

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

September, 2017

We're back, and *he* is still in the Oval Office. Can we ignore *Il Douche*? Of course not, so expect politics herein, starting with a denunciation immediately below. But we also give thought to how we think, the value of knowing we don't know, a world without work, and a Heaven for fish. Also, a Brit philosopher considers liberalism's paradox, two ex-Muslim women consider its failure, and we ask you, Dear Reader, to recommend a work of fiction – also immediately below. – JR

DEPOSING DONALD TRUMP IS A HUMANIST IMPERATIVE

John Rafferty

From The Affirmations of Humanism:

We attempt to transcend divisive parochial loyalties based on race, religion, gender, nationality, creed, class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity ...

Donald Trump has embraced American Nazis and racists.

We believe in the common moral decencies: altruism, integrity, honesty, truthfulness, and responsibility.

Donald Trump has told a lie in public, on camera, almost every day of his seven months in office.

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.

Donald Trump praises the dictators of Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, and Egypt, and the autocrats of Saudi Arabia, while attempting to bully the elected leaders of Canada, Mexico, Germany, South Korea, Japan and Australia, and even dismissed as "outdated" the NATO alliance of democracies.

We want to protect and enhance the earth, to preserve it for future generations ...

Donald Trump's only "accomplishments" after seven months in office have been to roll back Obama-administration protections for our drinking water, the air we breathe, and the land on which we grow our (and the world's) food.

Donald Trump has no ideology, and only one guiding principle: profit. The America he will willy-nilly create, if we don't stop him, will be a Twitter-driven autocracy overseen by a government of, by, and for an oligarchy of the 1%.

Bill Moyers said recently that he had thought Trump had unleashed a "malevolent fury" in America; now he knows that Trump *is* the malevolent fury.

Donald Trump must be stopped. Deposed. Your thoughts on what humanists can do, please, to editor@shsny.org

WHAT NOVEL WOULD YOU RECOMMEND TO A NEWCOMER TO AMERICA?

John Rafferty

Upon starting my second reading of Massimo Pigliucci's marvelous new book, *How to Be a Stoic*, I paid renewed attention to this at the beginning of Chapter 3:

"I came to the United States back in 1990. I knew little of American culture – other than what could be gleaned growing up watching Hollywood movies and television series dubbed in Italian – and a close friend suggested that I start my formal education by reading a short novel by Kurt Vonnegut.

"Slaughterhouse-Five, published in 1969, is a strange work."

It certainly is. It is also a fascinating choice – for oh, so many reasons – as an introduction to American culture.*

Anyway, this time around in my reading I thought, "What would I recommend?" And that's the question I pass on to you, reader of PIQUE.

Postulate a friend newly arrived in the U.S. from a foreign country – any country – who asks you to suggest a book – one novel, a work of fiction – to begin her/his acclimation to contemporary American culture. What do you recommend?

Email your book title, author and if you wish, no more than 10 words of reasons-why, to editor@shsny.org

All responses will be published in October PIQUE, so please, by September 15.

Come on, do it today; you can change your mind with another email – I've already changed my mind twice.

**It's also a fascinating coincidence, I think, that a dozen or more years later, at the bar in the Stone Creek Lounge, I offered Massimo the SHSNY Honorary Membership "chair" recently vacated by the death of Vonnegut. "How can I refuse?" he said. – JR*

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Some futuristic thinking for Labor Day ...

THE MEANING OF LIFE IN A WORLD WITHOUT WORK

Yuval Noah Harari

(Excerpted from *The Guardian*, 5/8/2017, and forwarded by Joel Galker)

Most jobs that exist today might disappear within decades. As artificial intelligence outperforms humans in more and more tasks, it will replace humans in more and more jobs. Many new professions are likely to appear: virtual-world designers, for example. But such professions will probably require more creativity and flexibility, and it is unclear whether 40-year-old unemployed taxi drivers or insurance agents will be able to reinvent themselves as virtual-world designers (try to imagine a virtual world created by an insurance agent!). And even if the ex-insurance agent somehow makes the transition into a virtual-world designer, the pace of progress is such that within another decade he might have to reinvent himself yet again.

The crucial problem isn't creating new jobs. The crucial problem is creating new jobs that humans perform better than algorithms. Consequently, by 2050 a new class of people might emerge – the useless class. People who are not just unemployed, but unemployable.

The same technology that renders humans useless might also make it feasible to feed and support the unemployable masses through some scheme of universal basic income. The real problem will then be to keep the masses occupied and content. People must engage in purposeful activities, or they go crazy. So what will the useless class do all day?

One answer might be computer games. Economically redundant people might spend increasing amounts of time within 3D virtual reality worlds, which would provide them with far more excitement and emotional engagement than the “real world” outside. This, in fact, is a very old solution. For thousands of years, billions of people have found meaning in playing virtual reality games. In the past, we have called these virtual reality games “religions”.

What is a religion if not a big virtual reality game played by millions of people together? Religions like Islam and Christianity invent imaginary laws, such as “don't eat pork”, “repeat the same prayers a set number of times each day”, “don't have sex with somebody from your own gender”, and so forth. These laws exist only in the human imagination. No natural law requires the repetition of magical formulas and no natural law forbids homosexuality or eating pork. Muslims and Christians go through life trying to gain points in their favorite virtual reality game. If you pray every day, you get points. If you forget to pray, you lose points. If by the end of your life you gain enough points, then after you die you go to the next level of the game (aka Heaven).

As religions show us, the virtual reality need not be encased inside an isolated box. Rather, it can be superimposed on the physical reality. In the past this was

done with the human imagination and with sacred books, and in the 21st century it can be done with smartphones.

