

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

mid-December, 2018 & January, 2019

Apologies for the lateness of the issue – explanation below. Within, we celebrate secular wins in November, smack-slap both of December’s holidays (*Welcome back, Hitch!*), and invite you to the season’s best solstice party (page 7). We don’t ask atheists more questions, do suggest atheist ~~com-~~
~~mandments~~ suggestions, question our moral superiority, consider our legality, remember one President, and try to forget another. But first (oh, how I hate this), a very fond farewell. – JR

DONNA MARXER 1934 - 2018

Artist, Poet, Environmental Activist, Humanist

After a months-long and debilitating illness, Donna died at Mount Sinai Heart hospital on November 27. She was attended in her final hours by her stepsons David, Brian and Brendan Rafferty (Colin was in California), her cousin Carl Marxer, longtime friend Bernard Alston, and by her husband, this memorialist – all members of the Secular Humanist Society of New York.

An SHSNY member for 20 years, whose grace and wit enlivened every gathering (“A secular humanist,” she said, “is an atheist with good manners”), Donna served on the Board and as Treasurer for the past 10, meticulously overseeing a trebling of the organization’s average bank balance in that time. As she said proudly, “Not bad for an artist, right?”

It was her delight also to oversee the social side of SHSNY Board meetings at the Marxer/Rafferty apartment, making sure everyone was well-fed, including ending each evening with one of her outstanding desserts. She cherished John Wagner’s compliment that, “You make everyone *want* to come to these meetings.”

Donna was born in Miami, Florida, where she grew up, except for a year-plus detour to Hollywood after winning an amateur talent contest at age two. She appeared in the kid chorus of one Bing Crosby musical, “The Star Maker”, and of her Hollywood career said, “I peaked at age four.”

After graduating from the University of Florida in 1954, she moved to New York, earned a MFA from Columbia in

1958, and began her lifelong career as a professional artist. Her paintings have been exhibited in more than fifty solo and group shows in New York and across the U.S., as well as in Norway, France and Cuba, and have earned her honors and inclusion in government-sponsored and other public collections in the U.S., Costa Rica, and Liechtenstein.

A sampling of Donna’s art (and of her late-career poetry) can be viewed on her website, www.donnamarxer.com.



Donna was concerned lifelong with the environment, especially the degradation of South Florida. In 2001, she conceived of and founded Artists In Residence In Everglades (AIRIE), a program that enables artists to live and work in Everglades National Park, and which is now one of the largest and most active programs in the national park system. At her death she was working to develop another program at Shenandoah National Park in Virginia. An arts activist as well, Donna served as Executive Director of Artists

Talk On Art in New York, and on the boards of New York Artists Equity and the Organization of Independent Artists. She was active, too, on the board of the Rebecca Kelly Ballet Company, for which she often created costume designs.

A memorial gathering will be held at 6:30 pm, Thursday evening, January 3, in Ceremonial Hall, 4th floor, of the New York Society for Ethical Culture, 2 West 64 Street.

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to The Appleby Foundation, which supports the Tahawus Center of Au Sable Forks, NY, Rebecca Kelly Ballet of NYC and various arts programs for children and adults, via <https://appleby-foundation.networkforgood.com/.../39594-appleb...>

– John Rafferty

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an Affiliated Local Group of the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH) program of the Center for Inquiry (CFI),

and an Endorsing Group in the Secular Coalition for New York (SCNY).

HUMANISM WON BIG IN NOVEMBER ...

Nicole Carr

(Excerpted from "A Humanist Recap of the Midterm Election", thehumanist.com, 11/8/2018)

In very good midterm election news, all ten members of the Congressional Freethought Caucus won their re-elections by considerable margins [in November]. That means Representatives Jared Huffman (D-CA) and Jamie Raskin (D-MD), caucus co-chairs; Dan Kildee (D-MI) and Jerry McNeerney (D-CA), the other founding members; and Steve Cohen (D-TN), Pramila Jayapal (D-WA), Hank Johnson (D-GA), Zoe Lofgren (D-CA), Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC), and Mark Pocan (D-WI) will all be returning to the US House of Representatives.

As a reminder, the Freethought Caucus promotes public policy based on reason, science, and moral values. The American Humanist Association (AHA) was honored to participate in the organizational meetings that resulted in its foundation.

The good news wasn't limited to the House of Representatives. In the Senate, Jacky Rosen (D-NV), who identifies herself as an ally of the secular community, beat incumbent Dean Heller.

The Freethought Equality Fund (FEF) PAC—affiliated with the Center for Freethought Equality, which is the political and advocacy arm of the AHA—endorses candidates who identify as humanist, atheist, or agnostic, and who share the goal of protecting the separation of church and state and defending the civil liberties of secular Americans.

In addition to victorious federal candidates, FEF-endorsed candidates won state House and Senate seats in Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, Vermont, Wisconsin, and Wyoming! ...

Newly elected Senator Rosen, a computer programmer, is one of nine incoming legislators who are credentialed in fields of science and medicine. Seven Democratic scientists will become members of the House, including an industrial engineer, an ocean scientist, a dentist, a biochemical engineer, a nurse, a nuclear engineer, and a pediatrician. One new Republican is a former aerospace engineer who ran as a businessman. ...

Progressive values truly carried the day. The forty-seven members or allies of the freethought community who are now elected officials at the state and federal level will continue the work of the American Humanist Association, the Center for Freethought Equality, and the Congressional Freethought Caucus in promoting policy based in reason, science, and compassion.

... AND WE'RE GETTING EVEN STRONGER

According to exit polls, "nones" made up 17 percent of the electorate in November, up from 12 percent in 2014. Those who never attend church services? 27 percent!

THE STUDIO EXECS GIVE THEIR NOTES ON THE "NATIVITY STORY" SCRIPT

Susanna Wolff

(Excerpted from TheNewYorker.com, 12/21/2017)

First off, there's a lot of really great stuff here, so thank you. We just have a few thoughts. In the scene where Gabriel comes down and tells Mary that she's going to bear the Son of God, we were wondering why God doesn't just make a baby and have Gabriel bring the pre-made baby to Mary. Seems cleaner, right?

