

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

September, 2016

Fall felicitations! We're back from summer with five pages of politics (this season, how could we not?). We introduce *three* new Dumbths (politics again), take on the b.s. of "religious freedom", wonder why we believe nonsense, consider how our minds play games with our minds, and attend Jean-Paul Sartre on rationality. A Python and a pig introduce us to new religions, and we posit an apatheist alternative. But first, a small but important break with tradition on a very big subject. – JR

THE ELECTION ISSUES

An Editorial

The Secular Humanist Society of New York – like any other 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization – is prohibited by the 1954 Johnson Amendment to the U.S. tax code from endorsing or opposing political candidates. (*The "Johnson", by the way, was Lyndon, when he was the leader of the Senate - just thought you'd like to know*). Your membership dues and your contributions to SHSNY are federal-tax-deductible because we are an educational (*not* religious) institution according to the definitions of the code.

While fundamentalist Protestant and extremist Catholic churches (and some synagogues) have since the Reagan administration flouted the no-political-endorsements rule (the late Jerry Falwell even made an industry of it), exhorting their flocks to vote Republican, and no Democratic administration has ever had the political will to yank an exemption (perhaps because of all the Democratic politicians who clap hands along with gospel choirs in black churches), the freethought community in America generally – and this organization in particular – have abided by the rules.

This electoral season we're going to stretch the rules a little. Too many of the issues in this campaign – climate change, LGBT rights, reproductive freedom, gun control – are of primary and immediate importance to humanists for us to remain silent in the face of ignorance and bigotry.

We *have* to say something, and in the first five pages of this issue of PIQUE we do. And we will – with contributions from you readers, please – in the next two issues leading up to the November 8 election.

I suffer no illusions about the influence of this little newsletter, or about the political clout of SHSNY. But each of us must do what we can about the possibly terrifying consequences of this bizarre election. While I am at this editorial desk, I cannot remain silent. – *John Rafferty*

IF YOU ARE A SANDERS PROGRESSIVE AND THINKING OF VOTING FOR JILL STEIN ...

John Rafferty

Consider that when asked if she is an anti-vaxxer and/or supports so-called "alternative medicine" she responded with reams of baffle-gab about "big pharma" and did not answer the question, probably so as not to offend people like you who believe in, you know, science.

But the Green Party platform is transparently clear, according to progressivesecularhumanist.com, with "the ridiculous and untenable claim that 'chronic conditions are often best cured by alternative medicine', while promoting 'alternative therapies' like homeopathy".

Please: if you can't stand Hillary, stay home, or just vote the down ticket, because, in simple arithmetic terms, a vote for Stein is a vote for Trump.

Really.



BRENDAN RAFFERTY AGREES*

Jill Stein is being used by the right wing to help elect Trump and she does not care. More votes for the Green party help the party receive federal funding in future elections.

The Bernie-or-Bust crowd, living in denial of the fact that Hillary actually received millions more votes in the primaries, are being completely played.

On Day One of the Democratic National Convention,

BOARD OF DIRECTORS: John Rafferty, *Pres./Editor*; Robert A. Murtha, Jr., *V.P.*; Donna Marxer, *Treas.*; Brian Lemaire, *Secty*; Maria Astifidis; Kiwi Callahan; Dorothy Kahn; Carl Marxer; Claire Miller; Carlos Mora; David Orenstein; John Wagner
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FOX News began running stories about disenchanted Bernie voters switching to support Jill Stein and the Green Party ... before it was even happening.

When Jill Stein showed up inside the DNC to speak to disenchanted Bernie supporters and delegates who were protesting, it was not her idea or some spontaneous event that helped encourage Bernie supporters to support Jill Stein instead of Hillary. FOX News staged the whole thing.

FOX brought Jill Stein into the convention with their own press credentials, and FOX News personality Lisa Kennedy Montgomery walked Jill Stein over to Bernie protesters to encourage them to leave the Democratic Party.

In a YouTube video — https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shXfBjY_etU — you can see Jill Stein walking through the hall with Kennedy Montgomery, to talk to Bernie supporters. And when asked if this was her own idea or that of FOX News, she admits it was arranged with her people by FOX.

**He'd better — JR*

FLASH LIGHT (AND SNOPES) DISAGREE

“False”, says the reliable Snopes.com in response to the anti-vaxxer charges made above and elsewhere in social media, and Flash Light offers the link. See it here: <http://www.snopes.com/is-green-party-candidate-jill-stein-anti-vaccine/>

Comment: The above is indeed a necessary partial corrective, but Snopes does also point out that some of Stein's statements do seem to flirt with the anti-vaxxers. See for yourself. — JR

I DON'T SEE IT AS VOTING FOR CLINTON ...

Bob Haslanger

(Posted on Facebook by Alan Roettinger and Shared by Kevin Jagoe)

I don't see it as voting for Clinton, I see it as voting for the Environmental Protection Agency, Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, Voting Rights Act, Food Stamps, Minimum Wage, Union Rights, the Affordable Care Act, Roe v. Wade, Marriage Equality, the Department of Education, the National and Community Services Act, union activities by federal employees, environmental research at the Department of Energy, USAID, intercity and high-speed rail grants, the Community Development Fund, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, a Corporation for Public Broadcasting Subsidy, the National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, and a liberal majority on the Supreme Court for the next 30 years that will overturn Citizens United.

Plus whatever Senators Sanders and Warren can get done with a Democratic Senate and a Democratic President.

If Trump gets elected, all that is gone.

It's not about Clinton. It's about over 80 years of the progressive movement [*since FDR and the New Deal — JR*] that we're in danger of losing because we're not looking at the bigger picture.

FROM THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY PLATFORM

“Climate change is an urgent threat and a defining challenge of our time. ... The best science tells us that without ambitious, immediate action across our economy to cut carbon pollution and other greenhouse gases, all of these impacts will be far worse in the future. ... We believe America must be running entirely on clean energy by mid-century. We will take bold steps to slash carbon pollution and protect clean air at home, lead the fight against climate change around the world, [and] ensure no Americans are left out or left behind as we accelerate the transition to a clean energy economy.