Some time ago I went with my six-year-old nephew Matan to hunt for Pokémon. As we walked down the street [in *Jerusalem – Ed.*], Matan kept looking at his smartphone, which enabled him to spot Pokémon all around us. I didn't see any Pokémon at all, because I didn't carry a smartphone. Then we saw two other kids on the street who were hunting the same Pokémon, and we almost got into a fight with them. It struck me how similar the situation was to the conflict between Jews and Muslims about the holy city of Jerusalem. When you look at the objective reality of Jerusalem, all you see are stones and buildings. There is no holiness anywhere. But when you look through the medium of smartbooks (such as the Bible and Qur'an), you see holy places and angels everywhere.

The idea of finding meaning in life by playing virtual reality games is of course common not just to religions, but also to secular ideologies and lifestyles. Consumerism too is a virtual reality game. You gain points by acquiring new cars, buying expensive brands, and taking vacations abroad, and if you have more points than everybody else, you tell yourself you won the game.

You might object that people really enjoy their cars and vacations. That's certainly true. But the religious really enjoy praying and performing ceremonies and my nephew really enjoys hunting Pokémon. In the end, the real action always takes place inside the human brain. Does it matter whether the neurons are stimulated by observing pixels on a computer screen, by looking outside the windows of a Caribbean resort, or by seeing heaven in our mind's eyes? In all cases, the meaning we ascribe to what we see is generated by our own minds. It is not really “out there”. To the best of our scientific knowledge, human life has no meaning. The meaning of life is always a fictional story created by us humans.

In his groundbreaking essay, *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight* (1973), the anthropologist Clifford Geertz describes how on the island of Bali, people spent much time and money betting on cockfights. The betting and the fights involved elaborate rituals, and the outcomes had substantial impact on the social, economic and political standing of both players and spectators.

The cockfights were so important to the Balinese, that when the Indonesian government declared the practice illegal, people ignored the law and risked arrest and hefty fines. For the Balinese, cockfights were “deep play” – a made-up game that is invested with so much meaning that it becomes reality. A Balinese anthropologist could arguably have written similar essays on football in Argentina or Judaism in Israel.

Indeed, one particularly interesting section of Israeli society provides a unique laboratory for how to live a contented life in a post-work world. In Israel, a significant percentage of ultra-orthodox Jewish men never work. They spend their entire lives studying holy scriptures and performing religion rituals. They and their families don't

starve to death partly because the wives often work, and partly because the government provides them with generous subsidies. Though they usually live in poverty, government support means that they never lack for the basic necessities of life.

That's universal basic income in action. Though they are poor and never work, in survey after survey these ultra-orthodox Jewish men report higher levels of life-satisfaction than any other section of Israeli society. In global surveys of life satisfaction, Israel is almost always at the very top, thanks in part to the contribution of these unemployed deep layers.

You don't need to go all the way to Israel to see the world of post-work. If you have at home a teenage son who likes computer games, you can conduct your own experiment. Provide him with a minimum subsidy of coke and pizza, and then remove all demands for work and all parental supervision. The likely outcome is that he will remain in his room for days, glued to the screen. He won't do any homework or housework, will skip school, skip meals, and even skip showers and sleep. Yet he is unlikely to suffer from boredom or a sense of purposelessness. At least not in the short-term.

Hence virtual realities are likely to be key to providing meaning to the useless class of the post-work world. Maybe these virtual realities will be generated inside computers. Maybe they will be generated outside computers, in the shape of new religions and ideologies. Maybe it will be a combination of the two. The possibilities are endless, and nobody knows for sure what kind of deep plays will engage us in 2050.

In any case, the end of work will not necessarily mean the end of meaning, because meaning is generated by imagining rather than by working. Work is essential for meaning only according to some ideologies and lifestyles. Eighteenth-century English country squires, present-day ultra-orthodox Jews, and children in all cultures and eras have found a lot of interest and meaning in life even without working. People in 2050 will probably be able to play deeper games and to construct more complex virtual worlds than in any previous time in history.

But what about truth? What about reality? Do we really want to live in a world in which billions of people are immersed in fantasies, pursuing make-believe goals and obeying imaginary laws? Well, like it or not, that's the world we have been living in for thousands of years already.

Comment: Comments? Send yours to editor@shsmj.org.

Once we thought the earth was flat –

What of that?

It was just as globos then

Under believing men

As our later folks have found it,

By success in running round it;

What we think may guide our acts,

But it does not alter facts.

– Charlotte Perkins Gilman

WHAT DO YOU REALLY BELIEVE?

Jonathan Engel

An issue that pops up with some regularity in the free-thought community is where we should and/or do stand regarding “mainstream” religious believers.

These are not the ultra-religious zealots with which religion is often associated in this country at this time. Often, these folks are progressive politically, and some of these individuals will tell you that their progressive political beliefs are an imperative necessitated by their religious beliefs. As a liberal and atheist I am all for working with mainstream religious folk to advance a progressive political agenda (so long as they respect my right to atheism just as I respect their right to religious beliefs), especially in these perilous times. Now understand, this does not lessen my hope that some day all people will make decisions based on reason and logic, and not on ancient superstitions. But people must come to rationalism of their own volition; imposing a secular worldview on people (as some communist countries tried to do) is both futile and unethical. But persuasion is definitely okay, and one way to persuade the religiously inclined is to press them (gently, gently) on what they actually believe.

You see, in some ways it is quite difficult to differentiate between the stated beliefs of “out-there” religionists and their moderate brethren, and putting this point to the moderates may just get them to re-examine their beliefs. A case in point: last year a woman in Florida decided to pray. With her eyes closed. While driving a car. Which proceeded to crash into a house. (Fortunately, no one was injured, although both car and house suffered significant damage). And for some reason, police brought her to a psychiatric hospital for observation. I guess they thought she just might be mentally unstable. And to be clear, this woman has nothing in common with mainline religious believers, who would never consider doing such a crazy thing, right? Well maybe. But then again, maybe not. It depends on what you really believe.