We don't buy that Joseph would accept Jesus as his son. Sort of makes Joseph seem like a loser. What if the Lord came down and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is actually from your biological material, so technically you're still the father"? Would something like that work?

Wait, Jesus is the Lord, the Son is the Father, and it's all one thing? We weren't following that. Is there a way to make that clearer? Maybe it's the word "son" that's the issue. Can Jesus be something else?

It seemed a little convenient that the Wise Men would find a baby in a manger by following a star. Make this more believable. (Also, will people know what a manger is?)

If you're really set on the magic-beacon stuff, maybe they can just fly directly to the manger and cut out some of these walking scenes? Possibly even consolidate the three Middle Eastern Wise Men into one jolly white fellow, with a catchphrase or a fun costume with merchandising potential? Like a Kevin James type, but aged up, to give him a bit more gravitas.

We LOVE the gift-giving stuff. (Will people know what myrrh is?)

Looking at it again, does the whole manger thing make Mary seem like a bad mom? Is there a reason that she can't give birth in a real house? Maybe bring some of the outdoorsy elements in? Like, put a giant tree inside the house?

Don't know how we feel about this Herod guy. Going after a baby? People are not going to like that. Do you need him? Off that: we suggested before that God just make a complete baby and give that to Mary instead of making her pregnant, but, as an alternative thought, what if Jesus were just a grown man from the start?

We're just kind of bumping on all the birth stuff. Your "Nativity Story" is just so FUN that we don't want to confuse audiences with something as unfun as childbirth. In fact, is there a reason you can't have Gabriel do everything you were planning to have Jesus do? That would actually be much cleaner, because Gabriel is obviously an angel, so you wouldn't have to deal with all those people doubting Jesus.

Oh, Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit are all the same thing? We don't know if that's really coming through. ?. ?.?. This is just an idea, so feel free to take it or leave it, but what if those three were actually different gods? That might streamline things, and also free you up to deliver a satisfying father-son moment at the end.

Or, if you're insisting on sticking to the one-god thing,

maybe Jesus is just a sidekick?

Although, if you cut Jesus, there really wouldn't be any reason to have anyone other than God spreading his own word. But would that be so bad? You pivot the whole story to God's triumphant return to talk to humans directly, and not this confusing three-person god thing? Just a thought.

Anyway, we REALLY love this story, especially the part where someone (did we hear somebody suggest Kevin James?) comes down from somewhere and gives gifts – and the idea that was being tossed around about bringing a tree inside was great, too!

Why don't you do another pass based on these notes, O.K.? We can't wait to see the next draft!

LIGHTING THE MAGI'S WAY

Haiku by Arthur Clarke

Sudden, brilliant star
in the East. What life did that
supernova kill?

THE NEW YORKER EXPLAINS CHRISTMAS TO EXTRATERRESTRIALS

Alexis Wilkinson

(Excerpted from "Explaining U.S. Holidays to Extraterrestrials", *The New Yorker*, 11/26/2018)

Christmas is the holiday that I enjoy the most. To prepare our homes for this day, we put small, colorful offerings underneath a large tree not native to this region. We tell children that an old man who has been watching us all year is responsible for these packages. The day is ostensibly to honor a baby with superpowers, but it's rude to ask too many follow-up questions about the baby, because he died.

CALVIN APPLIES PASCAL'S WAGER TO SANTA CLAUS

(Six-year-old Calvin and Hobbes, his stuffed tiger – but real to Calvin – have been discussing Santa.)

Calvin: Well, I've decided I do believe in Santa Claus, no matter how preposterous he sounds.

Hobbes: What convinced you?

Calvin: A simple risk analysis. I want presents. Lots of presents. Why risk not getting them over a matter of belief? I'll believe anything they want.

Hobbes: How cynically enterprising of you.

Calvin: It's the spirit of Christmas.

THE ATHEIST PIG LIKES CHRISTMAS

(Transcribed from @theatheistpig)

Woman: So, have you started your War on Christmas yet?

The Atheist Pig: I like Christmas. In fact, many atheists like the holidays. We love the decorations, the time spent with families, and especially the food. And, it might surprise you to know, most of us don't mind saying "Merry Christmas".

Woman: So you're saying there's no War on Christmas?

The Atheist Pig: Well, there was, but capitalism won that a while ago.

MY HOLIER-THAN-THOU HOLYDAYS

Emma Bradford

(Copied from *The Daily Mash (UK)*, 12/20/2017)

I don't need religion to be horribly sanctimonious about Christmas. This year I will be giving money to charity instead of sending Christmas cards, and making sure everyone knows about it.

As a committed atheist I spend most of the year mocking people for believing stories that were made up in the olden days as a form of social control, yet when December rolls around I nonetheless feel what I can only describe as a sense of holiness creeping over me. It's almost erotic.

I lecture my children on the ways in which rampant capitalism has killed the spirit of Christmas as I drive them home from school in my new white Mitsubishi Shogun.

On the way we stop at Waitrose [*think Whole Foods, Americans - Ed.*] and spend a moment feeling sorry for the man who is begging outside, but we don't give him any money because he'll just spend it on drugs.

I enjoy making my friends feel like selfish bastards by talking about how seriously I am considering inviting some homeless people to share our Christmas dinner. (Of course, I don't do it because they'd probably steal the television, but, as I'm always telling the children, it's the thought that counts.)

In many ways, I am like Jesus. But he wasn't real, so I am actually better than Jesus. Blessings on you all.

BAH, HANUKKAH

Christopher Hitchens

(Reprinted from *slate.com*, 12/2017, and forwarded by the *nonpareil Adrienne Karp*)

High on the list of idiotic commonplace expressions is the old maxim that "it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness". How do such fatuous pieces of folk wisdom ever get started on their careers of glib quotation? Of course it would be preferable to light a candle than to complain about the darkness. You would only be bitching about the darkness if you didn't have a candle to begin with. Talk about a false antithesis. But at this time of year, any holy foolishness is permitted. And so we have a semiofficial celebration of Hanukkah, complete with menorah, to celebrate not the ignition of a light but the imposition of theocratic darkness.