“We need major federal investments to rebuild our crumbling infrastructure ... The climate emergency and the need to expand the middle class demand that we make the most ambitious investment in American infrastructure since President Eisenhower created the interstate highway system. We will put Americans to work updating and expanding our roads, bridges, public transit, airports, and passenger and freight rail lines. We will build 21st century energy and water systems, modernize our schools, and support the expansion of high-speed broadband networks.

“Democrats will always fight to end discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, language, religion, gender, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability. We need to promote civility and speak out against bigotry and other forms of intolerance that have entered our political discourse.

“Democrats applaud last year's decision by the Supreme Court that recognized that LGBT people — like other Americans — have the right to marry the person they love. But there is still much work to be done. ...

“Democrats are committed to protecting and advancing reproductive health, rights, and justice. We believe unequivocally, like the majority of Americans, that every woman should have access to quality reproductive health care services, including safe and legal abortion — regardless of where she lives, how much money she makes, or how she is insured. ... We will continue to stand up to Republican efforts to defund Planned Parenthood health centers ... and seek to overturn federal and state laws and policies that impede a woman's access to abortion, including by repealing the Hyde Amendment. We condemn and will combat any acts of violence, harassment, and intimidation of reproductive health providers, patients, and staff.

“We will defend the ACA, which extends affordable preventive health care to women, including no cost contraception, and prohibits discrimination in health care based on gender.

“We will appoint judges who defend the constitutional principles of liberty and equality for all, and will protect a woman's right to safe and legal abortion, curb billionaires' influence over elections because they understand that Citizens United has fundamentally damaged our democracy, and believe the Constitution protects not only the powerful, but also the disadvantaged and powerless.”

FROM THE REPUBLICAN PARTY PLATFORM

“We reject the agendas of both the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement We demand an immediate halt to U.S. funding for the U.N.’s Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) . . . We will likewise forbid the EPA to regulate carbon dioxide, something never envisioned when Congress passed the Clean Air Act.

“We support the opening of public lands and the outer continental shelf to exploration and responsible production, even if these resources will not be immediately developed. . . . The current Administration’s Clean Power Plan . . . has been stayed by the Supreme Court. We will do away with it altogether. The Democratic Party does not understand that coal is an abundant, clean, affordable, reliable domestic energy resource.

“We oppose federal licensing or registration of law-abiding gun owners, registration of ammunition, and restoration of the ill-fated Clinton gun ban.

“We support legislation to require proof of citizenship when registering to vote and secure photo ID when voting. We strongly oppose litigation against states exercising their sovereign authority to enact such laws.

“Because of the vital role of religious organizations, charities, and fraternal benevolent societies in fostering generosity and patriotism, they should not be subject to taxation and donations to them should remain deductible. . . . we urge the repeal of the Johnson Amendment.

“We support the public display of the Ten Commandments as a reflection of our history and our country’s Judeo-Christian heritage and further affirm the rights of religious students to engage in voluntary prayer at public school events and to have equal access to school facilities.

“A good understanding of the Bible being indispensable for the development of an educated citizenry, we encourage state legislatures to offer the Bible in a literature curriculum as an elective in America’s high schools.

“Traditional marriage and family, based on marriage between one man and one woman, is the foundation for a free society and has for millennia been entrusted with rearing children and instilling cultural values. We condemn the Supreme Court’s ruling in *United States v. Windsor*, which wrongly removed the ability of Congress to define marriage policy in federal law. We also condemn the Supreme Court’s lawless ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges*

“We assert the sanctity of human life and affirm that the unborn child has a fundamental right to life which cannot be infringed. We support a human life amendment to the Constitution and legislation to make clear that the Fourteenth Amendment’s protections apply to children before birth.

“We understand that only by electing a Republican president in 2016 will America have the opportunity for up to five new constitutionally-minded Supreme Court justices appointed to fill vacancies on the Court. Only such appointments will enable courts to begin to reverse the long line of activist decisions – including *Roe*, *Obergefell*, and the Obamacare cases”

HOW THE “STUPID PARTY” CREATED DONALD TRUMP

Max Boot

(Excerpted from *The New York Times The Opinion Pages*, 7/31/2016)

It’s hard to know exactly when the Republican Party assumed the mantle of the “stupid party”. Stupidity is not an accusation that could be hurled against such prominent early Republicans as Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Elihu Root and Charles Evans Hughes. But by the 1950s, it had become an established shibboleth that the “eggheads” were for Adlai Stevenson and the “boobs” for Dwight D. Eisenhower – a view endorsed by Richard Hofstadter’s 1963 book, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, which contrasted Stevenson, “a politician of uncommon mind and style, whose appeal to intellectuals overshadowed anything in recent history”, with Eisenhower – “conventional in mind, relatively inarticulate”. The John F. Kennedy presidency, with its glittering court of Camelot, cemented the impression that it was the Democrats who represented the thinking men and women of America.

Rather than run away from the anti-intellectual label, Republicans embraced it for their own political purposes. In his “time for choosing” speech, Ronald Reagan said that the issue in the 1964 election was “whether we believe in our capacity for self-government or whether we abandon the American Revolution and confess that a little intellectual elite in a far-distant Capitol can plan our lives for us better than we can plan them ourselves”. Richard M. Nixon appealed to the “silent majority” and the “hard hats”, while his vice president, Spiro T. Agnew, issued slashing attacks on an “effete core of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals”.

William F. Buckley Jr. famously said, “I should sooner live in a society governed by the first 2,000 names in the Boston telephone directory than in a society governed by the 2,000 faculty members of Harvard University.” More recently, George W. Bush joked at a Yale commencement: “To those of you who received honors, awards and distinctions, I say, well done. And to the C students I say, you, too, can be president of the United States.”

Many Democrats took all this at face value and congratulated themselves for being smarter than the benighted Republicans. Here’s the thing, though: The Republican embrace of anti-intellectualism was, to a large extent, a put-on. At least until now.