Do you believe in a personal god? Do you believe in the power of prayer? Do you believe that “god” knows everything that is happening all the time (omniscience) and is all-powerful (omnipotent)? Do you believe that god (or one of his angels; you believe in them too, right?) looks out for you? After all, these are mainstream religious beliefs in this country. If you believe these things, the actions of the woman in the above story don't seem so crazy, do they? God is there, he knows everything, so he knew the woman was praying with her eyes closed while driving, and as he is omnipotent and looking out for her, it was reasonable for her to believe that he would take the wheel and see her through to safety. My point is that there is nothing in these beliefs that conflicts with mainstream religious thought in this country. Except for actually believing them.

This reminds me of an incident from right after 9/11 involving the oft-controversial television personality Bill Maher. Maher speculated that perhaps the terrorists were braver than we are; after all, they were willing to die for their

beliefs, while we tend to just drop bombs from the safety of an airplane and then hightail it out of there. Maher lost his show for these comments, but that's another issue. What's germane is that Maher (who is an atheist) missed the point here. How brave is it to fly into a building if you believe, and I mean *really believe*, that as soon as it hits you will wake up in a far better place? Not very. Bill was off the mark on this because (to his credit) he just couldn't fathom truly believing in the supernatural nonsense that the terrorists really did believe in.

My overarching point is that most "moderate" religious folks do not actually believe in the superstitious nonsense to which they pay lip service. If they did, the actions of a woman closing her eyes to pray while driving a car wouldn't seem so, well, crazy.

So I say to my mainstream religious brothers and sisters: As you clearly are not all-in on your religious beliefs, why not take the logical next step and give up superstition altogether? You know you don't really believe, and we free-thinkers are here to tell you that it's okay to quit pretending that you do.

HOW DO I KNOW? I DON'T KNOW.

Harvey Wachtel

Some time ago, I responded to a piece in *Readers Digest* with the following letter:

"In 'Life in these United States' you humorously labelled a girl's question to a pair of 'identical' twins, 'How do you know you're you?', as a dumb question.

"The nature of consciousness and the perception of one's own identity happens to be one of the most profound 'big questions' ever asked, about tied with 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' and well ahead of 'Is there a God?'. Addressing it to twins implicitly adds the observation that identity doesn't appear to be genetic.

"Assuming 'girl' refers to a minor, I'd describe the question as precocious, hardly dumb."

In my own pre-teen years, I asked my oh-so-smart (not at all sarcastic, he is very smart) college-age big brother the same question, minus the twins: "Why do I think I'm me and not, say, the neighbor's kid?"

Sixty years later I still don't have an answer, from him or from any of the many philosophers and scientists who've examined the subject.

WANT TO BE SMARTER? LEARN TO SAY "I DON'T KNOW."

Zat Rana

(Excerpted from Medium Daily Digest, 8/10/2017)

We seem to live in a world where everybody is always certain and nobody is willing to concede that they might be wrong. It seems that it's more vital to have any old opinion than to truly understand the contents of that opinion.

Somehow, we have decided that it's okay to hold beliefs based on blind affiliation rather than rigorous critical

thought. And if you don't take a side right away, well, then you are to be shunned or to be labelled as ignorant.

This likely isn't new to our age, but it's very much amplified by the internet. Part of it can be attributed to passion. Understandably, we feel strongly about certain things and that clouds our ability to see the other side.

That said, more often than not, the issue lies in our inability to humbly accept that we don't and can't know everything; that, often, we are wrong.

That's a problem.

The Irrationality of Certainty

Everything that we see and observe around us is an approximation of sorts. Our senses only take in a small fraction of the available information in our environment, and our brains consciously process an even smaller part.

There are smells around that we physically can't smell, there are sights to witness beyond the wavelength that our eyes operate in, there are sounds to be heard that we will never fully hear, and there are influencing thoughts in our subconscious mind that, in many ways, we can't even begin to relate to.

This is on a very core level. If we add in the complexity brought on as a result of our interactions with the world through the systems and ideologies we have in place, it's even more unlikely that we have complete knowledge. None of us are ever right. Certainty is an illusion, and there is no shame in being wrong because, by nature, our entire perception of the world is wrong.

Over time, we progress and thrive in our surroundings by being less wrong. We feel around, we test, and we question ourselves until something works.

Uncertainty isn't a condition to be avoided, but a tool for better decisions.

The Disease of Blind Affiliation

The primary way we mask our discomfort of uncertainty is via affiliation. In some ways, if we don't have a fully formed opinion, it makes sense to look toward the ideologies, groups, and people who we most generally identify with because there is already a proven track record of alignment.

It's a useful heuristic—a rule of thumb, if you will—and when it comes to small matters, there likely isn't too much harm in using that as a shortcut.

Thinking is hard work, and it's worth conserving that energy when possible. The problem occurs when we use our identity as Liberals or Conservatives, or when we let the weight of our loyalty to a personal hero or author dictate how we make sense of the world, rather than critically reasoning ourselves.

It's quite a slippery slope, too. If these viewpoints are consequential and important, over time we get drawn closer to them, and eventually we form a connection to something that we fundamentally haven't questioned.

That's no way to live. The dissonance often catches up, and it's rarely pretty.

Everyone is a sum total of their own unique experiences, and none of these experiences align perfectly with any

one person or ideological system. It's better to not have an opinion than to naively pursue someone else's.

The Value of "I Don't Know"

When you think about it, acknowledging ignorance is actually productive. Sometimes, the best answer is simply "I don't know." Now, that isn't to give you a reason to exercise indifference or to avoid making difficult decisions. It's just about choosing to stick to your circle of competence and awareness.

At any given point, there's only so much information we can make sense of. On a daily basis, there will be things we don't understand. If they aren't relevant, it's okay not to know. If they are, it's better to take time to think.

This may seem fairly intuitive, and yet, the vast majority of people rarely find themselves comfortable enough to be at ease with not knowing. Instead, they recite from memory whatever has been ingrained into their mind.

They would rather stand for something with a loose foundation, and they prefer certainty even after being challenged rather than to reconsider. In the long-term, none of these tactics tend to lead to a healthy outlook.