Jewish orthodoxy possesses the interesting feature of naming and combating the idea of the *apikoros* or "Epicurean" – the intellectual renegade who prefers Athens to Jerusalem and the schools of philosophy to the grim old routines of the Torah. About a century and a half before the alleged birth of the supposed Jesus of Nazareth (another event that receives semiofficial recognition at this time of the year), the Greek or Epicurean style had begun to gain immense ground among the Jews of Syria and Palestine. The Seleucid Empire, an inheritance of Alexander the Great – Alexander still being a popular name among Jews – had weaned many people away from the sacrifices, the circumcisions, the belief

in a special relationship with God, and the other reactionary manifestations of an ancient and cruel faith. I quote Rabbi Michael Lerner, an allegedly liberal spokesman for Judaism who nonetheless knows what he hates:

“Along with Greek science and military prowess came a whole culture that celebrated beauty both in art and in the human body, presented the world with the triumph of rational thought in the works of Plato and Aristotle, and rejoiced in the complexities of life presented in the theater of Aeschylus, Euripides and Aristophanes.”

But away with all that, says Lerner. Let us instead celebrate the Maccabean peasants who wanted to destroy Hellenism and restore what he actually calls “oldtime religion”. His excuse for preferring fundamentalist thuggery to secularism and philosophy is that Hellenism was “imperialistic”, but the Hasmonean regime that resulted from the Maccabean revolt soon became exorbitantly corrupt, vicious, and divided, and encouraged the Roman annexation of Judea. Had it not been for this no-less imperial event, we would never have had to hear of Jesus of Nazareth or his sect—which was a plagiarism from fundamentalist Judaism—and the Jewish people would never have been accused of being deicidal “Christ killers”.

Thus, to celebrate Hanukkah is to celebrate not just the triumph of tribal Jewish backwardness but also the accidental birth of Judaism’s bastard child in the shape of Christianity. You might think that masochism could do no more. Except that it always can. Without the precedents of Orthodox Judaism and Roman Christianity, on which it is based and from which it is borrowed, there would be no Islam, either. Every Jew who honors the Hanukkah holiday because it gives his child an excuse to mingle the dreidel with the Christmas tree and the sleigh (neither of these absurd symbols having the least thing to do with Palestine two millenniums past) is celebrating the making of a series of rods for his own back. And this is not just a disaster for the Jews. When the fanatics of Palestine won that victory, and when Judaism repudiated Athens for Jerusalem, the development of the whole of humanity was terribly retarded.

And, of course and as ever, one stands aghast at the pathetic scale of the supposed “miracle”. As a consequence of the successful Maccabean revolt against Hellenism, so it is said, a puddle of olive oil that should have lasted only for one day managed to burn for eight days. Wow! Certain proof, not just of an Almighty, but of an Almighty with a special fondness for fundamentalists. Epicurus and Democritus had brilliantly discovered that the world was made up of atoms, but who cares about a mere fact like that when there is miraculous oil to be goggled at by credulous peasants?

We are about to have the annual culture war about the display of cribs, mangers, conifers, and other symbols on public land. Most of this argument is phony and tawdry and secondhand and has nothing whatever to do with “faith” as its protagonists understand it. The burning of a Yule log or the display of a Scandinavian tree is nothing more than paganism and the observance of a winter solstice; it makes

no more acknowledgment of the Christian religion than I do. The fierce partisanship of the holly bush and mistletoe believers convicts them of nothing more than ignorance and simple-mindedness. They would have been just as pious under the reign of the Druids or the Vikings, and just as much attached to their bucolic icons. Everybody knows, furthermore, that there was no moving star in the east, that Quirinius was not the governor of Syria in the time of King Herod, that no worldwide tax census was conducted in that period of the rule of Augustus, and that no “stable” is mentioned even in any of the mutually contradictory books of the New Testament. So, to put a star on top of a pine tree or to arrange various farm animals around a crib is to be as accurate and inventive as that Japanese department store that, as urban legend has it, did its best to emulate the Christmas spirit by displaying a red-and-white bearded Santa snugly nailed to a crucifix.

This is childish stuff and if only for that reason should obviously not receive any public endorsement or financing. The display of the menorah at this season, however, has a precise meaning and is an explicit celebration of the original victory of bloody-minded faith over enlightenment and reason. As such it is a direct negation of the First Amendment and it is time for the secularists and the civil libertarians to find the courage to say so.

WHEN THE HELL IS THE AIR FORCE ACADEMY GOING TO GET CLEANED UP?

(Excerpted from “Air Force Academy Fails Religion Test in Wake Of Tree Of Life Massacre” by Paul Rosenberg on crooksandliars.com, 11/9/2018)

Two days after the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, a Jewish cadet at the Air Force Academy had to listen to upperclass cadets—who outranked him—disparage the victims for their faith, saying,

“The 11 Jews murdered would now be burning in hell forever because none of them had accepted Jesus as their savior prior to being shot and killed.”

This according to his parents, who are considering withdrawing him from the Academy. “These upperclass cadets were ‘loud and proud about saying it’ as our son told us. We are all in tears here,” they said in a letter to the Military Religious Freedom Foundation. “We had heard about the Academy’s long history of religious intolerance before our son applied and accepted his appointment. We had been assured that those days were over. As a result of what has just happened to our son we were obviously wrong.”

MRFF founder Mikey Weinstein told Crooks and Liars, “The Air Force Academy is not a problem, issue or challenge, it’s a constitutional—or unconstitutional—train wreck, and it’s been this way, basically since February 2004, which is when we started this fight.”

In fact, Weinstein had a similar experience of open anti-Semitic prejudice as a freshman cadet in 1973.

Editor: Half a century?! When the hell is some general going to lose his stars? – JR

CRACKS IN OUR MORAL SUPERIORITY

David Rafferty

(Reprinted from Greenwich Time, 12/8/2018)

I read this story recently about a southwestern caravan of migrants seeking safety in America, and wanted to share in case you missed it.

"The movement changed them; the highways, the camps along the road, the fear of hunger and the hunger itself, changed them. The children without dinner changed them, the endless moving changed them. They were migrants. And the hostility changed them, welded them, united them – hostility that made the little towns group and arm as though to repel an invader, squads with pick handles, clerks and storekeepers with shotguns, guarding the world against their own people.

