

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

June, 2018

Are we one dress-up costume away from fascism in America? Herein we hear from two U.S. Secretaries of State – on the bedrock principles of American society and on the Agent Orange in the Oval. We parse identity politics, italics and A.I., hear from our UK cousins, celebrate freethinking Finland and blue state values, nominate a “Sh*thead of the Month”, sing along with Pete Seeger, and party down on our Day of Reason. But first, a big, big political step forward. – JR

WE HAVE A CAUCUS IN CONGRESS

John Rafferty

(Based on Freedom From Religion Foundation press releases in April and “There Will Soon Be a “Congressional Freethought Caucus” on Capitol Hill” by Hemant Mehta (The Friendly Atheist) on patheos.com, 4/25,2018)

Marking a major milestone in Congress for secular representation, several representatives have announced the formation of a Congressional Freethought Caucus that will focus on promoting secular values and will give a voice to freethinking voters.

The new caucus was fittingly announced by Rep. Jared Huffman, D-Calif., the only openly nontheistic member of Congress, while accepting the Secular Coalition of America’s Visibility Award in April.

The mission statement of the Congressional Freethought Caucus is “to promote public policy formed on the basis of reason, science, and moral values; to protect the secular character of our government by adhering to the strict Constitutional principle of the separation of church and state; to oppose discrimination against atheists, agnostics, humanists, seekers, religious and nonreligious persons, and to champion the value of freedom of thought and conscience worldwide; and to provide a forum for members of Congress to discuss their moral frameworks, ethical values, and personal religious journeys.”

Other members of the Congressional Freethought Caucus include Rep. Dan Kildee, D-Mich., Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Calif., Rep. Mark Pocan, D-Wis., and Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md.

Who else?

Your representative, that’s who! I have written to my congresswoman, Carolyn Maloney (D-NY-12) suggesting (nicely but firmly) that she join the Caucus. Go thou and do likewise!

WILL WE STOP TRUMP BEFORE IT’S TOO LATE?

Madeleine Albright

(Former U.S. Secretary of State, 1997-2001)

(Excerpted from The New York Times Sunday Review, 4/6/2018)

(Editor: The Op-Ed that is excerpted here ran to promote Ambassador Albright’s new book, Fascism: A Warning, which is our SHSNY Book Club selection for August. – JR)

Today, we are in a new era, testing whether the democratic banner can remain aloft amid terrorism, sectarian conflicts, vulnerable borders, rogue social media and the cynical schemes of ambitious men. The answer is not self-evident. We may be encouraged that most people in most countries still want to live freely and in peace, but there is no ignoring the storm clouds that have gathered. In fact, fascism – and the tendencies that lead toward fascism – pose a more serious threat now than at any time since the end of World War II.

Meanwhile, the possibility that fascism will be accorded a fresh chance to strut around the world stage is enhanced by the volatile presidency of Donald Trump.

If freedom is to prevail over the many challenges to it, American leadership is urgently required. This was among the indelible lessons of the 20th century. But by what he has said, done and failed to do, Mr. Trump has steadily diminished America’s positive clout in global councils.

Instead of mobilizing international coalitions to take on world problems, he touts the doctrine of “every nation for itself” and has led America into isolated positions on trade, climate change and Middle East peace. Instead of engaging in creative diplomacy, he has insulted United States neighbors and allies, walked away from key international agreements, mocked multilateral organizations and stripped the State Department of its resources and role. Instead of standing up

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SHSNY is a Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association (AHA), an Affiliate Member of Atheist Alliance International (AAI), 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).

for the values of a free society, Mr. Trump, with his oft-vented scorn for democracy's building blocks, has strengthened the hands of dictators. No longer need they fear United States criticism regarding human rights or civil liberties.

At one time or another, Mr. Trump has attacked the judiciary, ridiculed the media, defended torture, condoned police brutality, urged supporters to rough up hecklers and – jokingly or not – equated mere policy disagreements with treason. He tried to undermine faith in America's electoral process through a bogus advisory commission on voter integrity. He routinely vilifies federal law enforcement institutions. He libels immigrants and the countries from which they come. His words are so often at odds with the truth that they can appear ignorant, yet are in fact calculated to exacerbate religious, social and racial divisions. Overseas, rather than stand up to bullies, Mr. Trump appears to like bullies, and they are delighted to have him represent the American brand. If one were to draft a script chronicling fascism's resurrection, the abdication of America's moral leadership would make a credible first scene. ...