Eisenhower may have played the part of an amiable duffer, but he may have been the best prepared president we have ever had – a five-star general with an unparalleled knowledge of national security affairs. When he resorted to gobbledygook in public, it was in order to preserve his political room to maneuver. Reagan may have come across as a dumb thespian, but he spent decades honing his views on public policy and writing his own speeches. Nixon may have burned with resentment of “Harvard men”, but he turned over foreign policy and domestic policy to two

Harvard professors, Henry A. Kissinger and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, while his own knowledge of foreign affairs was second only to Ike's. ...

In recent years, however, the Republicans' relationship to the realm of ideas has become more and more attenuated as talk-radio hosts and television personalities have taken over the role of defining the conservative movement that once belonged to thinkers like Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz and George F. Will. The Tea Party represented a populist revolt against what its activists saw as out-of-touch Republican elites in Washington.

The trend has now culminated in the nomination of Donald J. Trump, a presidential candidate who truly is the know-nothing his Republican predecessors only pretended to be. ...

Mr. Trump even appears proud of his lack of learning. He told *The Washington Post* that he reached decisions "with very little knowledge" but on the strength of his "common sense" and his "business ability." Reading long documents is a waste of time because of his rapid ability to get to the gist of an issue, he said: "I'm a very efficient guy." What little Mr. Trump does know seems to come from television: Asked where he got military advice, he replied, "I watch the shows." ...

Recently, he declared that he would not necessarily come to the aid of the Baltic republics if they were attacked by Russia, apparently not knowing or caring that Article 5 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty obliges the United States to defend any NATO member under attack. Last week, Mr. Trump even invited Russia's intelligence agencies to hack the emails of a former secretary of state — something impossible to imagine any previous presidential nominee doing. It is genuinely terrifying that someone who advances such offensive and ridiculous proposals could win the nomination of a party once led by Teddy Roosevelt, who wrote more books than Mr. Trump has probably read. It's one thing to appeal to voters by pretending to be an average guy. It's another to be an average guy who doesn't know the first thing about governing or public policy.

The Trump acolytes claim it doesn't matter; he can hire experts to advise him. But experts always disagree with one another and it is the president alone who must make the most difficult decisions in the world. That's not something he can do since he lacks the most basic grounding in the issues and is prey to fundamental misconceptions.

In a way, the joke's on the Republican Party: After decades of masquerading as the "stupid party", that's what it has become. But if an unapologetic ignoramus wins the presidency, the consequences will be no laughing matter.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

The pages of PIQUE will be open to your opinions about the current election in both the October and November issues. Please send your essays, short or (not too) long—or Forward enlightening items or opinions from the media—to editor@shsn.org. All are invited to the debate: members, friends, fellow-travelers.

WHY TRUMP? WHY NOW?

John Rafferty

"Extreme inequality fractures communities, and after a while the cracks gape so wide the whole edifice comes tumbling down. In this process everybody has been losing for some time, but perhaps no one quite as much as the white working classes who really have nothing, not even the perceived moral elevation that comes with acknowledged trauma or recognized victimhood. The left is thoroughly ashamed of them. The right sees them only as a useful tool for its own personal ambitions. This inconvenient working-class revolution we are now witnessing has been accused of stupidity – I cursed it myself the day it happened – but the longer you look at it you realize that in another sense it has the touch of genius, for it intuited the weaknesses of its enemies and effectively exploited them. The middle-class left so delights in being right! And so much of the disenfranchised working class has chosen to be flagrantly, shamelessly wrong."

The "it" that "happened" — in Zadie Smith's essay in the August 18 issue of *The New York Review* — was the "Brexit" vote in the UK, the populist uprising that will take Britain out of the European Community.

Now, read Smith's paragraph again, and substitute for Brexit in the UK the nomination by a major American political party of Donald Trump for the presidency of the United States. Eerie, isn't it? The "disenfranchised working class" voting "stupidly" against its own best interests, while the "middle-class left" (that's us, humanists) is "ashamed" of them and the opportunistic mainstream right wing is fumbling its attempts to harness their anger.

That anger — of white, less-educated American men — is by now a given, even a cliché in our political discourse. But the flip side of that anger is our "middle-class left" disdain.

Yes, we are appalled and ashamed as Americans that Donald Trump's rallies bring out some of our worst people, as well as the worst in some of our otherwise decent people: racism, xenophobia, misogyny, violence.

But look past the racists and thugs in the TV images and focus on the polite, polished people who are looking for someone — anyone — who will upend the inequality and injustice they see all around them: their jobs sent overseas, their local economies ruined, their government in deadlock, their army permanently at war, their safety at risk from a fanatical new enemy ... and the values and beliefs of the country they think they grew up in mocked everywhere in the media except on FOX News.

Many of them, I believe, know in their gut that Donald Trump is a phony and a liar, but they are thrilled to see and hear someone on the national stage who is promising to do things — however improbable — who not only beat in the primaries but made fools of the establishment politicians they despise, who is disrupting the whole broken, rigged system, and who promises to make "their" America (whatever that is) "great" again.

Remember that white-bearded man in the red shirt who

was caught on TV saying “Wow” when Trump suggested that “second amendment people” could deal with Hillary Clinton? He’s Darrell Vickers, yes, a Trump supporter, but he told CNN the next day:

“One of the things, if we’d had the chance to talk to him, I would have taken him to the shed. Down here in the South, we don’t curse in front of women, we don’t drink liquor in front of the preacher and we don’t make jokes like that in public.”

I think I’d like Darrell Vickers, and I don’t think Donald Trump would. Trump appeals to racists and thugs, yes, but he has also stirred to wakefulness people like Darrell, who *want* real change, who *want* a 21st century revolution.

Believe it or not, they are *our* opportunity.

WE’RE NOW THE BIGGEST “RELIGIOUS” VOTING BLOC

Christopher Ingraham

(with italic emphasis added – JR)

(Excerpted from “The non-religious are now the country’s largest religious voting bloc”, on The Washington Post wonkblog, 7/14/2016)

More American voters than ever say they are not religious, making the religiously unaffiliated the nation’s biggest voting bloc by faith for the first time in a presidential election year. This marks a dramatic shift from just eight years ago, when the non-religious were roundly outnumbered by Catholics, white mainline Protestants and white evangelical Protestants.

