
PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

SHSNY Doings

Events in October:

Non-fiction Book Club: Thursday October 5th. 7:00pm

Who's in Charge?: Free Will and the Science of the Brain by Michael S. Gazzaniga

Left brain or right brain, who is in charge? Michael Gazzaniga explains free will from the perspective of brain science.

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



Fiction book-club: Wednesday October 11th at 7:30

The Lost Wife by Susanna Moore.

Reviewing this tale of a woman's frontier odyssey from the author of "In the Cut," Anna Mundow notes that Susanna Moore's novel "is indeed based on a true account of one woman's experiences during the Sioux Uprising of 1862. It is, therefore, a thrilling if appalling adventure story. But this narrative is also, indeed primarily, an emotionally intense portrait of a resourceful woman whose courage—and conscience—will be horribly tested by war and barbarism.

In person — Nancy Adelman's apartment, 205 Third Ave. Apt. 6H between 18th & 19th St.

Free drinks for everybody.



Monthly Luncheon — we will gather at 12:00 noon on October 15th at the usual place: **Sathi**. 216 3rd Ave. between 18th & 19th St.

Jennie Frishtick of the Secular Student Alliance will be joining us, discussing what the SSA is learning through their work with young people in secularism..

Happy Hour: October 22th, 5:30pm - 7:00pm. Place: Nancy Adelman's apartment, 205 Third Ave. Apt. 6H between 18th & 19th St. Feel free to bring refreshments, food or drink, to share with the others. September's gathering was a huge success. A rollicking good time at Dorothy's. Thank you Dorothy for hosting!

Happy Hour through Zoom: Sunday, October 1st and 8th, 5:00pm - 6:15pm. You can join at 5:00pm using this link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81285165403?pwd=VGF6T1IrMjVpOFV4eFN0ZzkzbGVjUT09>

Grab a drink and join us virtually on Zoom. Discussions are led by Larry Shaw, renowned Humanist and author.

Meeting ID: 812 8516 5403
Password: 333428



Science vs. Authoritarianism

Andrew G Bjelland PhD

Replying to a George Will opinion column in the Washington Post, 09/13/23. Will's column suggested that a future appointee to director of the CDC should not recommend lockdowns to fight a pandemic.

Part of the problem: Mr. Will believes scientific research issues in certitudes rather than being a matter of ongoing experimentation and falsification or verification of hypotheses.

This is likely due to conservatives' beliefs that scientific certitude must be at least equivalent to the certitude they attribute to their own infallible ideologies—religious, political and economic.



Characteristic orientations of the conservative-authoritarian mind: the demand for certainty; a failure to acknowledge humans dwell in an ambiguous and only partially understood world; reliance on the traditions that undergird the status quo; distaste for ethical ambiguity and moral complexity; intolerance for and scapegoating of the members of "out-groups"; a readily manipulated fearfulness of cultural and social evolution; adherence to the dicta of ever-glorious and infallible autocrats and would-be autocrats.

A Statement of Principles

The social contract: the duty we owe to each other in exchange for being part of the community. That is the duty to treat each other well and fairly. Hannah Arendt and Ayn Rand differ in this area. Hannah Arendt believes in community; Ayn Rand preaches the philosophy of everyone for themselves.

Does atheism mean belief in nothing / anarchy / chaos as one author on C-SPAN's Book-TV claimed? That may or may not apply to Atheism, but secular humanists derive our ethics and morals from the society at large — applying some thought to which of society's ethics we adopt.

This statement of principles drafted by **Paul Kurtz** gives a good a starting place:

We are committed to the application of reason and science to the understanding of the universe and to the solving of human problems.

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 that scientific discovery and technology can contribute to the betterment of human life.

We believe in an open and pluralistic society and that democracy is the best guarantee of protecting human rights from authoritarian elites and repressive majorities.

We are committed to the principle of the separation of church and state.

We cultivate the arts of negotiation and compromise as a means of resolving differences and achieving mutual understanding.

We are concerned with securing justice and fairness in society and with eliminating discrimination and intolerance.

We believe in supporting the disadvantaged and the handicapped so that they will be able to help themselves.

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 want to protect and enhance the earth, to preserve it for future generations, and to avoid inflicting needless suffering on other species.

We believe in enjoying life here and now and in developing our creative talents to their fullest.

We believe in the cultivation of moral excellence.

We respect the right to privacy. Mature adults should be allowed to fulfill their aspirations, to express their sexual preferences, to exercise reproductive freedom, to have access to comprehensive and informed health-care, and to die with dignity.

We believe in the common moral decencies: altruism, integrity, honesty, truthfulness, responsibility. Humanist ethics is amenable to critical, rational guidance. There are normative standards that we discover together. Moral principles are tested by their consequences.

We are deeply concerned with the moral education of our children. We want to nourish reason and compassion.