"In the West there was panic when the migrants multiplied on the highways. Men of property were terrified for their property. Men who had never been hungry saw the eyes of the hungry. Men who had never wanted anything very much saw the flare of want in the eyes of the migrants. And the men of the towns and of the soft suburban country gathered to defend themselves; and they reassured themselves that they were good and the invaders bad, as a man must do before he fights. They said, these goddamned immigrants are dirty and ignorant. They're degenerate, sexual maniacs. Those goddamned immigrants are thieves. They'll steal anything. They've got no sense of property rights.

"And the latter was true, for how can a man without property know the ache of ownership? And the defending people said, They bring disease, they're filthy. We can't have them in the schools. They're strangers. How'd you like to have your sister go out with one of 'em?

"The local people whipped themselves into a mold of cruelty. Then they formed units, squads, and armed them – armed them with clubs, with gas, with guns. We own the country. We can't let these immigrants get out of hand. And the men who were armed did not own the land, but they thought they did. And the clerks who drilled at night owned nothing, and the little storekeepers possessed only a drawerful of debts. But even a debt is something, even a job is something. The clerk thought, I get fifteen dollars a week. S'pose a goddamn immigrant would work for twelve? And the little storekeeper thought, How could I compete with a debtless man?

"And the migrants streamed in on the highways and their hunger was in their eyes, and their need was in their eyes. They had no argument, no system, nothing but their numbers and their needs."

You might think that passage is about immigrants trying to escape the fear and brutality where they live in Central America being met with hatred and venom at the United States border, but those words were written 80 years ago. Go back now and everywhere you see the word "immigrant" replace it with the original word "Okie". You might now recognize it from *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck's classic novelization of the plight of Americans forced to flee their

homes in search of a better life.

Sadly, reading those words makes it easier to understand how Americans could shrug and take little notice of the tear-gassing of people seeking legal asylum. During the Depression, many Americans blindly, and with no evidence, convinced themselves that impoverished Okies fleeing the Dust Bowl were sub-human, disease-ridden maniacs who needed to be confronted with force. We did it then to white, Midwestern American families; we can certainly do it now to brown, non-native immigrants.

Don't be fooled though by the bleatings of the president, his henchmen and state news agency. The people at our border are not an invading army of terrorists, plague carriers and criminals. They're bedraggled refugees escaping horrific living conditions. But neither is the solution as simple as believing we just need to reclaim our national moral compass. Steinbeck reminds us that our capacity for savage cruelty has always been there.

So in America, where we desperately cling to our moral superiority, we are torn. Because if somehow you've convinced yourself up is down, day is night and asylum seeking migrants are an invasion force ... even you cannot say, without the words tasting like ash in your mouth, that America truly is great when it gasses children.

"ILLEGAL"

John Rafferty

Donald Trump wants to issue an executive order that would revoke birthright citizenship, which is protected by the 14th amendment to the Constitution. Let's parse the garble he announced on "Axios on HBO":

"It was always told to me that you needed a constitutional amendment. Guess what? You don't.¹ ... You can definitely do it with an act of Congress², but now they're saying I can do it just with an executive order³. Now how ridiculous! We're the only country in the world⁴ where a person comes in, has a baby, and the baby is essentially a citizen of the United States for 85 years. And it has to end."

When asked when and how he planned on issuing his executive order, Trump said:

"It's in the process. It'll happen.⁵ ... It's a ... very interesting ... I didn't think anybody knew that but me. I thought I was the only one."⁶

1. Yes, you do. You'd have to change the 14th amendment to the constitution with a new amendment.
2. No, you can't; only a constitutional amendment can change the constitution.
3. You can't, you can't, you can't, no matter how many times you say you can.
4. No, more than 30 countries offer birthright citizenship.
5. No, it won't. "It'll happen" means he thinks it will happen because he says it will happen.
6. He's the "only one" who thought of it because, as he has told us, "I have a very big brain."

And why am I so worked up about this? Because I was born three years or more before either of my parents became citizens. In Trump Nation, I'd be an illegal.

SHSNY CALENDAR: mid-DECEMBER 2018 - FEBRUARY 2019

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, JAN 10, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

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

GRAND HOTEL ABYSS:
The Lives of the
Frankfurt School
Stuart Jeffries

In 1923, a group of young radical German thinkers and intellectuals – including philosophers Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse – came together to explore politics and popular culture, and to explain the workings of the modern world.

Not only would they change the way we think, but also the subjects we deem worthy of intellectual investigation. Their lives, like their ideas, reflected and shaped the shattering events of the twentieth century.

Grand Hotel Abyss combines biography, philosophy, and storytelling to reveal how the Frankfurt thinkers gathered in hopes of understanding the politics of culture during the rise of fascism.

Tom Riggins will lead.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

Join us even if you haven't finished reading.

The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!

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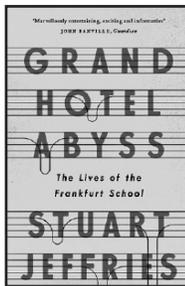
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SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, FEB 7, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
ENLIGHTENMENT NOW:

The Case for Reason,
Science, Humanism
and Progress
Steven Pinker

If you follow the headlines, today's world seems to be sinking into chaos, hatred and irrationality. But is modernity really failing? Or have we failed to appreciate progress and the ideals that make it possible?

Embracing the values of the Enlightenment: reason, science, humanism and progress, Pinker makes the case for an Enlightenment newly recharged for the twenty-first century, using our faculties of reason and sympathy to overcome our problems. We will never have a perfect world, but – defying the chorus of fatalism and reaction – we can continue to make it a better one.

John Rafferty will lead.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, MARCH 7, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
ALPHA GOD;

The Psychology of Religious
Violence and Oppression
Hector A. Garcia

In this by our November 2 speaker, "God" is seen as a reflection of the "dominant ape" paradigm so evident in the hierarchical structures of primates, our cousins. Original and fascinating.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

Advance-Reading Notice:

For April 4, we will read ...

The Epigenetics Revolution

by Nessa Carey

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION
SUN, JAN 20, 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 includes a \$15 breakfast



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

Come join 20 or more fellow freethinkers

for food, fun and convivial conversation, including the Dorothy Kahn-led ...

