

# PIQUE

The Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

## Upcoming SHSNY Programs and Events

**Freethought Day Brunch, In-Person, October 15, 2022, Noon**

Tony's Di Napoli, 1081 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, NYC  
(Between E.63 & E.64<sup>th</sup> Streets)

**First Sunday & Last Sunday ZOOM Happy Hours of the Month, 5PM ZOOM**

– See [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com) for details

**Sunday Brunch & Conversation**  
Sunday, October 16, 2022.

Time: Noon–2PM, The Globe Restaurant, 158 E. 23rd. St., NYC

Humanist Issues lead by Dorothy Kahn

**Non-Fiction Book Club, Oct. 6th, 7:00 PM, Via ZOOM**

Book: Rules: How We Learn by Stanislas Dehaene

– See [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com) for details

**Fiction Book Club, Oct. 12th, 7:30 PM – In-Person Event**

Book: TBA

– See [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com) for details

## October Chill Brings Warm SHSNY Greetings and Programs

Dr. David I. Orenstein

The colder air approaches as we wave goodbye to the summer and fall 2022. With the cooler weather comes other changes some planned and others unplanned for SHSNY

On the planned side, we are so excited to be holding our fall Freethought Day brunch LIVE and in-person on October 15<sup>th</sup>. Please see the last page of our newsletter for location and cost details. This year, our speaker is Professor Aaron Rabinowitz, who teaches at Rutgers University. Professor Rabinowitz is a rising voice in freethought movement.

Also planned of course are our monthly book clubs which are always so full of interesting discussion, our first and last Sunday Zoom Happy Hours, and of course our wonderful Globe Restaurant brunch the third Sunday of every month. This month we'll be discussing the impact of what a humanist healthcare system might look like.

The unplanned is more personal for me. I will be stepping down as President of SHSNY in January 2023. We will be holding a special election for members to vote on candidates for the board.

Details about who, how and when to vote will appear in our next several newsletters (including this one), and if you're a member in good standing not only can you vote but you can nominate yourself or another SHSNY member to join the Board.

I am stepping down for logistical reasons. My family and I purchased a home in Port Jervis, NY, right before the pandemic. In June of this year, we decided to fully call this our home rather than continue to commute and live in NYC. This change in our living status means

## Uh, What is Secular Humanism, Exactly?

By Laurence Mailaender

It happens to me so often that after speaking with someone new for a few minutes, they ask, “Uh, what is Secular Humanism, exactly?”

I guess we here in the SC (Secular Community) live in a bit of a bubble, because we think-- Who doesn't know this stuff? One acquaintance even confided she had to Google it after meeting me. So, when I get this question, first I ask myself: WWHD? (What Would Hitchens Do?)

Then I take a breath, remember to smile, and give them my usual sound bite, “It means being good without God.” They usually respond “OK” and we move on, but I know my statement begs the question:

“How do you know what Good is?” Well, I could refer them to Plato's writings, but that might be an Argument From Authority, so my usual ready retort is, “My mother taught me.”

The reason I'm bringing it up is we ought to stop and ask ourselves why so many people haven't heard of Secular Humanism.

I mean, it can't be good for enrollment in SHSNY and the rest of the SC. And if we are wondering why the so-called “Nones” (younger, non-religiously affiliated people) aren't signing up in droves for our groups, well, maybe it's partially because they haven't even heard of us!

However, if you ask these same people if they know what Atheism or Agnosticism is, they always do!

I'm away from Manhattan and the five boroughs now almost full-time except when I return to teach.

I have deeply enjoyed my time on the SHSNY Board as both a member and as your President. We have accomplished much during a terrible time in our human history. In addition, the 2021 loss of John Rafferty to COVID-19, can still be felt one year since his sad passing. We all miss John and Donna very much. For what they meant to SHSNY and to all their friends and family both in and outside the freethought movement.

But we have held the line! It wasn't easy but now with the COVID-19 waning (we hope), perhaps now is the time to think about growth and renewal more than ever. This is truly my hope. That the next leaders of SHSNY, those seasoned and those new to the Board will write the next chapter of our wonderful Society's future.

### *Humanism, exactly (Continued)*

I guess Atheism is more aggressive and tends to push people's buttons, it's a more 'sticky' concept. So, while we have our work set out for us to raise our profile, the good news is we also have the opportunity to 'brand' ourselves with the image that we want to stick.