We are engaged by the arts no less than by the sciences.

We are citizens of the universe and are excited by discoveries still to be made in the cosmos.

We are skeptical of untested claims to knowledge, and we are open to novel ideas and seek new departures in our thinking.

We affirm humanism as a realistic alternative to theologies of despair and ideologies of violence and as a source of rich personal significance and genuine satisfaction in the service to others.

We believe in optimism rather than pessimism, hope rather than despair, learning in the place of dogma, truth instead of ignorance, joy rather than guilt or sin, tolerance in the place of fear, love instead of hatred, compassion over selfishness, beauty instead of ugliness, and reason rather than blind faith or irrationality.

We believe in the fullest realization of the best and noblest that we are capable of as human beings.



Why am I an Agnostic?

Robert Ingersoll

excerpt

When I became convinced that the Universe is natural — that all the ghosts and gods are myths, there entered into my brain, into my soul, into every drop of my blood, the sense, the feeling, the joy of freedom. The walls of my prison crumbled and fell, the dungeon was flooded with light and all the bolts and bars and manacles became dust. I was no longer a servant, a serf or a slave. There was for me no master in all the wide world — not even in infinite space. I was free — free to think, to express my thoughts — free to live to my own ideal — free to live for myself and those I loved — free to use all my

faculties, all my senses — free to spread imagination's wings — free to investigate, to guess and dream and hope — free to judge and determine for myself — free to reject all ignorant and cruel creeds, all the "inspired" books that savages have produced, and all the barbarous legends of the past — free from all the "called" and "set apart" — free from the sanctified mistakes and holy lies — free from the fear of



eternal pain — free from the winged monsters of the night — free from devils, ghosts, and gods. For the first time I was free. There were no prohibited places in all the realms of thought — no air, no space, where fancy could not spread her painted wings — no chains for my limbs — no lashes for my back — no fires for my flesh — no master's frown or threat — no following another's steps — no need to bow, or cringe, or crawl, or utter lying words. I was free. I stood erect and fearlessly, joyously, faced all worlds.

And then my heart was filled with gratitude, with thankfulness, and went out in love to all the heroes, the thinkers who gave their lives for the liberty of hand and brain — to all the wise, the good, the brave of every land, whose thoughts and deeds have given freedom to the sons of men. And then I vowed to grasp the torch that they had held, and hold it high, that light might conquer darkness still.

R.G. Ingersoll
in "Why am I an Agnostic"



We two are clocks, and only count in time . . .

the hand a knife-edge pressed against the future.

— Robert Lowell (1917 - 1977)

Freedom Is a Word I No Longer Trust

New York Times, Aug. 30, 2023



In 2001, women waited to register for classes at Kabul University after the fall of the Taliban. It was the first time women were able to do so there since 1996.

by Sola Mahfouz

When the United States freed Afghanistan from the first Taliban government in 2001, everything in my homeland seemed to change overnight.

My father, a businessman, retrieved his cherished television from its hiding place in our home in Kandahar, where he had stashed it for years after the Taliban banned TV, along with music and cinema, as un-Islamic. Dusting it off, he placed it in a prominent spot in our living room, as if he were reclaiming a part of his own identity. People sang songs of liberation from Afghanistan's past, and we hoisted high the new tricolor national flag that reflected our nation's hopeful trajectory: a black band for the dark past, a red band signifying the blood shed for liberation and a green one representing optimism for the future.

It was as if a smothering veil had been suddenly lifted, revealing a world of color and sound that I, then a young girl regularly confined to our home because of Taliban edicts, had not seen or heard before. Even the sky seemed brighter and wider.

None of us could have dreamed that two decades later the Taliban would be back in power. That fate was finally sealed two years ago Wednesday, when the last American military forces were pulled out and, overnight, we lost our freedom again.

Since then I have come to ask myself: What is freedom, exactly? In other countries, particularly in the West, the answer may seem straightforward. But for Afghans, "freedom" is a word with many faces, a fleeting and fragile thing that passes from one hand to another, each claiming its own version of it. It is a word that I have learned not to trust.

Afghanistan has suffered from a succession of supposed liberators. The Soviets invaded in 1979 to prop up the Communist government at the time, which had vowed to free Afghans from feudalism, backwardness and inequality. The Soviets and their Afghan puppets were opposed throughout the 1980s by the mujahedeen, who were themselves hailed as “freedom fighters” by their backers in the United States. The Taliban later came along, promising to free the country from foreign ideas and the chaos of the nearly 10-year Soviet-Afghan war and civil war that followed. They seized full power in 1996.

President George W. Bush, of course, invoked freedom in justifying the military action that overthrew that first Taliban regime after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, saying of Osama bin Laden and his Taliban protectors: “They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”

The U.S. invasion later that year brought us some of these freedoms. The democracy that ensued was a flawed experiment riddled with corruption. But millions of Afghans, rich and poor, men and women, nonetheless rejoiced in the idea of voting in democratic elections.



