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# PIQUE

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Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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## Upcoming SHSNY Programs and Events

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**Monthly Brunch:** Sunday, June 18<sup>th</sup> from 12:00–2:00 PM, The Globe Restaurant, 158 East 23<sup>rd</sup> St. near 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. NYC

**Topic:** *Why are junior doctors going on strike?* led by Dorothy Kahn

**NonFiction Book Club,** Thursday, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 7:00 PM

Book: *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000* by Stephen Kotkin

Zoom:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82413289962>

Meeting ID: 824 1328 9962.

**Fiction Book Club,** 7:30pm July 12<sup>th</sup>

Book: *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* by Gabrielle Zevin

Set to be held at Karen Engel's apartment. If you prefer Zoom,

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82413289962>

Meeting ID: 824 1328 9962

Passcode: Read

**Happy Hour.** 5:00pm June 25<sup>th</sup>. Free-flowing conversation and conviviality at Nancy Adelman's, 205 Third Avenue. Feel free to bring refreshment, food or drink, to share with the other revelers.

## SHSNY Doings

Bob Murtha was in town early in June for a memorial service for his long-time partner Charlotte "Charlie" Pomerantz. The services were held at the Church of the Holy Apostles, a beautiful space where Charlie came often to participate in the New York City Community Chorus.

Carlos Mora, Claire Miller, and I attended and said hello to Bob. Bob seemed glad to see the many old friends who came and shook his hand or gave him a hug. Bob has moved to Charlottesville, VA, close to Charlie's daughter, Gabrielle. Gabrielle presided over the ceremonies for Charlie, and works at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville.



Non-fiction book-club: The book for August 3: *The Code Breaker: Jennifer Doudna, Gene editing and the future of the Human Race* by Walter Isaacson

## The Death of Pat Robertson

from an FFRF podcast by Dan Barker & Annie Laurie Gaylor

This month we note the death of Pat Robertson. He founded the 700 Club and the Christian Coalition. Pat Robertson ran for president in 1988

and inaugurated a form of political evangelism that we're seeing a great deal more of today. Pat Robertson said that Feminism led women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians. He blamed mass shootings on liberals and godlessness. With Jerry Falwell, he blamed 9/11 on pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays, lesbians, the ACLU, and People for the American Way. He stood as one of the many evangelical climate deniers. Fundamentalist religious beliefs about dominating the Earth and having an afterlife pose a serious threat to the planet. As the hymn said, this world is not my home; I'm just a passin' through.

Every time a riot breaks out at a school board because the board wants to recognize that gay people exist, that's Pat Robertson's shadow.



## Rebutting the critics of Secular Humanism

Brian Lemaire

In our previous issue, Carl Marxer gave us an article in which he asked Chat GPT “**What are the dangers of Secular Humanism and who are its loudest critics?**” Chat GPT generated an interesting witch's brew of criticisms of secular humanism. Below I take a whack at rebutting them. Parts of Carl's (and Chat GPT's) article are below, with my rebuttals in bold.

One of the perceived dangers of Secular Humanism is its emphasis on individualism and relativism. Critics argue that this can lead to a lack of moral absolutes, which in turn can result in a breakdown of societal norms and values. They argue that without a shared moral framework, people are more likely to engage in destructive behaviors such as drug abuse, promiscuity, and other forms of immorality. From a Christian perspective, absolute truth and objective morality come from God and are revealed in the Bible. Therefore, any worldview that denies the existence of God or the authority of the Bible is seen as denying absolute truth and objective morality.

**We get our ethics and morals from the society at large. Just because we don't share the dogma taught in the Bible, does not mean we don't share in society's moral framework. We very much do share in that framework.**

Another criticism of Secular Humanism is that it undermines traditional values and institutions. Some critics argue that it promotes a radical agenda of social and cultural change, which they believe is harmful to society. They contend that the promotion of individual autonomy and moral relativism is a threat to traditional family structures and religious institutions, which are seen as the bedrock of social stability and morality.

**Some traditional values and institutions we strongly oppose: slavery, and those involved with oppression. Secular humanism was instrumental in reducing their sway. Others we strongly support — those that bring greater equality and level the playing field. And we support those that bring us closer to the ideal of government of the people, by the people, and for the people.**

Another perceived danger of Secular Humanism is that it is elitist and disconnected from the concerns of ordinary people. Critics argue that it is a philosophy that is primarily embraced by the intellectual elite, and that it is out of touch with the needs and values of the majority of the population. They contend that it is a worldview that promotes a sense of superiority among its adherents, who believe that they know what is best for society.