Religious Composition of Registered Voters

	<u>2008</u>	<u>2016</u>
No Religion	14%	21%
Catholic	23	20
White Evangelical	20	20
Mainline White Prot’	19	14
Other Religions	9	11
Black Protestant	9	9
Other Protestant	5	6

These numbers come from a new Pew Research Center survey, which finds that “religious ‘Nones’, who have been growing rapidly as a share of the U.S. population, now constitute one-fifth of all registered voters and more than a quarter of Democratic and Democratic-leaning registered voters”. That’s a 50 percent increase in the proportion of non-religious voters compared with eight years ago, when they made up just 14 percent of the overall electorate. ...

“In 2008, religious ‘nones’ were outnumbered or at parity with white mainline Protestants and white Catholics,” the survey’s lead researcher, Greg Smith, said in an interview. “Today, ‘nones’ outnumber both of those groups.”

The growth of the non-religious — about 54 percent of whom are Democrats or lean Democratic, compared with 23 percent at least leaning Republican — could provide a political counterweight to white evangelical Protestants, a historically powerful voting bloc for Republicans. In 2016, 35 percent of Republican voters identify as white evangelicals, while 28 percent of Democratic voters say they have no

religion at all.

But while the religiously unaffiliated are making up a larger share of American voters, that doesn’t necessarily mean that that will translate into actual votes. Exit polls of people who actually cast votes — as opposed to preelection polls of registered voters — have traditionally shown that the unaffiliated underperform at the ballot box relative to their raw numbers.

For instance, in the 2012 election, the unaffiliated made up 18 percent of registered voters in preelection polls but only 12 percent of the people who actually voted. Some of this difference may be due to the different ways the two polls ask religious-affiliation questions, but Pew’s researchers say that the underperformance of the non-religious is a very real phenomenon.

“While the group is growing rapidly in the general public, its growth has been much less dramatic in the electorate,” Pew’s Smith said. “It could be the ‘nones’ are not connected, almost by definition, to religious institutions, which can play an important role in spurring turnout and interest in politics.” Smith also points out that the unaffiliated tend to be younger than the religious and that young people tend to vote less than older people.

Still, the Pew study finds other evidence that religion may be becoming a less potent force at the ballot box. In 2008, for instance, 72 percent of voters said it was important for a president to have strong religious beliefs. That number is down to 62 percent today.

Similarly, Americans see religious institutions as playing a smaller role in the public sphere. In 2008, 75 percent said that churches and other houses of worship contributed a great deal to solving social problems. Today, that number has fallen to 58 percent.

LET’S NOT BLOW THIS

John Rafferty

Please read the preceding piece and realize that we — the nones, the humanists, atheists, skeptics, freethinkers — have a never-before-in-our-lifetimes opportunity to make a serious difference in a national election.

We *must* defy the history of low turnout by “the religiously unaffiliated”, us. We *must* awaken the media and the American political oligarchy to the new-found strength of our numbers by turning out in record numbers to defeat the most anti-rational, anti-humanist major-party presidential candidate this country has ever produced.

Don’t make the mistake of assuming that because Donald Trump can’t win New York, New Jersey or Connecticut (you’re right, he can’t) you can take a pass on Election Day. This year your vote can count more than ever when the pundits on Election Night announce,

“Here’s a shocker from our FOX News analysis team: exit polling indicates that more than 90 percent of the religiously unaffiliated voted against Donald Trump.”

That’s when we will be taken seriously in American politics — this election, the next one, and every one from now on. It’s not enough for us to be the biggest dog in the fight; we have to act — and fight — like it.

SHSNY CALENDAR: SEPTEMBER-NOVEMBER, 2016

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, SEP 1, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

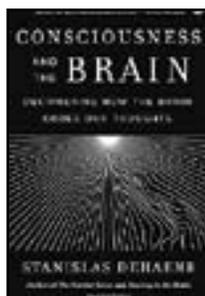
28 East 35 St. (front lounge)

We'll discuss

CONSCIOUSNESS
AND THE BRAIN:

Deciphering How the Brain
Codes Our Thoughts
Stanislas Dehaene

How does our brain generate a conscious thought? And why does so much of our knowledge remain unconscious? Thanks to clever psychological and brain-imaging experiments, scientists are closer to cracking this mystery than ever before.



Stanislas Dehaene describes the pioneering work his lab and those of other cognitive neuroscientists worldwide have accomplished in defining, testing, and explaining the brain events behind a conscious state. We can now pin down the neurons that fire when a person reports becoming aware of a piece of information and understand the crucial role unconscious computations play in how we make decisions.

A joyous exploration of the mind and its thrilling complexities, *Consciousness and the Brain* will excite anyone interested in cutting-edge science and technology and the vast philosophical, personal, and ethical implications of finally quantifying consciousness.

– Paperback & Kindle available

Join us even if you haven't finished reading. The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, OCT 6, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
A SHORT HISTORY OF
NEARLY EVERYTHING

Bill Bryson

Taking as territory everything from the Big Bang to the rise of civilization, Bryson seeks to understand how we got from there being nothing at all to there being us.

To that end, he has attached himself to a host of the world's most advanced archaeologists, anthropologists, and mathematicians, travelling to their offices, laboratories, and field camps.

“An always supremely clear and entertaining adventure in the realms of human knowledge. Science has never been more involving or entertaining.”

– Paperback & Kindle available

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, NOV 3, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME
(1998 edition)

Stephen Hawking

A landmark volume in science writing by one of the great minds of our time: How did the universe begin – and what made its start possible? Does time always flow forward? Is the universe unending? Are there other dimensions in space? What will happen when it all ends?

Told in language we all can understand, *A Brief History of Time* plunges into the exotic realms of black holes and quarks, of antimatter and “arrows of time”, of the big bang and a bigger God – where the possibilities are wondrous and unexpected.

– Paperback & Kindle available

SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
MON, SEP 12, 6:30 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
THE CANDIDATE

Just in time for the presidential politics season, this 1972 classic stars Robert Redford as the neophyte liberal of the title and Peter Boyle as the cynical operative who manages his at-first no-hope campaign for the Senate.



The Academy Award-winning screenplay is smart and viciously funny in a *Why-are-we-laughing-at-this?* way.