"I don't know" not only keeps us in our circle of competence and awareness where the risk of potential harm is low, but it also works as a feedback tool. It's a competitive advantage because it adds an incentive to critically break things down rather than to take the easy way out. It forces us to get smarter. There's no point standing for something if you have a bad reason to do so.

The Takeaway

Life is complex and messy, and it's okay not to know everything. It's fine to take time to form an opinion, and it's useful to acknowledge ignorance.

We live in a world saturated with ideas, and not all of them are good, and not all of them are right for everyone. Ask questions, be critical, and don't be afraid to change your mind. There are no solid rules against doing so.

No one makes progress by standing in the same place, and we didn't get to where we are by always being right. Everything is trial and error, and if you truly want to understand the world, you have to be comfortable with that.

It's okay to open your mind.

READERS RESPOND

To the Editor: In "The Dangers of Scientism" (PIQUE, June, 2017), John Semley asserts that too many people claiming to rely on science are actually following Scientism, which he defines as the view that "science possesses a unique claim to truth" and nothing is true unless provable by scientific method. By way of demonstration, Semley relates the oft-heard tale of how scientific conclusions in the past have often been subsequently proven seriously wrong.

But science deals in probabilities, not certainties. Something considered highly probable is discarded if contradicting evidence subsequently turns up. Unlike alternative medicine and religion, science is not written in stone.

Semley criticizes science popularizers like Neil

deGrasse Tyson and Bill Nye for daring to sell scientific "truth" to the public. What they do, says Semley, is simply "indoctrination", since we believe what they say without actually having "to do the work of science, or even understand it". But Tyson and Nye present to the public what is most probable, not what is certain. And since Tyson and Nye have a reliable track record we can believe what they tell us, without the impossible task of having to go and do the experimental research ourselves.

And if those of us who accept the words of popularizers considered reliable are mistaken, where would Semley want us to turn for information? Intuition, speculation, religion, "scientific" pronouncements from the White House, or what? – *Chic Schissel*

To the Editor: Thank you for another terrific issue (July). I especially liked your piece on the "real Americans". By the way, do you look at all those web sites whose articles you often reproduce? – *Walter Balcerak*

Walter: That's my daily penance for my sins. – *JR*

To the Editor: Again, a great (July) PIQUE. – *Bob Miller*

HEAVEN

Rupert Brooke

Fish (fly-replete, in depth of June,
Dawdling away their wat'ry noon)
Ponder deep wisdom, dark or clear,
Each secret fishy hope or fear.
Fish say, they have their Stream and Pond;
But is there anything Beyond?
This life cannot be All, they swear,
For how unpleasant, if it were!
One may not doubt that, somehow, Good
Shall come of Water and of Mud;
And, sure, the reverent eye must see
A Purpose in Liquidity.
We darkly know, by Faith we cry,
The future is not Wholly Dry.
Mud unto mud! – Death eddies near –
Not here the appointed End, not here!
But somewhere, beyond Space and Time,
Is wetter water, slimier slime!
And there (they trust) there swimmeth One
Who swam ere rivers were begun,
Immense, of fishy form and mind,
Squamous, omnipotent, and kind;
And under that Almighty Fin,
The littlest fish may enter in.
Oh! never fly conceals a hook,
Fish say, in the Eternal Brook,
But more than mundane weeds are there,
And mud, celestially fair;
Fat caterpillars drift around,
And Paradisal grubs are found;
Unfading moths, immortal flies,
And the worm that never dies.
And in that Heaven of all their wish,
There shall be no more land, say fish.

SHSNY CALENDAR: SEPTEMBER - NOVEMBER

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

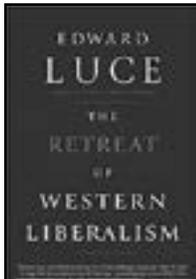
THURS, SEPT 7, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

28 East 35 St. (front lounge)
We'll discuss

**THE RETREAT OF
WESTERN LIBERALISM**

Edward Luce

Long an active participant in the SHSNY Book Club, Elaine Heller will lead the discussion of *Financial Times'* chief U.S. columnist Luce's argument that the



weakening of western hegemony and the crisis of liberal democracy, of which Donald Trump and his European counterparts are not the cause, but a terrifying symptom.

Luce argues that we are on a menacing trajectory brought about by ignorance of what it took to build the West, arrogance towards society's economic losers, and complacency about our system's durability, attitudes that have been emerging since the fall of the Berlin Wall. We cannot move forward without a clear diagnosis of what has gone wrong.

Unless the West can rekindle an economy that produces gains for the majority of its people, its political liberties may be doomed. We take democracy for granted, Luce tells us; "reality tells us something troublingly different".

"Insightful and harrowing" ...
Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*
Paperback and 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 5, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
THE WAR ON SCIENCE:

**Who's Waging It,
Why It Matters,**

What We Can Do About It
Shawn Lawrence Otto

Winner of the MN Book Award for Nonfiction. "Wherever the people are well informed," Thomas Jefferson wrote, "they can be trusted with their own government." But what happens when they are not? From climate change to vaccinations, transportation to technology, health care to defense – we are in the midst of an unprecedented expansion of scientific progress and a simultaneous expansion of danger.

At the very time we need them most, scientists and the idea of objective knowledge are being bombarded by a vast, well-funded, three-part war on science: the identity politics war on science, the ideological war on science, and the industrial war on science.

This provocative new book offers a vision, an argument, and some compelling solutions to bring us to our collective senses, before it's too late.

Paperback and Kindle available.

THURS, NOV 2, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
THE GREATEST STORY

EVER TOLD – SO FAR
Lawrence Krauss

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SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

MON, SEP 11, 6:30 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

**THE BRAND-NEW
TESTAMENT**

Did you know that God is alive, slovenly, and living in Brussels with his wife (who collects baseball cards) and his daughter, who thinks he's doing a rotten job, just writing laws on his laptop (#1404: *The other lines are always shorter*), and who decides to take over the God biz?