**Racial, sexual, and atheist minorities have suffered at the hands of religious conservatives. It is not elitist when secular humanism works to level the playing field.**



Responding to last month's Chat GPT objections to secular humanism, Helen Bennett sent us her Credo. If you have material you'd like to appear in the next issue of PIQUE or a comment on one of these articles, please email it to [editor@SHSNY.org](mailto:editor@SHSNY.org)

## My Credo

Helen Bennett

Shakespeare said, through Hamlet, "There is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will." This is the traditional view of God, defined by the Random House Dictionary as "the maker and ruler of the world; the one Supreme Being who loves and helps man." Traditionalists believe in divine providence, "God's care and help." Shakespeare said, again through Hamlet, "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow." Everything that happens occurs in accordance with God's private plan. This I do not believe, as there is no evidence for it, and as a Humanist, I rely on evidence to ground my beliefs. But as Unitarian Universalists, and other liberal thinkers, we may redefine God in accord with scientific advances and our own spiritual needs. We may believe, with the Pantheists, that God is Nature, or perhaps more idealistically, that God is Love. Some of us say that the divine is within us, or that God is the great mysterious unknown that is the spiritual core of reality. There are as many distinct definitions of God as there are unique personalities among us, and to some the term God is so amorphous that it defies definition. But as an English teacher and sometime rationalist, I maintain that one cannot believe in something that is indefinable. What do we mean by the term God? How do we decide whether we believe in it or not?

I believe there are two worlds, the world of objective reality and the world of poetry, which includes metaphor, mythology, and make believe. The second world is the world of fantasy and imagination, of beauty and dreams. A visit to this ethereal spot is what makes the real world intelligible and meaningful; it is the hidden world of the spirit. The problem with religion is that most of its adherents mistake the one for the other; they confuse the world of myth with the objective world of the senses and science. In his famous editorial, "Yes, Virginia, There Is a Santa Claus," Francis Pharcellus Church talks of this second world as if it were objectively real, at least to a child. As we mature, we realize he is speaking poetically, metaphorically.

Religion has a place at the center of human existence if we realize it is speaking to us metaphorically. We can adore the concept of God or the Goddess as long as we realize that they are the embodiment of our spiritual longings—not an objective power out there purposefully manipulating our lives. If such is the case, we are unaware of it, so we must concede our agnosticism if we are honest and clear-eyed. When I deny belief in God, it is the objective reality of the God of the Bible that I am more than doubtful about, as this God was created by man. Although I can accept the word “God” as a metaphor for our highest aspirations and ideals, the timeless eternal verities of the boundless universe, I would rather not pin that label on these abstractions. Most people think of God as the great intervener, the creator of our individual destinies. Therefore, as a purist in the English language I would rather not muddy the definition.

People who define God as The Great Unknown or the Totality of Nature are in love with the traditional term “God.” Although they may not adhere to conservative religious beliefs, they wish to retain the concept of deity, as it gives them comfort and a feeling of transcendence. Yes, there is much that is unknown and mysterious about the life force and what makes the universe tick. The agnostic acknowledges this lack of certainty in his self-definition. He says, “The existence of God is unknown or unknowable.” The atheist declares that there is no God who created the world and gives it a purposive direction. But the non-traditional theist, like many UUs here today, wishes to affirm godhead in the Great Mystery, as it makes him feel humble in the face of the vast blankness of a self-driven universe. He thinks that the Humanist lacks humility in arrogantly thinking that human beings are the center of ethics and spirituality.

I call myself a non-theist because I do not believe in the traditional meaning of the term “God” as the founder and director of the vast theater of being. If I claimed that Nature is my god, then I am using this word in a different way in an attempt to seem in agreement with the majority. Why should we call Nature, God or Love, God? Why isn't it sufficient to call Nature, Nature and Love, Love? What is it about divinity that so appeals to our inner cravings? TIME magazine tells us that there is a God gene, and that the most spiritual beings among early man were the survivors because they had a way of forming community and ethical codes. Now that we human beings are more mature, we can form community and ethics without the imposition of a metaphorical concept which we confuse with reality. God is only in our minds and exists with the same kind of reality as great fictional heroes, such as Hamlet or Cinderella. This form of reality is symbolic of our deepest yearnings and ideals.

As a Humanist, I wrote the following definitions in response to a request by the American Humanist Association. They appeared in the September/October edition of *Free Mind*, the newsletter of that organization.

“Humanism is an ethical system based on reason, science, and compassion.

The purpose of Humanism is to improve life on Earth. While appreciating both, Humanism makes the distinction between mythology and reality.