After-Film Discussion:

Let's talk 2016 "realpolitik".

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.
(But put something on the bar besides your elbow.)

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION
SUN, SEP 11, 11:30 am
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

We gather in the saloon's back room, where the pub-grub menu has been enhanced with an \$11 breakfast special, the Bloody



Marys are hot, the beer is cold, and conversation sparkles.

Come join 20 or more freethinkers for food, fun and great, convivial conversation, including the Dorothy Kahn-led ...

After-Brunch Discussion:

Where do humanists get their news?

SHSNY CALENDAR: SEPTEMBER-NOVEMBER, 2016

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, SEP 28, 7 pm
 Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
 140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
**THE PARTICLE AT THE END
 OF THE UNIVERSE:
 How the Hunt for the
 Higgs Boson Leads to the
 Edge of a New World**
Dr. Sean Carroll

Scientists have just announced an historic discovery on a par with the splitting of the atom: the Higgs boson, the key to



understanding why mass exists, has been found.

Caltech physicist Sean Carroll takes us behind the scenes of the Large Hadron Collider at CERN to meet the scientists and explain this landmark event.

We didn't really know for sure if anything at the subatomic level had any mass at all until we found it. The fact is, while we have now essentially solved the mass puzzle, there are things we didn't predict and possibilities we haven't yet dreamed. We only discovered the electron just over a hundred years ago, and considering where that took us—from nuclear energy to quantum computing—the inventions that will result from the Higgs discovery will be world-changing.

Great Lectures on DVD is FREE
(But put something on the bar besides your elbow.)

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MEET US ON MEETUP

www.meetup.com/shsny-org/

TEXT US ON TWITTER

@SHS_NewYork

STUDYING HUMANISM

MON, SEP 26, 6:30 – 8:30 pm
 Community Church of New York
 28 East 35 St (Gallery)
 2016-17 Meeting/Discussion #1
**"The Basics of Humanism
 in a Political Year"**

We begin our fifth year of studying the philosophy we live by with, as usual, a review of the "What-is-humanism?" basics (all online, no book to buy).

And, since presidential politics is unavoidable this season (see pages 1-5), our first two-hour discussion of the "semester" will be framed by the question: Is there a "Political Humanism"?

Readings:

Online: at americanhumanist.org/

- Edwords: *What is Humanism?*
- Edwords: *The Humanist Philosophy in Perspective*
- Doerr: *Humanism Unmodified*

Note: *Studying Humanism is a study group, not a book club. If you have not done the reading, you may audit the discussion. All are welcome, definitely including newcomers!*

PLANNING AHEAD

The usual SHSNY schedule is ...

Book Club: First Thursday
 at the Community Church of NY

Movie Night: Second Monday
 at Stone Creek Lounge.

Brunch: Third Sunday
 at Stone Creek Lounge

Great Lectures: 4th Wednesday
 at Stone Creek Lounge.

Studying Humanism: Last Monday
 at the Community Church of NY

More info: www.shsny.org
 and/or 646-922-7389

(leave a call-back number)

Q.: How do you make God laugh?

A.: Tell him your plans.

– John Cleese

AN EVENING WITH

TONI VAN PELT
 WED, SEP 21, 6:30 pm, at
 NY Society for Ethical Culture
 2 West 64 Street
**The Religious Freedom
 Restoration Act:
 FREEDOM? OR A LICENSE
 TO DISCRIMINATE?**

Using religious objections, individuals, businesses and institutions are claiming a right to discriminate against women, LGBTI people and the disabled, using the same arguments used in the 1960s opposing laws requiring integration in restaurants because of "sincerely held beliefs" that God wanted the races to be separate.



Imposing beliefs on others who do not share them goes against the very core of secular humanist, feminist and shared American family values and principles.

Ms. Van Pelt, President and Public Policy Director of the Institute for Science and Human Values, will discuss the history of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) and outline the damage it has done to date and its potential for future damage. She will also discuss ways *you* can help to stem the tide of religious special exceptions to the rule of law and to assist in and insist on the establishment of secular moral principles in American culture.

The evening is Co-Sponsored by:

- Secular Humanist Society of New York
- New York Society for Ethical Culture
- Secular Coalition for New York

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS A SHIELD NOT A WEAPON

Roy Speckhardt

Exec. Director, American Humanist Association

(Excerpted from *TheHumanist.com*, 8/12/2016)

Religious freedom isn't an excuse to be a bigot, it isn't a free license to discriminate, and it's definitely not a weapon politicians can wield to force their way of life on to others. But in recent years, regressive politicians and fundamentalist religious figures have discovered that by pretending religious freedom provides just those insidious qualities, they can hold sway over Americans who don't share their backward views. Progressive religious and secular people have shied away for far too long from directly confronting these bogus claims to an inherently discriminatory mutation of religious freedom.

Unfortunately, the type of religious freedom pushed by the religious right has gained traction in Congress and in some states, which have introduced so-called "religious freedom" bills that allow discrimination against the LGBTQ community and deny women access to reproductive healthcare based on "sincerely-held religious beliefs" or "moral convictions".

For example, in North Carolina, a U.S. federal judge is hearing a challenge to State Senate Bill 2, which allows magistrate judges to "recuse [themselves] from performing all lawful marriages...based upon any sincerely held religious objection". In California, a coalition of conservative groups and individuals is advocating against State Senate Bill 1146, which protects LGBTQ students in religious universities, on the grounds that it infringes upon their religious liberty. These groups claim that by requiring religious universities and colleges to publicly disclose their stance toward LGBTQ students and to treat LGBTQ students equally in order to receive state funding, the bill "is harmful to the free exercise of religion in higher education".

At the federal level, Congress is considering the First Amendment Defense Act (FADA), which would prohibit the government from taking "discriminatory actions" against any person or entity that acts according to "a religious belief or moral conviction that marriage is or should be recognized as the union of one man and one woman" and that "sexual relations are properly reserved to such a marriage". FADA would effectively sanction discrimination against same-sex married couples, unmarried couples, and families with children born out of wedlock in all areas of civic life—employment, housing, business and healthcare.