## Welcome New SHSNY Board Member Laurence Mailaender

The SHSNY would like to welcome Laurence Mailaender as the newest member of SHSNY's Board of Directors. Laurence is replacing Dr. David Madison, who joined the Board last year but has chosen to retire.

Laurence holds a PhD in Electrical Engineering and has expertise in signal processing and wireless communications networks such as 4G/5G cellular. Laurence is also the NYC Branch Leader for Center for Inquiry and has been active in the secular community for about 5 years. You can see CFI-NYC's events on Meetup.com under “Center for Inquiry New York City.”

## The Supreme Court Entangles Church and State By Joseph Lisanti

Many Americans believe that the initial right proclaimed in the Bill of Rights is freedom of religion. In fact, the framers of our Constitution thought it more important to first list freedom from religion: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." Only then did they add "or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

For most of our nation's existence, there was a clear separation between church and state. "In God We Trust" first appeared on U.S. coins during the Civil War at the urging of a Baptist minister, but the phrase only became the official motto of the United States in 1956.

For many years, the Supreme Court was a bulwark against the entanglement of religion and the government. In 1962, the Court ruled in *Engle v. Vitale* that public schools could not compose an official school prayer and encourage students to recite it, a landmark decision in the separation of church and state.

Things are rather different today. In the Court's last term, the conservative majority deemed that a public employee engaged in an activity funded by the public may overtly engage in prayer. The case, *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, favored a high school coach's decision to kneel and pray on the field at the end of a football game over a Washington State school's attempt to keep religious expression out of publicly funded events.

In another case decided last term, *Carson v. Makin*, the Court sided with a Maine family that wanted to use state funds to send their child to a religious secondary school. Maine's policy had allowed families in rural school districts without public high schools to use a state allowance to help pay tuition in private non-religious schools. The Court's majority ruled that Maine must allow families to use the program to fund secondary education in religious schools, thus forcing the state's taxpayers to fund proselytizing that they may fundamentally disagree with.

The Court's embrace of religion comes as an increasing percentage of Americans forgo religious affiliation. According to a 2021 Pew Research Center study, 29% of Americans "describe themselves as atheists, agnostics or 'nothing in particular' when asked about their religious identity." That's up from 16% in 2007. As the nation has become more secular, the Court's conservative majority has become more encouraging of religious expression.

## SCOTUS (Continued)

On the surface, one of the most contentious decisions of the Court's last term, overturning the federal right to abortion, was not an issue of separation of church and state. The Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* stated that "The Constitution makes no express reference to a right to obtain an abortion."

Furthermore, it stated that the Fourteenth Amendment's Due Process Clause should not be read to presume that "liberty" protected under it includes the right to abortion. While Chief Justice John Roberts would have maintained *Roe* but allowed Mississippi to ban abortion after 15 weeks, his incremental approach was rejected by the most conservative Court members. Justice Samuel Alito, joined by Justices Clarence Thomas, Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett overturned *Roe v. Wade*.

All five of these Justices are either Catholic or were raised Catholic. Nowhere in their ruling is religion mentioned as a reason to repeal a federal right to abortion and most of the Justices have been careful to stick to legal arguments in any public statements concerning the issue.

Amy Coney Barrett is a notable exception. When she was a law clerk to a federal judge in 1998, Barrett wrote an article in the *Marquette Law Review* that noted the Catholic church's "prohibitions against abortion and euthanasia are absolute." As a result, she wrote, abortion "is always immoral."

Given Justice Barrett's strong anti-abortion statements on religious convictions, she should have recused herself. If she had, the outcome might have been different. Chief Justice Roberts could have joined the other conservatives in restricting abortion, but kept it legal.

Curiously, some of the same people applauding government intervention in this basic health decision also say that government vaccine mandates violate their bodily autonomy. What's more, some people in this country have been quick to raise the specter of Sharia law taking over our judicial system when Muslims are involved in any legal dispute. The Supreme Court has clearly elevated Catholic religious conviction over established precedent.

## Protests Sweep Iran (NY Times)

By Brian Lemaire

Antigovernment protests erupted in cities across Iran on Monday, Sept. 19, after a 22-year-old woman, Mahsa Amini, died in the custody of the country's morality police.