Humanism defines reality as the objective, material world around us; religious terms such as *soul* or *spirit* are metaphors for the higher aspects of our basic animal nature.

Humanism strives to know reality through evidence and the scientific method; its understanding of truth changes with advances in our knowledge.

*God* is a metaphor for the unknown; the more we learn about nature, the less is attributed to the gods.

The basic tenets of Humanism are that progress is possible, and that humankind is responsible, both individually and collectively, for making the world better.

Humanism asserts the mature understanding that there is no Santa Claus, God, or afterlife. Wonders abound in the natural world, and human caring and love are enough to see us through life's disasters. Our immortality exists in the memories of those who knew us and the effects of our actions in our one life here on Earth. All human beings are born alike in dignity and inherent worth."

I would like to quote from Ann Druyan, the wife and collaborator of that great scientist and non-believer, Carl Sagan.

"When my husband died, because he was so famous and known for not being a believer, many people would come up to me—it still sometimes happens—and ask if Carl changed at the end and converted to a belief in the afterlife. They also frequently ask me if I think I will see him again. Carl faced his death with unflagging courage and never sought refuge in illusions. The tragedy was that we knew we would never see each other again. I don't expect ever to be reunited with Carl. The great thing is that when we were together, for nearly twenty years, we lived with a vivid appreciation of how brief and precious life is. We never trivialized the meaning of death by pretending it was anything other than a final parting. Every single moment that we were alive and we were together was miraculous—not miraculous in the sense of the inexplicable or supernatural. We knew we were beneficiaries of chance...That pure chance could be so generous and so kind...That we could find each other, as Carl wrote so beautifully in *Cosmos*, you know, in the vastness of space and the immensity of time...That we could be together for twenty years. That is something which sustains me and it's much more meaningful...The way he treated me and the way I treated him, the way we took care of each other and our family, while he lived. That is so much more important than the idea that I will see him someday. I don't think I'll ever see Carl again. But I saw him. We saw each other. We found each other in the cosmos, and that was wonderful."

I feel as she did about someone I loved. It does not require a real heaven to remember the heaven I knew here on earth.

There are two worlds, the world of concrete reality, which is the world of science, and the world of the imagination. Each is real, but in a different way. We must not confuse the two. If we do, we live in a fairy tale, like most of the religious people of the world. But we cannot solve mundane problems and come to a better way of living with the fairy tale suppositions of traditional religion, which confuses imagination with fact.

I also believe that **no** religion or philosophical view has a monopoly on truth or goodness, but all are united by the attitudes of their people of good will. Caring people of all three of the major "religions of the Book," as well as the adherents of non-theistic, rationalistic humanism, agree that unprovoked aggression, torture, and pain are bad and that innocent people should not be persecuted or killed for the crimes of their families or ancestors. Both the God-fearing and atheists of good will believe in justice, equality, and peace. All want their children to grow and thrive in a fair world that provides the basic needs of human existence, including the love of their fellowman. All people of good will condemn terrorism and torture. All are truly tolerant of their neighbors' point of view, and do not teach that non-believers are condemned to hell. People who are not tolerant of others create their own hell here on earth, and sometimes their innocent victims have to mop up the debris and go on to triumph in the long run.

Helen Bennett



## How to tell a Fascist

Cecil Brown (noted war correspondent)

A Fascist can be a university graduate or a ditch-digger, a factory-owner or a clerk, a millionaire or a pauper.

He may have arrived in America a few years ago, or his ancestors may have come over on the Mayflower. His skin may be white, yellow, or black. He may live next door to you, or a hundred miles away, or a ten thousand miles away.

Wherever he is, the fascist is your mortal enemy.

A fascist is the enemy of everything we hold dearest — our freedom. He is the saboteur of democracy. A fascist hates freedom for others. He has contempt for the people, calls them the rabble and scorns their individual rights.

To a fascist, the most absurd thought ever expressed is "all men are created equal . . . with certain inalienable rights." Such expressions are poison to him.

A fascist lusts for power over those he thinks are beneath him. He cringes before those he thinks are above him. Invariably, he is both a bully and a coward, both an autocrat and a slave.

A fascist is the termite of democracy. He knows democracy must be destroyed if he is to survive, expand, and control. A fascist dies if he cannot enslave others.

A fascist thrives on hate, blind hate. He adores bigotry and prejudice. He loves to whisper to fan discord. He schemes to whiplash minds into ugly snarls.

A fascist will not live in peace beside those who are unlike him, whether he is next door or a thousand miles away. The fascist must sway his neighbor — enslave him or exterminate him.