Nominated for Golden Globe and Cesar Best Picture awards, this 2016 dark comedy (in French, subtitled) stars Catherine Deneuve, who falls in love with a gorilla.

After-Film Discussion:

Want to know your death date?

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.

(But put something on the bar besides your elbow.)

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, SEP 17, 11:30 am

The Gem Saloon

375 Third Ave. (27 St)



Yes, it's a new venue for Brunch – in August another scheduling conflict at Stone Creek led 20-some

of us to try The Gem, and we very definitely liked it. See the menu at thegemsaloonnyc.com

So come join your fellow free-thinkers for food, fun and convivial conversation, including the Dorothy Kahn-led ...

After-Brunch Discussion:

May a Humanist punch a Nazi?

SHSNY CALENDAR: SEPTEMBER - NOVEMBER

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, SEP 27, 7 pm

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge

140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

DOUBT: A HISTORY

Jennifer Michael Hecht

In this sweeping history of skepticism, our own SHSNY Honorary Member Jennifer



Michael Hecht celebrates doubt as an engine of creativity and as an alternative to the political and intellectual dangers of certainty. Just as belief has its own history of people whose expressions of faith have forever changed the world, doubt has its own saints, martyrs, and sages.

Hecht blends her wide-ranging historical expertise, passionate admiration of the great doubters, and poet's sensibility to tell a stimulating story, viewing the history of doubt as not only a tradition challenging accepted religious beliefs, including the existence of God, but also as a progression of attempts to make sense of life, the natural world, and ourselves.

PLANNING AHEAD

The *usual* SHSNY schedule (barring holidays and weather calamities) is ...

Book Club: First Thursday

at the Community Church of NY

Movie Night: Second Monday

at Stone Creek Lounge.

Brunch: Third Sunday

at The Gem Saloon

Great Lectures on DVD:

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

STUDYING HUMANISM

MON, SEP 25, 6:30-8:30 pm

Community Church of New York

28 East 35 St. (Gallery)

2017-18 Meeting #1

THE BASIC TEXTS

We begin our new "academic year" with an online-reading study* of three of the basic definitions/declarations of humanism:

- The American Humanist Association's 2003 "Humanist Manifesto III, Humanism and Its Aspirations". Read it (5 minutes) at: <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto3/>
- The Council for Secular Humanism's 1980 "A Secular Humanist Declaration" by Paul Kurtz. Read it (15 minutes) at: <https://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php/11>

• The International Humanist & Ethical Union (IHEU) "Minimum Statement on Humanism". Read it (1 minute) at: <http://iheu.org/humanism/what-is-humanism/>

*NOTE

Studying Humanism is a study group, not a kaffee-klatch or a conversation, and *only* the people who have done the reading may participate in the discussion. If you have not done the reading, you may still audit the discussion.

All are welcome, definitely including newcomers!

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Should the Democrats embrace religion?

THE DEMOCRATS' RELIGION PROBLEM

Daniel K. Williams

(Excerpted from The New York Times OpEd page, 6/23/2017)

Many American liberals of the 1950s and 1960s ... looked to the moral inspiration of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, both of whom saw a religious imperative for social justice. The civil rights movement was grounded so thoroughly in the theology and culture of the African-American church that the historian David L. Chappell has called it a "religious revival". And the economic views of New Deal and Great Society liberalism echoed the positions of mainline Protestant denominations and the social teachings of 20th-century Catholicism.

In the late 1960s, some white liberals — especially college-age baby boomers — began to adopt a secularized version of liberal Protestant values. Yet even then, the Democratic Party's leaders retained a connection to those religious traditions, which allowed them to maintain their appeal to religious voters.

Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy, the party's leading antiwar candidates for the presidential nomination in 1968, were practicing Catholics who found inspiration in the church's teachings. Jimmy Carter was a Southern Baptist deacon who regularly taught an adult Sunday school class during his 1976 campaign for president.

Jesse Jackson, who won several primaries in 1984 and 1988, was an ordained minister. Al Gore was a Southern Baptist who had attended divinity school. Bill Clinton had deep roots in the Southern Baptist tradition, despite his troubled relationship with some of the conservative leaders of his denomination during his presidency.

Hillary Clinton frequently cited her Methodist faith as a source of her values. And Barack Obama, despite a secular upbringing, learned to speak in the theological cadences of a Protestant Christian tradition while attending a progressive African-American church in Chicago.

Yet now younger, secular Democrats are attempting to separate their party's progressive values from those religious traditions. Some may belong to a religious tradition or consider themselves to be spiritual people, but they are not able to speak the language of a communally based faith because it does not inform or shape their political views.

This has posed a problem at the polls, because most Democratic voters are not as secular as these activists might assume. While only 47 percent of white, college-educated Democrats identify as Christians, Christianity remains the faith of 81 percent of African-American Democrats and 76 percent of Latino Democrats.

The religious differences between generations are just as stark as the differences between racial groups. While 35 percent of millennials report having no religious affiliation, only 17 percent of baby boomers — and fewer than 11 percent of Americans born before 1945 — are religiously unaffiliated.

The party is thus split between a minority of young, educated, secular white activists and a larger group of African-Americans, Hispanics and older whites whose political values are closely tied to their faith. No wonder candidates like [failed Democratic Congressional candidate] Jon Ossoff struggled to connect with key blocs of the Democratic coalition.

And it's also no wonder that the Democratic congressional leadership is still dominated by a graying generation of leaders; they are the only ones who can bridge the party's religious divide. The median age of House Democratic representatives is now well over 60 — the highest in decades, and several years older than the median Republican age. ...

What can Democrats do to bridge the divide between young, secular party activists and the rest of voters? Oddly, last year's presidential run by Senator Bernie Sanders, a secular Jew, may suggest a way forward.

