
PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

SHSNY Doings

Events in September:

Non-fiction Book Club: Thursday September 7th. 7:00pm

The Vital Question: Energy, Evolution, and the Origins of Complex Life by Nick Lane

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82413289962>. Meeting ID: 824 1328 9962



Fiction book-club: Wednesday September 13th at 7:30

The Wind Knows My Name by Isabel Allende.

In two different times, in two different places, under different and horrible circumstances, two children are separated from their families — a young boy during the Holocaust, a little girl during the recent pandemic at the border. Allende beautifully brings them together, when the boy is now an elderly man.

In person — Karen Engel's apartment, 201 E 17th St. [corner of 3rd Ave.] Apt 18B

Zoom Meeting <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84734035691>. Meeting ID: 847 3403 5691



Monthly Luncheon — we will gather at 12:00 noon on September 17th at **Sathi**, 216 3rd Ave. between 18th & 19th St.



Happy Hour: September 24th, 5:00pm - 7:00pm. Place: Dorothy Kahn's apartment, 132 East 35 St. Apt. 14J. Feel free to bring refreshments, food or drink, to share with the others.

Maybe that should be named Happy Two Hours.

Happy Hour through Ring Central: September 3rd and 10th, 5:00pm - 7:00pm. You can join at 5:00pm using this link: <https://v.ringcentral.com/join/105855751?pw=9c751642372c5b1868a219f7cd5d701e>

Meeting ID: 105855751
Password: yKQTBtyBb2

When did Christianity Die?

S. T. Joshi
from Free Inquiry, June/July 2023

One of the advantages of studying the history of “Christendom” (the domination of the West by Christian monarchs and theologians), as I have been doing for the past several years, is an awareness of just how much things have changed—and changed, from our perspective, for the better. For a millennium and a half after Christianity took over the Roman Empire in the early fourth century, the totality of Western culture (government, law, literature, art, music, and social interaction) was under the sway of Christian doctrine and practice to a degree that most of us cannot even begin to imagine.

The high point of Christendom was perhaps the thirteenth century, and no figure embodied Christian control of all avenues of thought better than Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), still revered by Catholic thinkers despite the obvious fallacies in his “proofs” of the existence of God. But the mere fact that Aquinas felt the need to present such proofs—as his predecessor Anselm (1034–1109) did—suggests that faith in the Christian scripture was increasingly seen, even in that pious era, as insufficient. And the disgraceful behavior of the Papacy, with its multiple popes and its cadre of priests with wives or mistresses, lent a disrepute to Christianity that it has not shaken to this day.

Notwithstanding the tendentious revisionism of religiously inclined commentators, the Renaissance in Europe created a fundamental change in outlook—in the intelligentsia, at any rate. The Renaissance had two chief effects. First, the rediscovery of Greco-Roman culture (literature, history, philosophy) displayed a vibrant pre- or non-Christian civilization and thereby suggested the possibility of a society not under the sway of a dogmatic religion. Second, absorption of the texts of Aristotle and other classical philosophers and scientists indirectly generated the scientific revolution beginning with Copernicus, carrying on through Johannes Kepler and Galileo Galilei, and culminating in Isaac Newton. The result was a radically altered conception of the universe whereby the Earth, far from being the stationary center of all creation, was a tiny grain of sand amid a virtually boundless cosmos. The effect of this revolution cannot be underestimated. As H. P. Lovecraft said in 1917, “A mere knowledge of the approximate dimensions of the visible universe is enough to destroy forever the notion of a personal godhead whose whole care is expended upon puny mankind.”

The seventeenth century was probably the last gasp of Christian dominance. From René Descartes to Blaise Pascal to Baruch Spinoza to Gottfried Leibniz; from the Metaphysical Poets (John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, etc.) to John Milton and John Bunyan, Western thought and literature was still saturated with religion. But cracks were beginning to show. The religious wars of the first half of the century testified to the grim fact that people (or monarchs) were still prepared to go into battle to defend the faith, but there was a countervailing tendency toward religious toleration, for all that capital trials for heresy, blasphemy, and witchcraft were still prevalent. But it gradually seeped into

Western consciousness that killing one another over points of religious doctrine was not such a good idea.