A fascist nourishes the religious and racial prejudices of the gullible. He whips up verbal and physical outrages against Catholics, Jews, Protestants, Negroes. With devilish skill, he induces people to be anti-Russian, anti-British, anti-Chinese, anti-democracy's leaders, anti-finishing-off-Germany first. He is quite naturally against everything which promises victory for Democracy.

A fascist grows impatient if you indulge in the democratic right to criticize the administration, discuss the mistakes of our allies, or talk about war strategy. The fascist never discusses to reach understandings in the democratic way. The fascist dictates and expects to be obeyed.

A fascist abhors intelligent discussion. A fascist expects to do the thinking for you. He wants you to express his dictation violently. He wants you to denounce in sweeping generalizations. Above all, he wants you to reject any compromise. If you compromise and work out a problem on the basis of good will, then democracy is working. And that is a fatal dose for a fascist.

## How to Tell a Fascist

By CECIL BROWN  
(Noted War Correspondent)

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The Fascist cocks a happy eye toward the employer who gouges his workers every chance he gets. He cheers on those groups of employers who might be able to crush the spirits of workers, and make them amenable to economic and political enslavement.

A Fascist spread rumors to ostracize those employers who recognize that a worker is entitled to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness and the simple dignities of a human being.

The Fascist watches for allies among workers who, in the time of this war, think the number one enemy is the employer, and not the Germans or Japanese. A worker with that idea can transform easily a real grievance into a devastating strike that brings death to democratic soldiers on battlefield. When that happens, the Fascist rubs his hands in ecstatic joy.

A Fascist sits back and bobs his head in approval at congressmen who think it is far less important to beat the Axis than it is to "get that man in the White House."

A Fascist finds ready recruits among the Ku Klux Klan, and those other organizations which spread racial and religious intolerance.

A Fascist detests social changes, he opposes happiness for a people, he is the implacable enemy of peace and security. He wants a world of discord because such a world becomes ripe for his conquests.

A Fascist can never be satisfied until he has "disciplined" other peoples, that is, until he has forced them into slavery, or crushed them forever.

A Fascist talks in glib phrases and is always ready to strike like a snake. A Fascist is the mortal enemy of Democracy. He is forever the enemy of your freedom.

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## Advertising vs. Humanism

Joseph Lisanti

As humanists, we seek happiness in life through reason, scientific method, and empathy with our fellow human beings. By this standard, short of war, advertising may be the least humanistic activity in our society.

The average American is exposed to thousands of advertising messages daily, imploring us to buy the latest (fill in the blank) that will not only accomplish what the product or service was intended to do, but also make us happy.

Consider how cars are marketed. They are not sold as devices to transport us from point A to point B. Instead, we are subtly (and often not so subtly) told that they will enable us to be powerful, sexy, and the envy of our friends and neighbors.

And it's not just cars. Years ago, the comedian Elayne Boosler offered an on-target joke about beauty products. Holding up an imaginary bottle of shampoo, she said, "Look, honey. This will make me taller!" Although people in advertising will tell you that they are in the business of persuasion, that's simply an innocuous way of saying that they are creating artificial demand. The "persuasion" is often driven by subtle lies. A common lie advertisers use is that their product is better. But better than what? Better than not having anything? The dangling comparative leads the viewer or reader of the ad to conclude that the product is better than its competition, even if that isn't true.

Some advertisers use lies of omission. For many years, a popular treatment for headache and other minor pain was a pill known as APC that combined aspirin, phenacetin, and caffeine. One of the most successful brands of APC was Anacin. But in 1983, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration determined that prolonged use of phenacetin could damage the kidneys. When the FDA banned phenacetin, Anacin removed the ingredient. The pill was now only aspirin and caffeine. The advertising message: "Anacin contains the ingredient doctors recommend most for headache pain." Unsaid was that you could take your aspirin with a cup of coffee and essentially get the same effect.

Occasionally, advertisers who cross the line get slapped back. Decades ago, Royal Pudding's advertising jingle claimed the dessert had "more food energy than fresh whole milk." The Federal Trade Commission forced the makers of Royal Pudding to run corrective advertising to explain that "more food energy" was just another way of saying more calories.

In recent years, the FTC has let advertisers get away with exaggerated claims about the efficacy of their products. That has started to change. In April, the FTC warned 670 companies that they could be fined if claims they make about their products could not be substantiated.

Could it be that we'll see the triumph of science over advertising?



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Individual membership \$40 per year; Family membership \$65; Subscription only: \$30; Student: \$20.

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