Mr. Sanders's non-Christian background may have hurt him in the South; he did poorly among African-American voters, despite his consistent civil rights record. But he did what few other secular candidates have done: He won a sympathetic hearing from conservative evangelicals with a speech that gave a religious grounding for his economic views, complete with biblical citations. When Mr. Sanders spoke at Liberty University, he did not pretend to share evangelical Christians' faith, but he showed respect for his audience's religious tradition.

To do the same, secular Democrats need to study the religious language of Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. They need to take the time to learn the religious values of their audience. They need to be honest about their own secularity, but acknowledge their debt to the religious traditions that have shaped their progressive ideology.

Only through a willingness to ground their policy proposals in the religious values of prospective voters will they be able to convince people of faith that they are not a threat to their values but are instead an ally in a common cause.

Comment: Really? Your opinion, please, to editor@shsny.org.

But are the Republicans losing religion?

IS CHRISTIANITY BEING REPLACED BY "MORALISTIC THERAPEUTIC DEISM"?

Rod Dreher

(Excerpted from "Trump Can't Save American Christianity" in The New York Times, 8/2/2017. Rod Dreher is a senior editor at The American Conservative.)

According to Genesis 1, in four days, God made the heavens, the earth and all the vegetation upon it. But four days after Anthony Scaramucci's filthy tirade went public, Team Trump's evangelical all-stars — pastors and prominent laity who hustle noisily around the Oval Office trying to find an amen corner — still had not figured out what to say.

Fortunately, the White House relieved them of that

onerous task by firing Mr. Scaramucci — not, please note, on the president's initiative, but rather at the request of John Kelly, the new chief of staff. Meanwhile, the Christian Broadcasting Network ran a puff piece proclaiming that a "spiritual awakening is underway at the White House", thanks to a Bible study with what "has been called the most evangelical cabinet in history". That ought to still any skepticism emerging among the true believers for a while.

Is there anything Donald Trump can do to alienate evangelicals and other conservative Christians who support him? By now, it's hard to think of what that might be. These are people who would never let men with the morals and the mouths of Mr. Trump and Mr. Scaramucci date their own daughters. And yet, Team Trump has no more slavishly loyal constituency.

This is not only wrong, but tragically so. The most pressing problem Christianity faces is not in politics. It's in parishes. It's with the pastors. Most of all, it's among an increasingly faithless people.

The truth is, Christianity is declining in the United States. As a theologically conservative believer, I take no pleasure in saying that. In fact, the waning of Christianity will be not only a catastrophe for the church but also a calamity for civil society in ways secular Americans do not appreciate.

But preparing for this post-Christian future requires a brutally honest assessment of both the modern church and the contemporary world. This is painful, but denial will only make the inevitable reckoning worse.

First, Americans are falling away from the church in unprecedented numbers. According to a 2014 Pew study, more than one in three millennials refuse to identify with a religious tradition — a far higher number than among older Americans. Most of these young adults are likely to stay away from church as they age.

This generational shift is a watershed. Last year, the sociologists David Voas and Mark Chaves concluded that the United States is no longer a counterexample to the West's secularization. America is on the same path of religious decline pioneered by Europe and Canada.

Second, the faith American Christians profess is, from a moral and theological perspective, shockingly thin. Christian Smith, a sociologist at Notre Dame, has been leading a long-term study of the religious and spiritual lives of millennials. Mr. Smith finds that what he terms "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" has displaced authentic Christianity as the true religion of American Christians.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a pseudoreligion that jettisons the doctrines of historical biblical Christianity and replaces them with feel-good, vaguely spiritual nostrums. In M.T.D., the highest goal of the religious life is being happy and feeling good about oneself. It's the perfect religion for a self-centered, consumerist culture. But it is not Christianity.

"America has lived a long time off its thin Christian veneer," Mr. Smith told me. "That is all finally being stripped away by the combination of mass consumer capitalism and liberal individualism."

Since the 1980s, conservative Christians unwittingly participated in our own marginalization by placing too much hope in Republican politics. There's nothing wrong in principle for Christians to bring our faith to the public square (if you disagree, take it up with the abolitionists and the civil rights movement). But the standard "religious right" model, based on the idea that the American people are a morally sound majority led by decadent liberal elites, was inaccurate.

Conservative Christians helped elect Republican politicians, but that did not stop the slide toward secularism. True, the church gained some access to power, but it failed to effectively counter popular culture's catechetical force.

Too many of us [*he means conservative Christians - Ed.*] are doubling down on the failed strategies that not only have failed to convert Americans but have also done little to halt the assimilation of Christians to secular norms and beliefs. Mr. Trump is not a solution to this cultural crisis, but rather a symptom of it.

THE REPUBLICAN PARTY HAS LEFT ITS SENSES (and here come the Independents)

Joe Scarborough

(From the OpEd page of The Washington Post 7/17)

I did not leave the Republican Party. The Republican Party left its senses. The political movement that once stood athwart history resisting bloated government and military adventurism has been reduced to an amalgam of talk-radio resentments. President Trump's Republicans have devolved into a party without a cause, dominated by a leader hopelessly ill-informed about the basics of conservatism, U.S. history and the Constitution.

America's first Republican president reportedly said, "Nearly all men can stand adversity. But if you want to test a man's character, give him power." The current Republican president and the party he controls were granted monopoly power over Washington in November and already find themselves spectacularly failing Abraham Lincoln's character exam.

It would take far more than a single column to detail Trump's failures in the months following his bleak inaugural address. But the Republican leaders who have subjugated themselves to the White House's corrupting influence fell short of Lincoln's standard long before their favorite reality-TV star brought his gaudy circus act to Washington.

When I left Congress in 2001, I praised my party's successful efforts to balance the budget for the first time in a generation and keep many of the promises that led to our takeover in 1994. I concluded my last speech on the House floor by foolishly predicting that Republicans would balance budgets and champion a restrained foreign policy for as long as they held power.

I would be proved wrong immediately.

As the new century began, Republicans gained control of the federal government. George W. Bush and the GOP Congress responded by turning a \$155 billion surplus into

a \$1 trillion deficit and doubling the national debt, passing a \$7 trillion unfunded entitlement program and promoting a foreign policy so utopian it would have made Woodrow Wilson blush.