With the eighteenth century, there was a distinct clearing of the air. The French Enlightenment engendered the first authentic atheists—Denis Diderot, Jean d’Alembert, Étienne Condillac, and many others. In 1770, Paul Thiry d’Holbach wrote *Système de la nature* (*The System of Nature*), the most exhaustive treatise on atheism ever written. The skeptic David Hume compactly expressed the most bedeviling problem in Christian theodicy: Why does God allow bad things to happen? It is a problem entirely of Christianity’s own making, wedded as it is to the idea of a god that is both omnipotent and benevolent. Hume asks: “Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?” The question is unanswerable.

The United States was the first nation to repudiate an established church. The founders were well aware of the dangers that a religiously based politics could engender. They knew that the English civil war of the previous century had in part been generated by doctrinaire **Puritans** (who then transplanted their fanaticism to these shores, culminating in the Salem witch trials of 1692), and they had no wish to have their new society embroiled in such shenanigans.

The nineteenth century saw the increasing secularization of society. People may have paid lip service to religion, but writers ranging from George Eliot to Oscar Wilde found little interest in it. Thinkers as varied as John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Mark Twain destroyed whatever remained of the intellectual scaffolding of Christianity. And, as W. E. H. Lecky pointed out (*History of the Rise and Influence of Rationalism in Europe*, 1865), **politics gradually replaced religion as the focus of people’s passion**—a tendency that, for good or ill, has continued down to the present day.

The outbreak of World War I—fought among several nations all purporting to be Christian—sealed that religion’s fate. Secularism was the order of the day. Bertrand Russell became the most astute atheist philosopher in the West, to be joined later by A. J. Ayer, Kai Neilsen, and a host of others. John Beevers, in *World without Faith* (1935), delivered a pungent epitaph of the faith: **“I do not believe that Christianity holds anything more of importance for the world. It is finished, played out. The only trouble lies in how to get rid of the body before it begins to smell too much.”**

His words are as true now as they were when he wrote them. We may still be faced with annoying recrudescences of religious or quasi-religious movements—everything from spiritualism to occultism to the religious Right to QAnon—but these are all just the spasmodic twitching of a moribund behemoth.

After all, it takes a long time for a corpse to decay.

Consciousness and Language

Brian Lemaire

Human language has been created by the human mind.

But could it also work the other way around? That language has helped give rise to human consciousness? Because language gives shape to our thoughts, thus it has allowed us to achieve a level of conscious awareness by making our thoughts more accessible to us.

The human mind is more aware than that of other animals, partly because of our ability to communicate. We have the ability to tell ourselves and others, in spoken language, our reasons for doing things. This means we develop a facility in our brains for monitoring our reasons, our agendas.

It is only once a creature begins to develop the activity of communication, and in particular the communication of its actions and plans, that it has some capacity for monitoring its formation of intentions . . . a level of self-monitoring that keeps track of which situation-action schemes are in the queue for execution, or in current competition for execution—and which candidates are under consideration. Daniel Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* pg. 248

Once we develop this language facility, we can tell ourselves and other people what is going on in our thoughts.

And it works both ways—not just monitoring, but directing. When language came about, it brought into existence the kind of mind that can transform itself on a moment's notice into a somewhat different virtual machine, taking on new projects. For instance when you landed a job, you told yourself, "I am no longer a job-getting machine. Now I am a job-keeping machine." In the course of trying to make sense of our own lives, language helps us keep track by helping us organize our agendas.



Which is truer —
the uncomfortable full dress of words for print,
or wordless conscious not even no one ever sees?
*from **No Telling** by Robert Lowell*

Writer's Strike



 Writers Guild of America West and Meredith Salenger

The revolt of the Christian home-schoolers

Peter Jamison. The Washington Post. May 30, 2023

They were taught that public schools are evil. Then a Virginia couple defied their families and enrolled their kids.