After-Brunch Discussion:
Righteous mind or Vengeful mind?

DRINKING REASONABLY
WED, JAN 16 6-10:00 pm
(for December, see next page)
Vino Levantino Wine Bar
210 West 94 Street
(Broadway - Amsterdam Aves)



Get together with Gother NYC freethinkers in the various groups of the Reasonable New York coalition (including SHSNY) for fellowship, networking, pub grub and reasonable imbibing.

We – skeptics, humanists, rationalists, atheists, agnostics – meet and mingle, discuss the issues of the day and whatever else is on our minds, and just have fun.

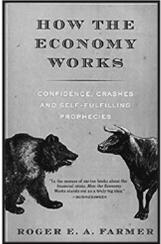
Come anytime for any length of time 6-10, or come at 6:00 and enjoy Happy Hour prices until 7:00.

Don't drink alcohol? Don't let that stop you from joining in the conversation and the fun. *Come!*

SHSNY CALENDAR: mid-DECEMBER 2018 - FEBRUARY 2019

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
WED, DEC 26, 7 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

HOW THE ECONOMY WORKS
Roger Farmer



Of all the economic bubbles that have been pricked," the editors of *The Economist* recently observed, "few have burst more spectacularly than the reputation of economics itself." But what will take its place? UCLA professor Farmer offers a powerful argument for how economics must change to get us out of the current crisis. Farmer traces the swings between classical and Keynesian economics since the early 20th century. Rather than simply allowing the pendulum to swing back, we must synthesize the two.

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
WED, JAN 23, 7 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
Catastrophes! Earthquakes,
Tsunamis, Tornadoes,
And Other
Earth-Shattering Disasters
Donald Prothero

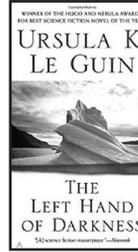
Devastating natural disasters have profoundly shaped human history, leaving us with a respect for the mighty power of the earth – and a humbling view of our future.

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To reserve your seat on the sofa, and/or to nominate a book for us to read, contact: editor@shsny.org

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Advance-Reading Notice:
For March 12, we will read ...
A Clockwork Orange
by Anthony Burgess



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2018

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Brunch: Third Sunday
at Stone Creek Lounge
Drinking Reasonably
Third Wednesday

at Vino Levantino Wine Bar
Great Lectures on DVD
4th Wednesday
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NINE QUESTIONS NOT TO ASK ATHEISTS

(Part 2)

Greta Christina

(Reprinted from “How Can You Be Moral?: Here Are 9 Questions You Don’t Need to Ask an Atheist — And Their Answers”, on Greta Christina’s Blog, 10/16/2018.)

(Editor: Greta’s first five questions: How can you be moral without believing in God?; How do you have any meaning in your life?; Doesn’t it take just as much/even more faith to be an atheist as it does to be a believer?; Isn’t atheism just a religion?; and What’s the point of atheist groups? were all asked – and brilliantly answered – in November PIQUE. – JR)

6: “Why do you hate God?”

Or, “Aren’t you just angry at God?”

The answer: Atheists aren’t angry at God. We don’t think God exists. We aren’t angry at God, any more than we’re angry at Santa Claus.

Why you shouldn’t ask it: This question doesn’t just deny our humanity. It denies our very existence. It assumes that atheists don’t really exist: that our non-belief isn’t sincere, that it’s some sort of emotional trauma or immature teenage rebellion, that it’s not even really non-belief.

And honestly? This question reveals how narrow your own mind is. It shows that you can’t even consider the possibility that you might be mistaken: that you can’t even conceive of somebody seeing the world differently from the way you do. This question doesn’t just make atheists mad. It makes you look like a dolt.

7: “But have you [read the Bible or some other holy book; heard about some supposed miracle; heard my story about my personal religious experience]?”

The answer: Probably. Or else we’ve read/heard about something pretty darned similar. Atheists are actually better-informed about religion than most religious believers. In fact, we’re better-informed about the tenets of most specific religions than the believers in those religions. For many atheists, sitting down and reading the Bible (or the holy text of whatever religion they were brought up in) is exactly what set them on the path to atheism – or what put the final nail in the coffin.

Why you shouldn’t ask it: As my friend and colleague Heina put it: “Have you heard of Jesus? No, actually, I was born under a fucking rock.”

Are you really not aware of how dominating a force religion is in society? In most of the world, and certainly in the United States, religion is impossible to ignore. It permeates the social life, the economic life, the cultural life, the political life. We’re soaking in it. The idea that atheists might somehow have come to adulthood without being aware of the Bible, of stories about supposed miracles, of stories about personal religious experiences ... it’s laughable. Or it would be laughable if it weren’t so annoying. Religious privilege is all over this question like a cheap suit.

8: “What if you’re wrong?”

Sometimes asked as, “Doesn’t it make logical sense to believe in God? If you believe and you’re wrong, nothing ter-

rible happens, but if you don’t believe and you’re wrong, you could go to Hell!”

The answer: What if you’re wrong about Allah? Or Vishnu? Or Zeus? What if you’re wrong about whether God is the wrathful jerk who hates gay people, or the loving god who hates homophobes? What if you’re wrong about whether God wants you to celebrate the Sabbath on Saturday or Sunday? What if you’re wrong about whether God really does care about whether you eat bacon? As Homer Simpson put it, “What if we picked the wrong religion? Every week we’re just making God madder and madder!”

Why you shouldn’t ask it: There are so very many things wrong with this question. It even has a name – Pascal’s Wager – and I’ve actually written an entire piece on the many things that are wrong with it. But I’ll stick with two for today, the ones that aren’t just logically absurd but that insult the intelligence and integrity of both atheists and believers:

a) Are you really that ignorant of the existence of religions other than your own? Has it really never occurred to you that when you “bet” on the existence of your god, there are thousands upon thousands of other gods whose existence you’re “betting” against? Are you really that steeped, not only in the generic privilege of all religion, but in the particular privilege of your own?

b) Do you really think atheists have so little integrity? Do you really think we’re going to fake belief in God ... not just to our families or communities in order to not be ostracized, but in our own hearts and minds? Do you really think we’re going to deliberately con ourselves into believing – or pretending to believe – something that we don’t actually think is true? Not just something trivial, but something this important? Do you really think we would pick what to think is true and not true about the world, based solely on which idea would be most convenient? How does that even constitute “belief”? (And anyway, do you really think that God would be taken in by this con game? Do you really think that what God wants from his followers is an insincere, self-serving, “wink wink, I’m covering my bases” version of “belief”?)