Voters made Nancy Pelosi speaker of the House in 2006 and Barack Obama president in 2008. After their well-deserved drubbing, Republicans swore that if voters ever entrusted them with running Washington again, they would prove themselves worthy. Trump's party was given a second chance this year, but it has spent almost every day since then making the majority of Americans regret it.

The GOP president questioned America's constitutional system of checks and balances. Republican leaders said nothing. He echoed Stalin and Mao by calling the free press "the enemy of the people". Republican leaders were silent. And as the commander in chief insulted allies while embracing autocratic thugs, Republicans who spent a decade supporting wars of choice remained quiet. Meanwhile, their budget-busting proposals demonstrate a fiscal recklessness very much in line with the Bush years.

Last week's Russia revelations show just how shamelessly Republican lawmakers will stand by a longtime Democrat who switched parties after the promotion of a racist theory about Barack Obama gave him standing in Lincoln's once-proud party. Neither Lincoln, William Buckley nor Ronald Reagan would recognize this movement.

It is a dying party that I can no longer defend.

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Jon Meacham has long predicted that the Republican and Democrats' 150-year duopoly will end. The signs seem obvious enough. When my Republican Party took control of Congress in 1994, it was the first time the GOP had won the House in a generation. The two parties have been in a state of turmoil ever since.

In 2004, Republican strategist Karl Rove anticipated a majority that would last a generation; two years later, Pelosi became the most liberal House speaker in history. Obama was swept into power by a supposedly unassailable Democratic coalition. In 2010, the tea party tide rolled in. Obama's reelection returned the momentum to the Democrats, but Republicans won a historic state-level landslide in 2014. Then last fall, Trump demolished both the Republican and Democratic establishments.

Political historians will one day view Donald Trump as a historical anomaly. But the wreckage visited of this man will break the Republican Party into pieces — and lead to the election of independent thinkers no longer tethered to the tired dogmas of the polarized past.

When that day mercifully arrives, the two-party duopoly that has strangled American politics for almost two centuries will finally come to an end. And Washington just may begin to work again.

Comment: Joe Scarborough is a conservative who was a Republican Congressman 1995-2001, and is currently host of the "Morning Joe" show on liberal-leaning MSNBC.

Reader reaction/response to his interesting prediction that the "two-party duopoly" is coming to an end is solicited at editor@shsny.org — JR

THE TIMES PRINTS JON ENGEL'S LETTER ABOUT THE WHINER-IN-CHIEF

(From The New York Times "Letters" column, July 8, 2017)

TO THE EDITOR: Re: "Remarks Draw Backlash That Unites a Normally Fractious News Media" (news article, June 30): In defending President Trump's indefensible remarks about Mika Brzezinski, his spokeswoman, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, said, "I don't think you can expect someone to be personally attacked, day after day, minute by minute, and sit back." I see her point. Where could we possibly find an example of a president subject to scurrilous personal attacks who responds only with class and dignity? How far back in the history of the presidency would we have to go?

Less than six months actually. His name was Barack Obama, and some of the most racist, unfounded attacks (birtherism) against him came from the same guy who's whining now about how he's being treated.

Miss the 44th president? I know I do.

— Jonathan Engel, New York

FOLLOW THE MONEY

John Rafferty

What "Deep Throat" (FBI agent Mark Felt) famously instructed Bob Woodward to do in digging for the truth about a criminal administration and obstruction of justice in the 1972-75 Watergate scandal, was: "Follow the money".

In the 1980s and 1990s, because no bank in America would touch a serial defaulter, Donald J. Trump started borrowing money from Russian sources. The Russians bailed him out. Eric Trump said publicly in 2008 that "money was pouring in from Russia" to the Trump businesses, and that "Russians make up a pretty disproportionate cross-section of a lot of our assets."

So if Trump is a billionaire now, he owes it to the Russians. (And since he still owes millions to Deutsch Bank and some Americans from as far back as the 80s, he probably still owes Russia.) We do not know what role Russians (and maybe Putin himself) had in any of Trump's projects since then, but we do know that (how many?) of his associates — Paul Manafort and Michael Flynn for two — also do or have done extensive business with Russia.

When Trump (or Steve Bannon) assembled the Trump campaign team in 2015-16, it comprised many of those Americans with extensive dealings with Russians. And several of those Trump campaign figures (including his son and son-in-law) had both public and private meetings with Russian businessmen and government officials during the campaign. Throughout the 2016 campaign, Trump promoted the idea of improved relations with Russia, and praised Vladimir Putin personally.

Late in the campaign, after hacking the DNC, Russians passed info they'd got from Leon Panetta's emails to Wikileaks, which then made the info public, embarrassing Hilary Clinton. Trump joked about it in public, and "invited" the Russians to hack some more.

Despite Trump's continued insistence that Russian hacking and possible collusion with the Russians by Trump campaign associates are "fake news" put out by Democrats sour-graping about his "historic election victory" ...

Seventeen U.S. intelligence agencies say conclusively that Russians hacked into voter registration and other programs in at least 21 states during the 2016 campaign. And now former DHS Secretary Johnson says Putin personally ordered and orchestrated the attacks.

After his inauguration, Trump appointed Michael Flynn as National Security Advisor even though the Obama administration had rescinded Flynn's security clearance because of his Russian entanglements, and after Trump was warned about the same by his own CIA people.

When it was discovered that Flynn had lied to VP Pence about meeting with Russians, Trump did nothing until a public outcry pressured him to fire Flynn nearly three weeks later, then asked several DOJ and law enforcement people – most notably FBI chief James Comey – to drop any investigation of Flynn, "a good guy". If true (and of course it is), that is a clear case of obstruction of justice.