Amini died on Friday, Sept. 16. She had been arrested three days earlier after being accused of violating Iran's hijab law, which requires women to cover their hair and wear loose fitting robes.

The demonstrations, led mostly by women, broke out in more than a dozen cities and on university campuses. Security forces fired on the crowds in Kurdistan, Amini's home province, killing four people, rights groups said.

Crowds called for an end to the Islamic Republic and chanted for the death of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has been ill in recent weeks. Several women removed their hijabs, burning them and waving them in defiance. In Tehran, people chanted "we will fight and take our country back."

"We are witnessing a nationwide reaction," said Hadi Ghaemi, the executive director of the Center for Human Rights in Iran, an advocacy group.

So why does this matter? My opinion: The Iranian government is violating the autonomy of its citizens, forcing the women to wear the hijab. It has become harder to maintain their regressive societal norms in the face of growing use of the World Wide Web. That genie is escaping from the bottle.

## Membership and Giving to SHSNY

Your membership and financial support of SHSNY goes a long way. It helps us to continue to provide fun, interesting, and thought-provoking events and programs each month and throughout the year.

To our members we pledge to always put your needs first. To those who come to our programs, we hope that you will always see SHSNY as a lighthouse for both reason and community.

The SHSNY board all serve as a group of dedicated volunteers, but we can't do it without your help. Membership and giving is simple. You can mail us a check or go to [www.SHSNY.org](http://www.SHSNY.org) to join. Here's a breakdown of membership options:

Membership includes a subscription to PIQUE.

**Individual Membership:** \$40 per year (tax deductible)

**Family Membership:** \$65 per year (tax deductible)

**Student Membership:** \$20 per year (tax deductible)

**Subscription to PIQUE only:** \$30 per year (12 issues)



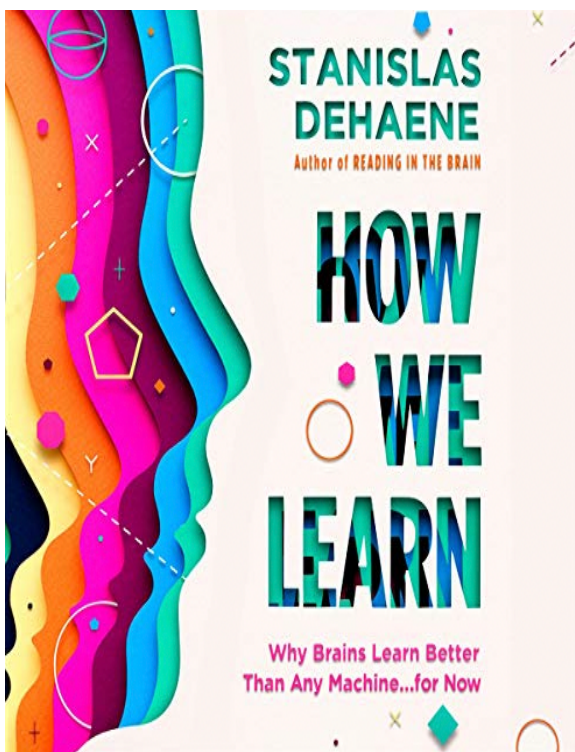
**In Humanism We Trust  
In Reason We Trust  
In Science We Trust  
In Each Other We Trust**

## Spotlight: SHSNY Book Clubs

The SHSNY has two fantastic ongoing book club groups which meet monthly via Zoom.

October's book selections are:

### The Non-Fiction Club Presents:



### The Fiction Club Presents:

TBA

See details on SHSNY's Meetup.com page for meeting dates, times and access.

## Bye Bye Lizzie; It's Been Nice Not Knowing You

By Jonathan Engel

On September 11, the New York Times published an opinion piece by the well-known editor Tina Brown entitled "Queen Elizabeth II Loved Her Job". This got me to wondering: How did Elizabeth Mountbatten-Windsor get this job in the first place? What was the application process like? Did she need to take the GREs? Is there an on-line application portal? It's just that I think I'd be really good at this job, and I'd like to give it a shot.