9: “Why are you atheists so angry?”

The answer: I’ve actually written an entire book answering this question (*Why Are You Atheists So Angry? 99 Things That Piss Off the Godless*). The short answer: Not all atheists are angry about religion – and those of us who are angry aren’t in a constant state of rage. But yes, many atheists are angry about religion – and we’re angry because we see terrible harm being done by religion. We’re angry about harm being done to atheists ... and we’re angry about harm done to other believers. We don’t just think religion is mistaken – we think it does significantly more harm than good. And it pisses us off.

Why you shouldn’t ask it: This question assumes that atheists are angry because there’s something wrong with us. It assumes that atheists are angry because we’re bitter, selfish, whiny, unhappy, because we lack joy and meaning in our lives, because we have a God-shaped hole in our hearts.

AN ATHEIST “10 COMMANDMENTS”

Jim Underdown

(Excerpted from centerforinquiry.org/blog/atheist-10-commandments/ 11/20/2018)

The people asking it seem to have never even considered the possibility that atheists are angry because we have legitimate things to be angry about.

This reflexive dismissal of our anger’s legitimacy does two things. It treats atheists as flawed, broken, incomplete. And it defangs the power of our anger. (Or it tries to, anyway.) Anger is a hugely powerful motivating force – it has been a major motivating force for every social change movement in history – and when people try to dismiss or trivialize atheists’ anger, they are, essentially, trying to take that power away.

And finally: The people asking this question never seem to notice just how much atheist anger is directed, not at harm done to atheists, but at harm done to believers. A huge amount of our anger about religion is aimed at the oppression and brutality and misery created by religion, not in the lives of atheists, but in the lives of believers. Our anger about religion comes from compassion, from a sense of justice, from a vivid awareness of terrible damage being done in the world and a driving motivation to do something about it. Atheists aren’t angry because there’s something wrong with us. Atheists are angry because there’s something right with us. And it is messed-up beyond recognition to treat one of our greatest strengths, one of our most powerful motivating forces and one of the clearest signs of our decency, as a sign that we’re flawed or broken.

The list of questions you shouldn’t ask atheists doesn’t end here. It goes on, at length. “How can you believe in nothing?” “Doesn’t atheism take the mystery out of life?” “Even though you don’t believe, shouldn’t you bring up your children with religion?” “Can you prove there isn’t a god?” “Did something terrible happen to you to turn you away from religion?” “Are you just doing this to rebel?” “Are you just doing this so you don’t have to obey God’s rules?” “If you’re atheist, why do you celebrate Christmas/ say ‘Bless you’ when people sneeze/ spend money with ‘In God We Trust’ on it/ etc.?” “Have you sincerely tried to believe?” “Can’t you see God everywhere around you?” “Do you worship Satan?” “Isn’t atheism awfully arrogant?” “Can you really not conceive of anything bigger than yourself?” “Why do you care what other people believe?”

But for now, I’ll leave these questions as an exercise for the reader. If you understand why all the questions I answered today are offensive and dehumanizing, I hope you’ll understand why these are as well.

If you want to understand more about atheists and atheism – that is awesome. Many of us are more than happy to talk about our atheism with you: that’s how we change people’s minds about us, and overcome the widespread myths and misinformation about us. But maybe you could do a little Googling before you start asking us questions that we’ve not only fielded a hundred times before, but that have bigotry and dehumanization and religious privilege embedded in the very asking. And if you do want to know more about atheism, please stop and think about the questions you’re asking – and the assumptions behind them – before you do. Thanks.

I’ll paraphrase a question my old Pal Lou had: “It’s easy to sit in the back of the class and trash the Ten Commandments. What do you offer us unbelievers in the way of rules for living?”

Ok, first, let’s dump the word “commandment”. I’m not in the military, and I don’t cotton to being commanded around, especially by anyone I’m not married to. Even “rules” make me squirmy and inclined to rebel. So let’s tone it down a little from the get-go.

These are just suggestions from an average guy with a PhD in living through dumb mistakes. (So far.)

Why can’t we agree on some behaviors that benefit most people most of the time? That’s probably about as close as we can get to a secular version of the 10 Commandments that doesn’t focus on painfully obvious ethical transgressions (Commandments 6-9) or God’s massive but fragile ego (Commandments 1-4.). So I give you:

Underdown’s 11 Strong Suggestions

1. Leave a place as good or better than when you got there.
The earth and everything on it is finite. So don’t mess it up ... for yourself, for others, for future occupants.

This is common courtesy for the next person to use any space. True, everyone reading this in 2018 will probably be dead in a hundred years, but unless you want future generations lumping you in with the era-who-ruined-the-planet, heed this suggestion.

2. Be nice and Be fair.

This is based on the amended Golden Rule: Treat people as they wish to be treated.

OK, most people can look inward for this standard, but there are those masochists and fetishists out there who might have some warped idea of what a good time is. This isn’t complicated, though.

3. Suck it up and quit whining.

We all have our problems – some more than others. But no one wants to hear about every little problem you have. This is a call to be tough, resilient, and robust.

It is not a call to ignore injustice.

In his book, *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*, Laurence Gonzales writes about the Rule of 3s. He essentially says that REAL problems begin when you go 3 minutes without air, 3 days without water, and 3 weeks without food. Put in that context, most of our daily annoyances pale in comparison.

4. Live within your means.

Don’t let people who sell things tell you what you need to be happy. You don’t need a PlayStation 11, or whatever they’re up to now.

Save a little. And if your means are considerable, think about spreading the wealth around a little to those less fortunate. It is YOUR money, but think about it. Nobody needs a Maserati. (I would like to get one out on a desert highway and punch it, though ...)

5. Take responsibility for what you do.

Or don't do ... you lazy bastard. (Sorry, talking to myself.)