Another bill Congress is considering is the Child Welfare Provider Inclusion Act, which would allow child welfare agencies to refuse to provide services that "conflict with the provider's sincerely held religious beliefs or moral convictions". Adoption agencies would be allowed to refuse to place children in homes with same-sex couples, interracial couples and single people based on the agency's views on homosexuality, interracial relationships and single parenting.

These bills are based on a fundamental and intentional misinterpretation of religious freedom. True religious freedom starts with the absence of a state religion and includes strict government neutrality that does not promote or privilege any religious view. True religious freedom also provides protections for all to believe or not as they see fit. Just like other essential freedoms, religious freedom doesn't provide a free pass for anyone to interfere in someone else's life, so it only allows religious practices that don't burden others. Religious freedom, properly understood, is a shield that protects us from impositions from government, religious majorities, employers, and others in power who might otherwise threaten what we see fit to think and do.

Though someone might believe differently from you or engage in behavior that is contrary to the teachings of your faith, that doesn't allow you to invoke religious freedom to discourage their belief or prevent their behavior. This sort of flawed thinking must be forcefully rejected if the American people want their government officials to spend less time crafting discriminatory legislation and instead focus on policies that unite people of all faiths and no faith.

THE HAZARDS OF APATHEISM

Joel Galker

One of the things I like to do on weekends is to get out on a Meetup walk for the exercise, seeing new sights in some of the neighborhoods of NYC, socializing with acquaintances, and once in a while to even make a new friend. What could be wrong with that?

But as it happened a couple of weeks ago when I was on a walk in the South Bronx, I happened to sneeze. Dammit – when I sneeze I don't welcome commentary, especially religious exegesis. But I was blindsided by a woman, no doubt well meaning, who said to me, "god bless you" or maybe "God bless you". I was stunned and gave it a split second of thought. A smart alec could have said, "god who?" A militant New Atheist might have disputed the unstated assumptions and instructed her on the downside of theism.

But as a sociable person, an Apatheist who doesn't much care about whether God/god does or doesn't exist, and as a Secular Humanist who thinks it's best to do right by other people, and as a Radical Pragmatist trying to get on with life and avoid taking the bait, it was a conundrum.

Ought I to have been more optimistic, as Descartes might have advised, because a well meaning acquaintance improved my chance of going to heaven, or was I a traitor to the Secular Community by saying "Thanks" and cowardly taking refuge in wishy-washy Apatheism?

What's an Apatheist to do?

ANOTHER POSSIBLE DESCRIPTION OF US?

(From *AWordADay.com*)

nul•li•fid•i•an *n.* 1. A person having no faith or religious belief. *adj.* 1. Having no faith or religious belief.

Comment: *Feh. Don't personally like it, because it's negative; I like "secular humanist" because it makes a positive point.* – JR

WHY WE HUMANS BELIEVE IN NONSENSE

Walter Balcerak

A married virgin is impregnated by one of the incarnations of a monotheistic god. She gives birth to a child who assumes a second identity of that god. As an adult, this man/god is executed to expiate the curse inflicted on humanity by a third identity of the monotheistic god. That malediction is caused by the world's first woman because she follows the advice of a talking snake.

About 600 years later, Muhammad, a prophet of the monotheistic god, ascends on a flying horse to a blissful kingdom in the sky where he is greeted by seventy virgins.

How is it possible for billions of human beings to believe such fantasies? Historian Yuval Noah Harari offers an answer in his bestselling book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. The capacity to believe myths, he asserts, has enabled our species, *Homo sapiens*, to prevail over other members of the human genus, such as the Neanderthals, and to propagate and dominate every corner of the globe.

Harari divides the history of *Sapiens* into three major revolutions: The Cognitive Revolution, the Agricultural Revolution, and the Scientific Revolution. The crowning achievements of the first revolution were a huge increase in our intelligence and a related development shared with no other species: language. It is language, he believes, that permits the creation and sharing of myths that foster social cooperation and expansive political organization.

"As far as we know," Harari writes, "only *Sapiens* can talk about entire kinds of entities that they have never seen, touched or smelled.

"Legends, myths, gods and religions appeared for the first time with the Cognitive Revolution.... [F]iction has enabled us not merely to imagine things, but to do so collectively. We weave common myths such as the biblical creation story, the Dreamtime myths of Aboriginal Australians and the nationalist myths of modern states. Such myths give *Sapiens* the unprecedented ability to cooperate flexibly in large numbers."

This ability explains, for example, why a small sect of believers in a virgin birth and a divine trinity was able to slay the polytheistic gods of Rome and convert most of Europe and Central and South America. It also explains why a tribe in Arabia, led by Muhammad, could convert and conquer much of the Middle East and North Africa.

Common myths are the founding basis of religions, states, judicial systems, and most cooperative human organizations. "Yet," Harari concludes, "none of these things exist outside the stories that people invent and tell one another. There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings."

(Next issue, I will present Harari's thoughts on the evolution of religions. I recommend the hardcover version of his book, which is printed on high-quality paper and contains many color illustrations.)

CONSCIOUSNESS: THE MIND MESSING WITH THE MIND

George Johnson

(Reprinted from *The New York Times Science Times*, 7/4/2016)

A paper in *The British Medical Journal* in December reported that cognitive behavioral therapy — a means of coaxing people into changing the way they think — is as effective as Prozac or Zoloft in treating major depression.

In ways no one understands, talk therapy reaches down into the biological plumbing and affects the flow of neurotransmitters in the brain. Other studies have found similar results for "mindfulness" — Buddhist-inspired meditation in which one's thoughts are allowed to drift gently through the head like clouds reflected in still mountain water.

Findings like these have become so commonplace that it's easy to forget their strange implications.

Depression can be treated in two radically different ways: by altering the brain with chemicals, or by altering the mind by talking to a therapist. But we still can't explain how mind arises from matter or how, in turn, mind acts on the brain.

This longstanding conundrum — the mind-body problem — was succinctly described by the philosopher David Chalmers at a recent symposium at The New York Academy of Sciences. "The scientific and philosophical consensus is that there is no nonphysical soul or ego, or at least no evidence for that," he said.