ROUND HILL, Va. — They said goodbye to Aimee outside her elementary school, watching nervously as she joined the other children streaming into a low brick building framed by the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Christina and Aaron Beall stood among many families resuming an emotional but familiar routine: the first day of full-time, in-person classes since public schools closed at the beginning of the pandemic.

But for the Bealls, that morning in late August 2021 carried a weight incomprehensible to the parents around them. Their 6-year-old daughter, wearing a sequined blue dress and a pink backpack that almost obscured her small body, hesitated as she reached the doors. Although Aaron had told her again and again how brave she was, he knew it would be years before she understood how much he meant it — understood that for her mother and father, the decision to send her to school was nothing less than a revolt.

Aaron and Christina had never attended school when they were children. Until a few days earlier, when Round Hill Elementary held a back-to-school open house, they had rarely set foot inside a school building. Both had been raised to believe that public schools were tools of a demonic social order, government “indoctrination camps” devoted to the propagation of lies and the subversion of Christian families.

At a time when home education was still a fringe phenomenon, the Bealls had grown up in the most powerful and ideologically committed faction of the modern home-schooling movement. That movement, led by deeply conservative Christians, saw home schooling as a way of life — a conscious rejection of contemporary ideas about biology, history, gender equality and the role of religion in American government.

Their decision to send Aimee to the neighborhood elementary school — a test run to see how it might work for their other kids — had contributed to a bitter rift with their own parents, who couldn’t understand their embrace of an education system they had been raised to abhor.





1 Arkansas state Rep. Jim Bob Duggar and his wife, Michelle, lead 12 of their 13 children to a polling place in Springdale, Ark., in 2002

Among conservative Christians, home schooling became a tool for binding children to fundamentalist beliefs they felt were threatened by exposure to other points of view.

Over decades, they have eroded state regulations, ensuring that parents who home-school face little oversight in much of the country. More recently, they have inflamed the nation's culture wars, fueling attacks on public-school lessons about race and gender with the politically potent language of "parental rights."

But what should be a moment of triumph for conservative Christian home-schoolers has been undermined by an unmistakable backlash: the desertion and denunciations of the very children they said they were saving.

Former home-schoolers have been at the forefront of those arguing for greater oversight of home schooling, forming the nonprofit Coalition for Responsible Home Education to make their case.

"As an adult I can say, 'No. What happened to me as a child was wrong,'" said Samantha Field, the coalition's government relations director. It is not uncommon for children who grow up in oppressively patriarchal households to reject or at least moderate their parents' beliefs.

Christina, 34, and Aaron, 37, had joined no coalitions. They had published no memoirs. Their rebellion played out in angry text messages and emails with their parents, in tense conversations conducted at the edges of birthday parties and Easter gatherings. Their own children — four of them, including Aimee — knew little of their reasons for abandoning home schooling: the physical and emotional trauma of the "biblical discipline" to which they had been subjected, the regrets over what Aaron called "a life robbed" by strictures on what and how they learned.

Aaron had grown up believing Christians could out-populate atheists and Muslims by scorning birth control; Christina had been taught the Bible-based arithmetic necessary to calculate the age of a universe less than 8,000 years old. Their education was one in which dinosaurs were herded aboard Noah's ark — and in which the penalty for doubt or disobedience was swift. Sometimes they still flinched when they remembered their parents' literal adherence to the words of the Old Testament: "Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod, he will not die."

Aaron: "For a long time, I've wondered why I was so unable to think for myself in this environment," he says today, attributing the shortcoming to "learning that even starting to think, or disagree with authorities, leads to pain — leads to physical and real pain that you cannot escape."

But by the time the Bealls had Aurelia, their fourth child, Aaron had begun to question far more than corporal punishment. "When it came time for me to hit my kids, that was the first independent thought I remember having: 'This can't be right. I think I'll just skip this part,'" he says.

But if that seemingly inviolable dogma was false, what else might be?

“It’s like having the rug pulled out from under your feet,” he says. “All of reality is kind of up for grabs.”