How inclined are you to blame others for something you had a hand in? This includes saying I'm sorry, and owning up to any damage or unhappiness you cause. ... It isn't easy sometimes, but doing right pays off in self respect.

6. Stop watching screens so much and live a little!

Sorry if you're reading this on a screen, but I'm talking about proportion. I recently saw a table full of 20-somethings at a bar on a Friday night and they were ALL looking at their phones! Not talking, laughing, or flirting — staring down at a blue light. Sweet Jesus, why leave the house?

In the Giant Forest in Sequoia National Forest, many people seemed more concerned with their selfies than seeing General Sherman, the largest living tree on earth. Watching a travel show is not traveling. Playing your Wii is not exercising. ...

7. Try to see the other person's point of view.

Our tribal instincts make it easy to demonize others — whatever kind of "other" that is. But really, most of the world just wants to make a decent living, be warm and safe, and yuck it up every now and then.

Try a little empathy on for size — even for the Presbyterians. They're people too, you know.

8. Don't believe everything you hear (or see)!

We live in an age where there is more information available to more people than ever in the history of the world. That's mostly a good thing. Churches and other institutions have purposely kept people ignorant for much of human history.

But there is an incalculable amount of bullshit out there as well. Any crackpot with a credit card and 2 hours can create a website that is 100 percent bad information. Exercise those skeptical muscles every now and then. If it sounds crazy, it probably is.

9. Keep your brain and body active.

This is pure quality-of-life here. Strong and fit bodies not only make day-to-day life easier, they keep good blood supplies coursing through your gray matter as well. Reading, exploring, doing things differently— evidence shows all that helps keep the brain fit, too.

10. Tell someone to kiss your ass when appropriate.

I'm not talking about gratuitous expletives. I'm talking about resisting the temptation to sell your ethical soul. There are times in life when an offer comes along to do a wrong that will bring you some profit or even safety.

Do your best to deny another's attempt to corrupt you.

11. Take a moment every day to be grateful.

No matter how bad it gets, someone out there is worse off or dead. That's the bottom line, isn't it?

You, on the other hand (if you're actually reading this and not merely in a coma), aren't dead yet.

So there's that.

It's just got to be mentally healthy to shift your thinking from what's wrong with the world (or your life) to what's right with it — at least once in a while. Hope springs eternal. I don't know who the hell this Hope is, but she's got the right idea ... springing ... whatever that means ...

THE CASE FOR SECULAR HUMANISM

Jonathan Engel

There are two recent news stories that help to illuminate the utility of secular humanism, and why the world is so desperately in need of a belief system that puts people over dogma.

First, from Pakistan: Asia Bibi, a Christian woman, was acquitted by Pakistan's highest court of a charge of blasphemy, after having spent eight years on death row. Her alleged crime? Some Muslim neighbors claimed that she had insulted the prophet Mohammed. In the aftermath of the acquittal ruling there have been violent demonstrations demanding Ms. Bibi's execution, and her attorney had to leave Pakistan for his own safety. Ms. Bibi's safety is also far from assured, as the Court has prevented her from leaving the country.

Story number 2 comes from China. The headline in *The Guardian* read: "UK Confirms Reports of Chinese Mass Internment Camps for Uighur Muslims." It is estimated that as many as 1 million Uighurs are being held in these camps. The Chinese government claims that the purpose of these camps is to act as "vocational training centers" that embody "humane management and care" and are somehow connected to counter-terrorism. But ex-detainees have reported that they were abused, forced to learn Mandarin, and underwent political indoctrination. The governments of the UK, the US, the Netherlands, Sweden, Austria, Norway, Germany and Belgium have all asked questions about the camps in advance of China's appearance before a UN human rights panel.

The first thing that struck me about these two stories is the differing reactions of Muslims in Pakistan, China, and around the world. In Pakistan there were violent demonstrations because a woman who had been held in prison for eight years (because she may have said something bad about someone who died hundreds of years ago) has not been executed. But put a million Muslims in internment camps and the only complaints come from western countries.

This is what happens when you put dogma ahead of human beings. Secular humanists live lives guided by reason and science, freed from religious and secular dogmas, motivated by an appreciation of life and the lives of others, centered on the supreme value of the individual human.

Deeply religious Pakistanis, on the other hand, want to kill people (Ms. Bibi and her lawyer) because their dogma of revering Mohammed has allegedly been besmirched, while they shrug their collective shoulders at the internment of a million of their fellow human beings. So the insult of a person long dead counts for more than the suffering of a million living people. Please don't read this essay as an indictment of all people who practice Islam. There are millions of Muslims, many of them here in the United States, who would recoil at the thought of killing a Christian for their supposed "blasphemy". But the frightening truth is that there are also millions of Muslims who demand death for blasphemers while ignoring the abuse of a million of their co-religionists. Because of dogma. This is the opposite of humanism, wherein the well-being of living human beings, whomever

they are and wherever they live, is always prioritized over rigid, antiquated beliefs. In my opinion, it is humanism that the world needs today.

HUMANISM: OPEN MINDS AND OPEN HEARTS

Keith C. Burris

(Excerpted from "Intellectual tools allow humanism to flourish" in *The Toledo Blade*, 11/5/2018, i.e., five days after the *Tree of Life* massacre in Pittsburgh)

And if you ask me to write what I think humanism is, I would say this: The ability of humanity to prevail, with the help of certain intellectual tools we have acquired through the ages: Reason, respect for science, love of the arts, civility, manners, and intellectual curiosity.

And there is one other thing, at least in America: Generosity of spirit. I think of the great American humanists, be they in letters (John Updike, John Cheever, Saul Bellow), in the arts (Isaac Stern, Leonard Bernstein, Robert Shaw), in diplomacy (George F. Kennan), in science (Freeman Dyson), in true religion (Dorothy Day) and I see an openness of spirit. And I think that is what our country needs today — the learned, open-hearted, and open-minded humanists, eager to engage their fellow citizens and at pains to understand them. And, more inclined to embrace expanded legal immigration than decry illegal immigrants; more inclined to look past party and ideology than to cling to it; more inclined to reach across the table than turn away in disdain. I want to walk with them.