Okay, I'm being facetious. It's highly unlikely that I'll ever be Queen of England (or King, for that matter). And the closest I'll ever come to Count, Duke, or Prince will be listening to Basie, Ellington, or the guy who recorded "Purple Rain". The thing is, the Queen/King of England has some actual influence and authority. A lot of what they do is ceremonial, but not all of it. And let's not forget the U.K. House of Lords, where peers (not mine, and probably not yours) have actual power to shape legislation and oversee government actions.

Why? Because of who their fathers were? How does that make any sense? Look, any country that allows for the inheritance of wealth from one generation to the next (including the U.S.) can't be a full meritocracy. But this is about more than money. It's also about caste; about having a societal structure that gives some people a permanent leg up because of their "bloodlines". (Remember also how a certain orange-hued, overweight, psychopathic gargoyle living in Palm Beach likes to brag about his supposedly superior bloodlines too). How anti-humanist, to classify people by their genes, regardless of their intelligence, ability, courage, kindness, decency, and all the other human traits that really matter.

So farewell Elizabeth, I guess. I have nothing personal against you, but nothing personal for you either. And I mourn your death to the same extent as you would have mourned mine, which is to say, not at all. I bow to people who through their diligence, intelligence, and decency have made this world a better place. I do not bow to orbs, crowns, or scepters. If you want my respect, show me who you are. Not who your ancestors were.

## Humanist Support for Iran

By Carl Marxer

Mahsa Amini, 22, fell into a coma after being beaten by police in the Iranian capital of Tehran on September 16, 2022. That followed her detention by Iran's morality police for "unsuitable attire" by not properly wearing the Islamic headscarf, known as hijab. She later died of her wounds while in custody. Her death unleashed a wave of anger over issues including freedom in the Islamic Republic and an economy reeling from sanctions.

At least six protesters have now been killed, according to Iranian media and officials, as well as a police officer and two members of a pro-government militia. However, activist groups say the death toll is higher. Significant internet outages were reported across the country, with one of the biggest mobile phone operators disrupted, leaving millions of Iranians offline. Iran has curbed access to social media networks Instagram and WhatsApp amid protests over the death of the woman in police custody, according to residents and internet watchdog NetBlocks.

Humanists around the world have expressed outrage at the police killing of the woman for allegedly breaking the country's strict hijab rules. Humanists UK Vice President Shaparak Khorsandi said: "The Iranian regime kills women for trying to live freely. This is not just Iran's problem, it is the world's problem. Do not look away. This denial of basic human rights is an affront to human dignity. Mahsa Amini cannot speak up any more.

The world should act in solidarity and amplify her voice and the voices of all Iranian women who dare to speak up for choice and democracy." In April of 2020, Humanist International called for Iran to immediately release its prisoners of conscience and human rights defenders during the COVID-19 Crisis. At that time, Iran was reported to have experienced over 5,000 coronavirus-related deaths, though it is suspected that the official death toll was much higher. "All states are obliged by international law to protect the right to life of citizens, and to avoid preventable deaths when individuals are placed in their custody.

International law is clear that aside from being deprived of liberty, people in prison have the same rights as everyone else." Humanists International is particularly concerned with individuals wrongfully imprisoned on the grounds of expressing their beliefs and criticizing religion:

Soheil Arabi, an Iranian blogger and human rights activist was sentenced to death for "insulting the Prophet" in Facebook posts. In 2015, his death sentence was commuted to 7½ years in prison and two years of religious studies to "cure" him of his atheism. Despite being tortured and severely beaten for his views, he has written open letters criticizing the dire prison conditions and the failure of Iranian authorities to adequately protect prisoners during the pandemic. He restarted his hunger strike in April 2020.

Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee, an author and human rights activist who was sentenced to 6 years in prison for the crime of "insulting the sacred" based on one of her unpublished stories which tackled the issue of stoning. She has protested her treatment through repeated hunger strikes. Ebrahimi Iraee was released on bail in April 2019, but the government has continued to persecute her. She was arrested again in November of 2019 on new charges of "insulting the leader", "disturbing public opinion" and "propaganda against the state", which originate from her protest carried out while in detention against the execution of three Kurdish dissidents. She was taken to Gharchak prison, where she remains in detention.