Young girls openly attended a formerly clandestine school in Kabul for the first time in 2001.

I can recall other things as a little girl, like suddenly being able to walk with my mother to shop at the bazaar without fear of being lashed by Taliban whips for appearing in public without a male escort. Most exciting, girls were allowed to attend school again. My mother could finally speak openly to me and my siblings of her own college days before the Taliban, when she became a chemistry professor at Kabul University. She was giddy that her three boys and three girls would grow up educated. I stepped into a classroom for the first time at the age of 7, in my new uniform of a black frock, white trousers and a scarf, a bundle of nervous pride tightly clutching the pencils that my father had given me.

In 2016, I left to pursue an education in the United States and watched from afar two years ago as control of Afghanistan swiftly fell to the Taliban again.

As the final American pullout neared in August 2021, my cousin in Afghanistan told me by phone how he had witnessed an elderly woman, her face wet with tears of joy, welcoming triumphant Taliban fighters. She embraced and kissed one young fighter, thanking him for helping to liberate the country from the “heartless, evil” Afghan and American forces that she blamed for killing her three sons in a military raid. Some people showered the Taliban with sweets, a gesture of welcome and reverence in Afghan culture. I was stunned by the contrast between my own family’s fear and despair and that woman’s relief. But how could I blame her? One person’s freedom is another’s oppression. As Albert Camus wrote, “Absolute freedom mocks at justice.”



The first Friday prayer, on Aug. 20, 2021, at Pul-i-Khishti Mosque in Kabul, Afghanistan, since the Taliban took control of the country.

Now back in power, the Taliban have silenced dissent, enforced their strict brand of Islam and erased Afghan women from public life, education and the workplace. The Taliban have applied a doctrine they call *fekri jagra*, or “war of thoughts,” to purge Afghanistan of the ideas they say have been imposed on the people by foreign powers.

In America, I thought that I would finally learn what freedom really was, and I did feel free at first. I could speak my mind, question and challenge others, ride a bicycle and wear whatever I chose to wear.

But even here, it’s not so simple.

Former President Donald Trump has attacked and incited violence against some of the foundations of American freedom — the press, Congress, truth itself. In doing so, he is no different from the other authoritarians and fascists around the world who appeal to mythical or selective notions of freedom that threaten to erase all others.

A growing push by American conservatives to remove books from libraries and public schools on grounds of morality or contested history, or to supposedly free children from the “woke agenda,” reminds me of when I was 11 and Taliban sympathizers came to our home to tell my father that if my

sisters and I returned to school, we would have acid thrown in our faces. This was a few years after the Taliban had been driven from power, yet parts of the country were still under their sway. For the next nine years, books and a slow dial-up internet connection were my only window to the world beyond the four walls of my home.

We should be wary of those who speak of freedom as if it were self-evident and universal. We must look closely at our freedom, as if it were a beam of light passing through a prism, to discern its true colors. We should ask ourselves: Are we really free, or do we live in someone else's idea of freedom, one driven by religious or nationalist myths? Does my freedom to stay ignorant deny your place in history, your identity? Do my rights diminish yours? No matter where we stand politically or geographically, we should weigh the freedom that we seek against the moral cost that we pay to achieve it.

I feel more like an observer of American freedom than a true participant. Freedom is not only a physical or intellectual state; it is emotional. The Taliban takeover has devastated and scattered my family and enslaved my homeland. I will only truly feel free when I can do in Afghanistan the same things that I can do in America.

Comments 271

Socrates commented August 30



Socrates

Downtown Verona, NJ

A very thoughtful essay from a flickering candle amid the darkness. Freedom isn't free; it must be fought for and sustained every waking moment against the forces of patriarchy, authoritarianism, tribalism, religiosity and extremism. There are many layers of freedom. There is the personal freedom to think, read, speak and act freely within a general set of civic laws without causing harm to others. There is the democratic freedom to be fairly represented within a democratic framework of government. There is freedom of religion and freedom FROM religion. There is free will. Most humans - but not all - prefer freedom to lack of it. But a good third of humans lean toward authoritarianism, and it only takes a few of them to ruin it for the rest of us. Remarkably and sadly, this Afghani writer understands freedom infinitely better than many so called 'real Americans' ludicrously demanding 'freedom' from taxation, sensible regulation, basic personal responsibility and public safety rules that are necessary to support the common good of society. In this misbegotten country, 'freedom' has essentially been reduced to a childish, arrested development 'Lord of the Flies' notion that you ought to be able to do whatever you want without any concern for others. It's a version of 'freedom' that rejects and refuses to recognize the society that we're all members of whether we want to admit or not. So here's to real freedom, not the fake, fevered, fascist, flag-waving kind.

7 Replies 260 Recommended

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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