Descartes's notion of dualism — mind and body as separate things — has long receded from science. The challenge now is to explain how the inner world of consciousness arises from the flesh of the brain.

Michael Graziano, a neuroscientist at Princeton University, suggested to the audience that consciousness is a kind of con game the brain plays with itself. The brain is a computer that evolved to simulate the outside world. Among its internal models is a simulation of itself — a crude approximation of its own neurological processes.

The result is an illusion. Instead of neurons and synapses, we sense a ghostly presence — a self — inside the head. But it's all just data processing.

"The machine mistakenly thinks it has magic inside it," Dr. Graziano said. And it calls the magic consciousness.

It's not the existence of this inner voice he finds mysterious. "The phenomenon to explain," he said, "is why the brain, as a machine, insists it has this property that is nonphysical."

The discussion, broadcast online, reminded me of Tom Stoppard's newest play, "The Hard Problem", in which a troubled young psychology researcher named Hilary suffers a severe case of the very affliction Dr. Graziano described. Surely there is more to the brain than biology, she insists to her boyfriend, a hard-core materialist named Spike. There must be "mind stuff that doesn't show up in a scan".

Mr. Stoppard borrowed his title from a paper by Dr.

Chalmers. The “easy problem” is explaining, at least in principle, how thinking, memory, attention and so forth are just neurological computing. But for the hard problem — why all of these processes feel like something — “there is nothing like a consensus theory or even a consensus guess,” Dr. Chalmers said at the symposium.

Or, as Hilary puts it in the play, “Every theory proposed for the problem of consciousness has the same degree of demonstrability as divine intervention.” There is a gap in the explanation where suddenly a miracle seems to occur.

She rejects the idea of emergence: that if you hook together enough insensate components (neurons, microchips), consciousness will appear. “When you come right down to it,” she says, “the body is made of things, and things don’t have thoughts.”

Proponents of emergence, who have become predominant among scientists studying the mind, try to make their case with metaphors. The qualities of water — wetness, clarity, its shimmering reflectivity — emerge from the interaction of hydrogen and oxygen atoms. Life, in a similar way, arises from molecules.

We no longer believe in a numinous life force, an élan vital. So what’s the big deal about consciousness?

For lack of a precise mechanism describing how minds are generated by brains, some philosophers and scientists have been driven back to the centuries-old doctrine of panpsychism — the idea that consciousness is universal, existing as some kind of mind stuff inside molecules and atoms.

Consciousness doesn’t have to emerge. It’s built into matter, perhaps as some kind of quantum mechanical effect. One of the surprising developments in the last decade is how this idea has moved beyond the fringe. There were three sessions on panpsychism at the Science of Consciousness conference earlier this year in Tucson.

This wouldn’t be the first time science has found itself backed into a cul-de-sac where the only way out was proposing some new fundamental ingredient. Dark matter, dark energy — both were conjured forth to solve what seemed like intractable problems.

Max Tegmark, a physicist at the Massachusetts Institute of Physics (he also spoke at the New York event), has proposed that there is a state of matter — like solid, liquid and gas — that he calls perceptronium: atoms arranged so they can process information and give rise to subjectivity.

Perceptronium does not have to be biological. Dr. Tegmark’s hypothesis was inspired in part by the neuroscientist Giulio Tononi, whose integrated information theory has become a major force in the science of consciousness.

It predicts, with dense mathematics, that devices as simple as a thermostat or a photoelectric diode might have glimmers of consciousness, a subjective self.

Not everything is conscious in this view, just stuff like perceptronium that can process information in certain complex ways. Dr. Tononi has even invented a unit, called phi, that is supposed to measure how conscious an entity is.

The theory has its critics. Using the phi yardstick, Scott Aaronson, a computer scientist known for razorlike skepticism, has calculated that a relatively simple grid of electronic logic gates — something like the error-correcting circuitry in a DVD player — can be many times more conscious than a human brain.

Dr. Tononi doesn’t dismiss that possibility. What would it be like to be this device? We just don’t know. Understanding consciousness may require an upheaval in how science parses reality.

Or maybe not. As computers become ever more complex, one might surprise us someday with intelligent, spontaneous conversation, like the artificial neural net in Richard Powers’s novel *Galatea 2.2*.

We might not understand how this is happening any more than we understand our inner voices. Philosophers will argue over whether the computer is really conscious or just simulating consciousness — and whether there is any difference.

If the computer gets depressed, what is the computational equivalent of Prozac? Or how would a therapist, human or artificial, initiate a talking cure?

Maybe the machine could compile the counselor’s advice into instructions for reprogramming itself or for recruiting tiny robots to repair its electronic circuitry.

Maybe it would find itself flummoxed by its own mind-body problem. We humans may not be of much help.

ON RATIONALISTS ... AND STONES

Jean Paul Sartre

The rational man seeks the truth gropingly, he knows that his reasoning is only probable, that other considerations will arise to make it doubtful; he never knows too well where he’s going, he is “open”. he may even appear hesitant.

But there are people who are attracted to the durability of stone. They want to be massive and impenetrable; they do not want to change: where would change lead them? This is an original fear of oneself and a fear of truth. And what frightens them is not the content of truth which they do not even suspect, but the very form of the true — that thing of indefinite approximation. It is as if their very existence were perpetually in suspension. They want to exist all at once and right away. They do not want acquired opinions, they want them to be innate; since they are afraid of reasoning, they want to adopt a mode of life in which reasoning and research play but a subordinate role, in which one never seeks but that which one has already found, in which one never becomes other than what one already was. Only passion can produce this. Nothing but a strong emotional bias can give instant certitude, it alone can hold reasoning within limits, it alone can remain impervious to experience and last an entire lifetime. — *Portrait of an Anti-Semite*, 1946

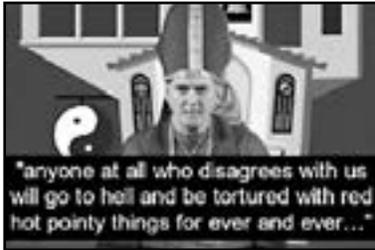
The fact that an opinion has been widely held is no evidence whatever that it is not utterly absurd.