When Comey did not promise such "loyalty", Trump fired him, admitting in a TV interview that the reason was "the Russia thing", and causing Deputy AG Rosenstein to appoint Special Counsel Robert Mueller to investigate "the Russia thing". Mueller's investigation into possible collusion by Americans with a foreign government in a cyber-attack against the U.S. – which is treason, if true – has now expanded to include Donald J. Trump.

Follow the money:

- Donald Trump owes the Russians (or Russia) money.
- They own him.
- They attacked the U.S., and intend to do it again.
- Some of his associates probably colluded with them.
- At best, he turned a blind eye – violating his oath of office.
- Impeachably worse, he interfered with investigations into possible collusion – obstruction of justice.
- Worst case: he, too, colluded – committing treason.

WHAT TO SAY THE NEXT TIME YOU HEAR, "BOTH SIDES DO IT" OR "THEY'RE ALL CROOKS"

Over the last 53 years Democrats have held the White House for 25 of those years while Republicans have held it for 28. During their 25 years in office Democrats have had a total of three executive branch officials indicted, with one conviction and prison sentence. That's one executive branch official convicted of a crime in two and a half decades of Democrat leadership, in spite of countless hours and tens of millions of dollars spent on Republican "investigations" whenever they controlled the House or Senate.

By contrast, during the 28 years that Republicans have held office since 1968 they have had a total of 120 criminal indictments of executive branch officials, with 89 criminal convictions and 34 prison sentences handed down. That's more prison sentences than years in office for Republicans.

THE FAILURE OF THE LIBERAL LEFT

Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Asra Q. Nomani

(Excerpted from "They Brushed Off Kamala Harris. Then She Brushed Us Off.", on the OpEd Page of The New York Times, 6/22/2017)

(Editor: Ali and Nomani opened this lengthy OpEd with a complaint that four liberal female U.S. senators (Harris, Heitkamp, Hassan, and Haskell) ignored them when they testified before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs "about the ideology of political Islam, or Islamism". – JR)

In the rubric of identity politics, our status as women of color is canceled out by our ideas, which are labeled "conservative" – as if opposition to violent jihad, sex slavery, genital mutilation or child marriage were a matter of left or right. This not only silences us, it also puts beyond the pale of liberalism a basic concern for human rights and the individual rights of women abused in the name of Islam.

There is a real discomfort among progressives on the left with calling out Islamic extremism. Partly they fear offending members of a "minority" religion and being labeled racist, bigoted or Islamophobic. There is also the idea, which has tremendous strength on the left, that non-Western women don't need "saving" – and that the suggestion that they do is patronizing at best.

After all, the thinking goes, if women in America still earn less than men for equivalent work, who are we to criticize other cultures?

This is extreme moral relativism disguised as cultural sensitivity. And it leads good people to make excuses for the inexcusable. The silence of the Democratic senators is a reflection of contemporary cultural pressures. Call it identity politics, moral relativism or political correctness – it is shortsighted, dangerous and, ultimately, a betrayal of liberal values.

The hard truth is that there are fundamental conflicts between universal human rights and the principle of Sharia, or Islamic law, which holds that a woman's testimony is worth half that of a man's; between freedom of religion and the Islamist idea that artists, writers, poets and bloggers should be subject to blasphemy laws; between secular governance and the Islamist goal of a caliphate; between United States law and Islamist promotion of polygamy, child marriage and marital rape; and between freedom of thought and the methods of indoctrination, or *dawa*, with which Islamists propagate their ideas.

Defending universal principles against Islamist ideology, not denying that these conflicts exist, is surely the first step in a fight whose natural leaders in Washington should be women like Kamala Harris and Claire McCaskill – both outspoken advocates for American women.

We believe feminism is for everyone. Our goals – not least the equality of the sexes – are deeply liberal. We know these are values that the Democratic senators at our hearing share.

Will they find their voices and join us in opposing Islamist extremism and its war on women?

THE PARADOX OF LIBERALISM

A.C. Grayling

(Excerpted from the essay "Tolerance", in *Meditations for the Humanist*.)

Tolerance is, however, not only the centerpiece but the paradox of liberalism. For liberalism enjoins tolerance of opposing viewpoints, and allows them to have their say, leaving it to the democracy of ideas to decide which shall prevail. The result is too often the death of toleration himself, because those who live by hard principles and uncompromising views in political, moral and religious respects always, if given half a chance, silence liberals because liberalism, by its nature, threatens the hegemony they wish to impose.

To the question, "Should the tolerant tolerate the intolerant?" the answer should be a resounding "No". Tolerance has to protect itself. It can easily do so by saying that anyone can put a point of view, but no one can force another to accept it. The only coercion should be that of argument, the only obligation should be to honest reasoning. Helen Keller said that "the highest result of education is tolerance", and she was right; one can be confident that in most cases the unbiased reasonings of an informed mind will come out in favor of what is good and true.

WOW. WE NEW GUYS DIDN'T KNOW THIS ABOUT ART HARRIS

I am sorry to learn of the passing of Art Harris (PIQUE, July). As you noted, he was one of the original members of the SHS of NY back in 1988, along with Warren Allen Smith, Keith Charles, Al Tino, Cathy Girordano, John Arents, yours truly, and several others.

Art was one tough customer. I recall the night around 1989 when he and his gracious wife Dorothy hosted a party for group members at their Fifth Avenue apartment. In order to join us, Art had to sneak out of a nearby hospital where he was being treated for a gunshot wound he incurred on the subway while intervening in a violent mugging attack against a young woman. Art owned and inspected properties in high crime areas and was licensed to carry a gun. He confronted the mugger, who attacked him. In the ensuing struggle, Art was hit in the arm but he managed to shoot the mugger three times, though not fatally. The mugger was eventually sent to prison.

Art Harris always spoke his mind on the issues, and I did not always agree with him. However, I always respected and liked him. He was a bona fide New Yorker, a WWII veteran, and a proud freethinker. — Dennis Middebrooks

Note: Dennis is a past President (1990s) of SHSNY.

Yes, Depositing Donald Trump
is a Humanist Issue
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