Anniversary of His Death**

June 8<sup>th</sup> commemorates the death of Thomas Paine, who was a brilliantly insightful founding father of the United States, and a key leader of the Age of Enlightenment. The Thomas Paine Memorial Association (TPMA) has been raising

funds to erect a statue to Paine in Washington D.C. The statue is being created by sculptor, Zenos Frudakis. TPMA is working to install the statue for the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, on July 4, 2026.

A bill was passed by Congress late in 2022, sponsored by Representative Jamie Raskin of the Congressional Freethought Caucus approving the statue.

The TPMA, along with the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the Center For Inquiry, and the Freethought Society is sponsoring a program on June 8<sup>th</sup> honoring Paine.

Speakers will include the mayor of Paine's hometown of Thetford, England, leaders of the sponsoring organizations, and Amber Quitno, an elected County Board Member of DeKalb County Illinois, and a modern-day deist. Amber will educate attendees about the nature of deism.

Paine, like other founding fathers, was a deist.

During his life, Paine became a social outcast, particularly for his controversial views on organized religion. He died in poverty on June 8, 1809, and only six people attended the burial at his farm in New Rochelle, New York.

An obituary in the New York Evening Post noted, "...he lived long, done some good, and much harm."

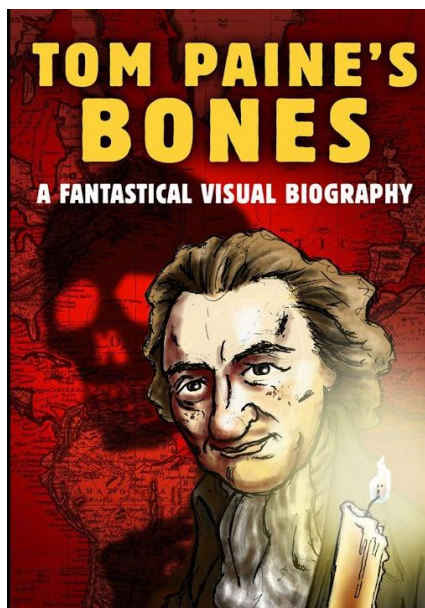
One of the speakers at the Zoom event is Paul Fitzgerald (a.k.a Polyp), a graphic novelist who lives in the English town where Paine's remains were intended to be re-buried (after being disinterred by journalist William Corbett in the US) but the townspeople rejected them as the remains of a blasphemer.

Lord Byron even wrote about the incident, which was widely quoted at the time: "In digging up your bones, Tom Paine, Will Cobbett has done well;

You visit him on earth again;  
He'll visit you in hell."

His remains were ultimately lost, with various people now claiming to be in possession of his skull and other bones.

Fitzgerald created a graphic novel celebrating Paine's life, thoughts, and works.



The program honoring Paine and further explaining Deism will be recorded and available for viewing after the event. Here is the [Zoom link to attend](#).

### Upcoming Events of Interest to Humanists

*Submitted by Diane Krohn*

- June 8: Thomas Paine Day, an on-line Zoom event, sponsored by the SoCal Secular Coalition. [Thomas Paine Day](#)
- June 8-June 22: Dr. Mark Reimers: Further Reflection: The Science of Consciousness. This is a 3-part course, streaming on Zoom; 3 Thursdays, 1 ½ hrs each session. American Humanist Association. [The Science of Consciousness](#).
- July 9: Azhar Majeed: Fighting for Science and Secular Rights in the Halls of Power. Center for Inquiry West, Los Angeles. [Azhar Majeed](#).

### HSSB Contact Information

#### Officers:

*President:* Judy Flattery,

[sbhumanisteditor@gmail.com](mailto:sbhumanisteditor@gmail.com)

*Secretary:* Diane Krohn, [DJKrohn1@gmail.com](mailto:DJKrohn1@gmail.com)

*Treasurer:* David Flattery,

[david.flattery@post.harvard.edu](mailto:david.flattery@post.harvard.edu)

#### Board Members at Large:

Wayne Beckman, Robert Bernstein, Mary Wilk, Judith Fontana

#### Newsletter Editor & Submission Deadline

Judy Flattery, [sbhumanisteditor@gmail.com](mailto:sbhumanisteditor@gmail.com)

Deadline for submissions to the Secular Circular is midnight, the last day of each month. Our web site, [www.SBHumanists.org](http://www.SBHumanists.org), archives current and past issues of the *Secular Circular*. 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 or Donate to HSSB:** Annual Membership dues are \$36 for an individual, \$60 for a couple, \$100 for a Society Supporter, and \$300 (or more) for a Society Patron. Dues payments and other donations can be made via PayPal ([Paypal.me/SBHumanists](https://Paypal.me/SBHumanists)) or check. Include your name and contact information when submitting payments. Make checks out to *Humanist Society of Santa Barbara* and mail to Mary Wilk, P.O. Box 30232, Santa Barbara, CA 93130. [mwilk@cox.net](mailto:mwilk@cox.net). Dues, donations, and payments can also be remitted via this PayPal QR code. Once at the site, select 'Send' then log into your PayPal account to complete the transaction.:



Watch our speaker videos on [YouTube](#). Subscribe to our [Meetup](#) page to be notified of upcoming events.





Humanist Society of Santa Barbara  
P.O. Box 30232  
Santa Barbara, CA 93130

## HSSB Calendar

**Tuesday June 13, 5:00 p.m. HSSB Board Meeting.** Join as early as 4:45pm for socializing. Zoom link:  
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>. Members always welcome to attend.

**Saturday June 17, noon – 3pm. HSSB Summer Solstice Picnic.** Stow Grove Park, Area 3. \$5, bring a dish to pass. All are welcome.

**Tuesday July 18, 5:00 p.m. HSSB Board Meeting.** Join as early as 4:45pm for socializing. Zoom link:  
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>. Members always welcome to attend.

**Saturday July 22, 3:00 p.m. Srishti Hukku. *Artificial Womb Technology*.**  
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.

**Tuesday August 15, 5:00 pm. HSSB Board Meeting.** Join as early as 4:45pm for socializing. Zoom link:  
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>. Members always welcome to attend.

**Saturday August 19, 3pm. Hemant Mehta, *The Friendly Atheist*.**  
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.