— Bertrand Russell

THE CHURCH OF J.C. CAPITALIST

John Cleeve

Here is an important announcement. We have decided to found a church on this website because we believe that if we save just one solitary soul from eternal torment, then the founding will have been worthwhile – especially as it gives us a huge tax advantage.



Now, we're going to call ourselves The Church of J.C. Capitalist because, here in the United States of America, Christian teaching is of course the cornerstone of the capitalist system – televangelists in particular setting a fine example to us all in the accumulation of great personal wealth, and illustrating the worldly rewards that real faith can bring us if we are truly humble – and have good-heartedness, too.

Now, people has said to me, quite critically, that Christ spoke a lot about the poor, so what is our church doing about *them*? Well, as Christ himself so rightly said, "*Blessed are the poor*". So they're alright, they will get their reward in heaven, no need to worry about them.

Now, The Church of J. C. Capitalist is founded on two separate principles. One, our focus groups tell us to target very anxious people with weak egos who are desperate for certainty. So we will be very authoritarian, telling our members exactly what to think and do. And we guarantee to make them positively glow with self-confidence.

Because anyone at all who disagrees with us will go to hell and be tortured with red hot pointy things for ever and ever, amen.

And the second principle is: morals are only about sex.

So, send money now. Inquire about different levels of membership. And remember, a one-time gift of ten thousand dollars guarantees you entry into heaven, with one special guest of your choice – *plus* a beautiful framed certificate to the effect, signed by me. Join now.

[Makes the sign of the dollar.]

AND ONE MORE NEW RELIGION IS BORN

The Atheist Pig

(Transcribed from TheHumanist.com, 7/8/2016)

Liberal Young Christian Woman: You know, Winston, I can't believe that people would want to kill others just for being gay.

The Atheist Pig: Well, that's religion for you.

LYCW: That's not my religion. Hate the sin, love the sinner, that's what I say.

Pig: Your bible specifically says to kill all gay people.

LYCW: Maybe so, but I wouldn't kill gays and my god wouldn't ask me to.

Pig: Congratulations. You just created God in your own image.

OUR THREE NEWEST DUMBTH CANDIDATES

(INCLUDING MAYBE OUR NEXT VICE PRESIDENT)

After signing a bill that would make abortion harder than ever to get in Indiana, Governor **Mike Pence** said in an interview with The Huffington Post that, "First and foremost, because this is such a sensitive topic, let me just say that I sympathize with rape victims not just in America, but around the world. I can only imagine what it must be like to experience such trauma."



Well, okay, not bad. But then ...

"However, that does not justify murder, not even that justifies murdering a baby, not in my book. Because ... we'd then have an epidemic of women claiming to have been raped just so they could have an abortion."

Possible. Vice. President. Of. The. United. States. That is, the guy Donald Trump hands the nuclear football to when business at one of his golf courses calls.

And in an appearance on Trinity Broadcasting Network, popular televangelist **Kenneth Copeland** warned Christians of the horrors God may inflict on them if they don't support Donald Trump.



"If Christians don't support Trump, they are risking the wrath of God. Trump has been chosen by God, and by rejecting him, they are rejecting God. They could be punished with barrenness, poverty or even having a gay child."

Oh, the horror ... *the horror!*

But certainly summer's strangest was the man who walked through the toxic dust and debris of September 11, 2001. Speaking in Youngstown, Ohio, in near-rabid promotion of his pal Donald Trump, Rudy Giuliani, mayor of New York City on 9/11, declared that Islamic extremists hadn't carried out any terror attacks on American soil before Barack Obama's presidency.



"Under those eight years, before Obama came along, we didn't have any successful radical Islamic terrorist attack in the US. They all started when Clinton and Obama came into office."

Scheisskopfs all, certainly, but who will take home the horse's-ass trophy? You'll decide in online voting in January, and we'll celebrate the winning idiot at our Darwin Day/ Anniversary Dinner in February. In the meanwhile, send your nominations of American public figures (not your drunk uncle) who need to have their science- or reason-denying illogic pointed out to them to editor@shsn.org.

READERS RESPOND

• *To the Editor:* Re: "Which Side Are You On?" (July PIQUE) about libel lawsuits shutting down an outlet like Gawker: these things do not belong in the courts, especially if the person doing the shutting down is someone with an outsized wallet, in which case it becomes a matter of whoever is richer owning the marketplace of ideas. If Gawker prints something that is importantly wrong and getting traction, the proper recourse is to use other media and correct the record. – *Brian Lemaire*

• *To the Editor:* Re: "Like Carvel, NYC Offers 31 Flavors" (July PIQUE), the words "heterosexual", "bi-sexual", etc., didn't make the city's new "gender flavor" list because they are sexual orientations, not gender identities. The list choices indicate how a person regards him/herself; your omitted examples indicate whom a person is sexually attracted to. – *Harvey Wachtel*

WAIT: ONE LAST WORD ABOUT "APATHEISM"

For all the work seculars do to promote acceptance of nonbelievers, perhaps nothing will be as effective as apathy plus time. As the secular millennials grow up and have children, the only Sunday morning tradition they may pass down is one everyone in the world can agree on: brunch. – Gabe Bullard in *National Geographic*, "The World's Newest Major Religion: No Religion".

Save the Date:

OCTOBER 16 SHSNY's 8TH ANNUAL FREETHOUGHT DAY BRUNCH AT PETE'S TAVERN with SUSAN JACOBY

This year we host distinguished freethinker/author Susan Jacoby (*The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll; American Freethought; The Age of American Unreason*), who will read from her latest (twelfth!) book: *Strange Gods: A Secular History of Conversion* – "a groundbreaking historical work that addresses religious conversion in the West from an uncompromisingly secular perspective. ... Nothing has been more important in the struggle for reason than the right to believe in the God of one's choice or to reject belief in God altogether."



So save the date, and join us for brunch (just \$25 for your choice of 11 entrees and a drink, and including tax and tips), for fellowship and stimulating conversation, and for a terrific talk by one of America's leading freethinkers.

*Complete pre-pay details in October PIQUE
and on www.shsny.org/calendar and Meetup October 1.*

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