FREE WILL, DETERMINISM, AND CRAPS

Chic Schissel

I had considerable difficulty getting through Abraham Loeb's article "Does It Matter if We Have Free Will?" (PIQUE, November). He seems to maintain that "philosophy" is adequate to fill in those spaces that science has been unable to explain. He says "metaphysical thinking can supplement science" in such situations.

Philosophy is defined as "love of wisdom". But Loeb defines philosophy as merely speculation. If science cannot answer my question I am willing to simply say "I don't know" rather than go into metaphysical twaddle.

Loeb calls the concept of free will an "emergent phenomenon", but the concept of free will versus determinism has been with us for centuries. 70-odd years ago, in college, I did a paper on the subject that I think clarifies the problem. Crap shooting was my example.

Free Will and Determinism

The question is often raised whether free will really exists. Assuming the universality of mechanistic physical laws, the claim is made that reason must lead us to absolute determinism; therefore we cannot be truly responsible for our behavior. In an absolute sense this may be right, but on humanity's level of understanding this is not useful.

When two dice are thrown we notice that different numbers come up, and we conclude that the dice have "free will". But continued observations show that the dice exhib-

it a pattern: the number 7 comes up more frequently than other numbers, and 6 and 8 show up more than 5 and 9. So, then, we decide that the free will behavior of the dice is limited, restricted by something we call probability.

Now, if we go further, if we measure the coefficient of friction of the dice, the recoil characteristics of the dice table and the rebound panel, the sweat in the palm of our dice-throwing hand, the force of the throw, every absolute physical characteristic of every physical factor involved, we could absolutely predict what number will come up, and the dice will have lost all attributes of free will.

But we can't even adequately measure the physical data involved in a crap game, let alone the initial direction and amplitude of the energy of the big bang. So we have to be satisfied with probability, and this is the level at which science operates. And, as a corollary, it leaves us with the troubling concept that we, at least to some extent, have free will and are responsible for our behavior.

Finally, I offer the words of Isaac Bashevis Singer, who said, with a smile, "We have to believe in free will. We have no other choice."

ANOTHER READER RESPONDS TO PIQUE

To the Editor: Re "TICK ... TICK ... TICK" (PIQUE, November), methinks that the IPCC is missing the boat by half a century. The doomsday deadline to "get climate change under control" cannot be in 2030 (12 years hence) because it was in 1981, thirty-seven years ago when good ole Ronnie Raygun put the kibosh on environment protection.

For how that happened see "Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change", the giant *New York Times Magazine* feature in August. It describes the "tragedy in two acts" with pictures, with environmental and political details, and with commentary, about how we blew it and began the process of ending life on Earth. The best way to find the *NYTimes* feature is to just Google "losing earth".

The consequence of missing the deadline, which fully develops a century or so after missing it, is not to "make life in many parts of the world unbearable". It is to make life in every part of the world impossible. — *Giddian Beer*

JESUS AND MO SURPRISE THE BARMAID

(Transcribed from jesusandmo.net/comic/heat/)

Jesus: I agree, barmaid — longer heat waves, rising sea levels, stronger hurricanes, flooding, tsunamis. There's no point denying it.

Mohammed: Scientific evidence proves it's all happening.

Barmaid: But do you agree that human activity is the cause?

Jesus: Yes.

Mo: Absolutely.

Barmaid: Then I owe you an apology. I just assumed that you would deny that carbon emissions from industry and agriculture had anything to do with global warming.

Jesus: (sigh)

Mo: You are very naïve.

Jesus: Not that kind of human activity.

Mo: We're talking about gay sex.

I VOTE FOR T-F, C-F, F-W SG

(Excerpted from centerforinquiry.org/blog/fear-and-loathing-of-trump/, with embellishments.)

At the CFI blog, Ben Radford looks at the tactic some are using online to avoid using Trump's name so as not to trigger algorithms or give him too much attention. Trump hasn't noticed, it seems, or doesn't care. There are several ways people indicate the president, most popularly "T***p" and "Strump", but also including, Voldemort-like, "He who shall not be named".

There are also various circumlocutions, such as Mad King Cheeto, Agent Orange, the Dumpster, the Orange Manatee, Hair Furor, President Bone Spurs, Donald Drumpf, Assault-in-chief, and "Tiny-Fingered, Cheeto-Faced, Ferret-Wearing Shitgibbon", among others.

Others simply call him "Sin Nombre" (nameless in Spanish)—though I'd prefer "Hombre Sin Nombre" because it's alliterative and references his infamous, inane "bad hombres" comment—though no one asked me.

Readers of PIQUE are encouraged to offer their own cognomens for the mendacious, kleptocratic thug in the Oval Office. Email editor@shsny.org.

"Patriotism is when love of your own people comes first, nationalism when hate for people other than your own comes first." — *Charles deGaulle*

"I am a nationalist." — *Donald Trump*

REMEMBERING BUSH 41: A CORRECTIVE

John Rafferty

Because the current occupant of the White House is so god-awful—a serial-adulterer racist misogynist, perhaps an actual traitor, and certainly a thief who leads a kleptocracy rather than an administration—the American media (and much of the nation) fell all over themselves in their weeklong obsequies-cum-showerbath of nostalgia for the first President Bush, George H.W.

Yes, he was a nice man, a war hero, and the best-qualified-to-be-president we'd had since, I don't know, Jefferson? But let us not forget ...

He sold his soul to Ronald Reagan (earning Nancy's open contempt) and for the sake of the vice presidency embraced what he'd once called "voodoo economics", helping underwrite the first few hundred billions of supply-side debt that generations to come will have to pay for.

He beat Michael Dukakis for the presidency with a racist campaign designed by Lee Atwater and Roger Ailes, including the infamous "Willie Horton" commercial.

As president, he did nothing about the AIDS epidemic raging throughout his term in office.

He put Clarence Thomas on the Supreme Court.

He approved the disgraceful campaign to discredit Thomas's accuser, Anita Hill.

And he said that atheists – that's most of us, folks – were "not real citizens" of the United States of America.

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at Dewey's Pub
Wed, Dec 19, 6 – 10:00 pm
RNY Winter Solstice Party

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Immigration, Illegals
and Morality

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Hitchhikers on Hannukah

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A Farewell

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