Sina Dehgan was sentenced to death at 21 years of age for messages he sent on an instant messenger app. Sina's court-appointed lawyer failed to plead a key defense in Article 263 of the Islamic Penal Code which allows that the death sentence for insulting the prophet can be reduced if the insults were the result of anger or a mistake. During his trial, the Iranian authorities reneged on their promise to Sina that he would be pardoned if he signed a confession and showed remorse. They instead used his forced confession to justify the death sentence against him, which was upheld by the Iranian Supreme Court in January 2017. Sina's co-defendant Mohammed Nouri, was also sentenced to death in February, 2017 for "insulting the prophet" on social media. Sina and Mohammed's current whereabouts and status are unknown.

### **Iran (Continued)**

Humanists International's Director of Advocacy, Elizabeth O'Casey, cited these cases, saying:

"Humanists International stands in solidarity with these courageous individuals, all of whom have been subjected to cruel and inhumane treatment simply for who they are or for expressing what they believe and whose compromised health makes them especially vulnerable to infection. We call on the Iranian regime to adhere to its obligations under international law and to release these individuals – who, we stress, should not be in prison in the first place – before it is too late."

Why should we here in the US be concerned about these atrocities? The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states that everyone in the United States has the right to practice their own religion, or no religion at all.

It means people shouldn't have to go against their core values and beliefs in order to conform to culture or government. As a minority of religious fanatics push for the US to be known as a 'Christian Nation', the type of religious persecution we see in countries like Iran could become an acceptable part of our US culture.

But the U.S. Constitution is a secular document. It begins, "We the people" and contains no mention of 'God' or 'Christianity'. We must be concerned about religious persecution in all countries, including the United States. Anne Gaylor, founder of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, points out: "There can be no religious freedom without the freedom to dissent."

### **Notice of SHSNY Special Election – Voting Information**

The SHSNY will be holding a special election beginning January 2, 2023 through January 17, 2023. During this time, SHSNY members in good standing will have access to vote for candidates to fill open board positions.

All voting will be conducted electronically. As with the recent election of board members in 2021-2022, the voting will take place via the Internet. A link to the voting website will be made available by December 15<sup>th</sup> to members of the SHSNY community.

If you are a SHSNY member in good standing and wish to serve on the board, please email, [info@shsny.org](mailto:info@shsny.org), to notify us of your intent. You must email us by November 30<sup>th</sup>, to have your name placed on the ballot for nomination.



**SHSNY Board: Dr. David Orenstein (President); Nancy Adelman, Kevon Cameron, Jonathan Engel, Dorothy Kahn, Brian Lamaire, Laurence Mailaender, Carl Marxer, Claire Miller, John Wagner**

**Mailing Address: SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, FDR Station, New York, NY 10150**

The Secular Humanist Society of New York  
Welcomes You to Join Us Live at Our Annual  
**Freethought Day Brunch**

With Guest Speaker Prof. Aaron Rabinowitz



**Professor Aaron Rabinowitz**

*Aaron Rabinowitz is a secular moral philosophy educator with 10+ years of experience helping students develop their capacities for flourishing and value-centered community organizing. He's currently working towards his Ph.D. in Education at Rutgers University, with a focus on developing a new pedagogy of luck. The new approach centers the problem of moral luck as a way to short circuit compulsive meritocratic behavior and replace it with greater compassion, humility and personal fulfillment. He's also the host of two philosophy podcasts, Embrace the Void, and Philosophers in Space which he co-hosts with Thomas Smith. His extended research interests include emerging technologies, personhood, conspiracism, and counterculture memetics.*

**Presentation Topic**  
*“A Humanist Approach to Luck”*

**When: Noon on Saturday,  
October 15, 2022**

**Where: Tony's Di Napoli  
1081 Third Avenue  
(Between E.63 & E.64<sup>th</sup> Streets)**

**Prix Fix lunch includes delicious Italian-style Salad,  
Appetizers, Main Course and Dessert. Also Includes  
Non-alcoholic beverages**

**Alcohol for Purchase**

**Event Cost:**  
**SHSNY Members: \$45.00 Per Person**  
**Non-Members: \$50.00 Per Person**  
**Student/Under 25: \$30.00 Per Person**

**Registration and Payments Accepted via  
SHSNY's Website, [www.SHSNY.org](http://www.SHSNY.org)**

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