He scoured Amazon for books about evolution and cosmology. Eventually, he found his way to blog posts and books by former Christian fundamentalists who had abandoned their religious beliefs. He watched an interview with Tara Westover, whose best-selling memoir, *“Educated,”* detailed the severe educational neglect and physical abuse she endured as a child of survivalist Mormon home-schoolers in Idaho.

And in the spring of 2021, as he and Christina were struggling to engage Aimee in her at-home lessons, he suggested a radical solution: Why not try sending their daughter to the reputable public elementary school less than a mile from their house?

The dialogue took on a darker tone as Aimee, with Christina’s hesitant agreement, began school that fall. By then, Aaron had told his parents he no longer considered himself a believer.

Despite the sympathy expressed in an email from Aaron’s parents, Christina bristled at the suggestion in the email that her husband’s crisis of faith stemmed from his reluctance to face “hard things” in his life. She knew that reexamining his religious convictions and traumatic memories had perhaps been the hardest thing Aaron had ever done.

Aimee, meanwhile, was thriving at Round Hill Elementary. By the third quarter, her report card said she was “a pleasure to teach,” was “slowly becoming more social and more willing to participate in class” and showed “tremendous growth” in her reading skills, which had lagged below grade level at the beginning of the year.

Now it was Christina’s turn to question her belief — not in Christianity, but in the conservative Christian approach to home schooling. She began to research spiritual abuse and the history of Christian nationalism. Ideas she had never questioned — such as the statement, in a book given to her by her dad, that it “would be a waste of her time and her life” for a woman to work outside the house — no longer made sense.

Her loss of faith in the biblical literalism and patriarchal values of her childhood was coming in the way the movement’s adherents had always warned it would: through exposure to people with different experiences and points of view.

Those people just happened to be her daughter and her husband.

“This is the guy I’ve been married to for eight years,” she recalls thinking. “I know him. I know his heart. I know what kind of parent he wants to be to our kids. These easy answers of ‘Oh, you’re just not a Christian anymore, you just want to sin’ . . . didn’t work anymore.”

Aimee told her parents how her second-grade class had learned that day about Punxsutawney Phil.

Aaron looked at her in bewilderment.

“Phil?” he asked. “Am I out of the loop?”

His daughter stared back at him in disbelief.

“He’s famous!” Aimee said. She explained Phil’s role in predicting the length of winter.

“I knew about groundhogs,” Aaron said. “I just didn’t know about Phil.”

“He’s really famous,” Aimee said.

Christina smiled at her husband.

“Home-schooler,” she said.

These were the gaps Aaron and Christina had become accustomed to finding as they learned about a world whose boundaries extended far beyond the one in which they had been raised. There were so many things they had not learned, and perhaps would never learn.

But they could provide new and different opportunities for their own kids. They were doing so in Loudoun County, one of the hotbeds of America’s culture wars over public instruction about race and gender. To the Bealls, who truly knew what it was like to learn through the lens of ideology, concerns about kids being brainwashed in public schools were laughable.



“People who think the public schools are indoctrinating don’t know what indoctrination is. We were indoctrinated,” Aaron says. “It’s not even comparable.”

The breadth of their children’s education was on display as the Bealls jostled into the school library with other families. It was the second day of Black History Month, and the shelves were set up with displays of books about the Underground Railroad, soprano Ella Sheppard and Vice President Harris. Where the walls reached the ceiling a mural was painted, with Mary Poppins and Winnie the Pooh.

Aaron and Christina stood shoulder-to-shoulder, surveying the room. This was the belly of the beast, the environment their parents had worked to save them from.

“Let’s go out this way, guys,” Christina said, leading the way through an exit when it was time to disperse from the library to listen to the teachers read stories aloud.

The hallways were long and wide, with plenty of room for small legs to gather speed. Soon Aaron and Christina were watching as their children, who knew the way to their classrooms, ran far in front of them.

If you have material you'd like to appear in the next issue of PIQUE or a comment on one of these articles, you can email it to editor@SHSNY.org

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