What is to be done? First, defend the truth. A free press, for example, is not the enemy of the American people; it is the protector of the American people. Second, we must reinforce the principle that no one, not even the president, is above the law. Third, we should each do our part to energize the democratic process by registering new voters, listening respectfully to those with whom we disagree, knocking on doors for favored candidates, and ignoring the cynical counsel: "There's nothing to be done."

I'm 80 years old, but I can still be inspired when I see young people coming together to demand the right to study without having to wear a flak jacket.

We should also reflect on the definition of greatness. Can a nation merit that label by aligning itself with dictators and autocrats, ignoring human rights, declaring open season on the environment, and disdain the use of diplomacy at a time when virtually every serious problem requires international cooperation?

To me, greatness goes a little deeper than how much marble we put in our hotel lobbies and whether we have a Soviet-style military parade. America at its best is a place where people from a multitude of backgrounds work together to safeguard the rights and enrich the lives of all. That's the example we have always aspired to set and the model people around the world hunger to see. And no politician, not even one in the Oval Office, should be allowed to tarnish that dream.

For a long time we have gone along with some well-tested principles of conduct: that it was better to tell the truth than falsehoods; that a half-truth was no truth at all; that duties were older than and as fundamental as rights; that, as Justice Holmes put it, the mode by which the inevitable came to pass was effort; that to perpetuate a harm was always wrong, no matter how many joined in it, but to perpetuate it on a weaker person was particularly detestable. – Dean Acheson, U.S. Secretary of State, 1949-1953

ONE COSTUME AWAY FROM DICTATORSHIP

John Rafferty

On his "Real Time with Bill Maher" show on HBO Comedian Bill Maher accuses Donald Trump of acting a like a third-world dictator. Let's see if actual DJT quotes support Maher's claims that ...

He's a narcissist ...

"I have the best words." "I'm smart, really smart." "I alone can fix it." "It's hard for them to attack me on looks, because I'm so good-looking."

He demands over-the-top flattery ...

"Mr. President, we thank you for the honor and the blessing that you've given us to serve your agenda and the American people ..." – since-fired Chief of Staff Rance Priebus

"It is the greatest privilege of my life to serve as your vice president. – scheming-to-succeed V.P. Mike Pence

He puts his name on buildings ...

Trump Tower, Trump International Hotels, Trump Entertainment Resorts, 4 Trump Plazas, 9 other Trump-named buildings, and 17 Trump-named golf clubs.

He appoints unqualified family to positions of power ...

2 people, 1 word = Jarovanka

He hates and threatens a free press ...

"The Fake News is working overtime ... take away credentials?"

"... disgusting and corrupt media."

To a rally crowd: "I will put these people [the media] down for you."

He has his own propaganda outlet ...

By his own admission, he starts every day with "Fox and Friends", and we have learned that he ends many evenings on the phone with Fox's Sean Hannity.

It has been more than a year since he has held a solo news conference.

He blames minorities for all the country's problems ...

"[Mexicans] bring drugs, they bring crime, they're rapists."

"Why do we want all these people from shithole countries coming here?"

He lies so freely no one knows what truth is any more ...

The Fact Checker: "3001 false or misleading claims ... in his first 466 days in office."

He uses his office for personal gain ...

Chinese government-owned telecom company ZTE was sanctioned for stealing US intellectual property ... until it invested \$500 million in a Trump Organization project in Indonesia, and "America First" Trump is now lifting the sanctions in order to "save Chinese jobs".

Jared Kushner's father asked the government of Qatar to invest in the Kushner company's white elephant, 666 Fifth Avenue. Qatar said no, and almost immediately, Trump announced US support of the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar. So Qatar reconsidered, is now investing with Kushner, and Trump has just welcomed his "good friend", the emir of Qatar in the White House. Blockade? What blockade?

He admires/aligns with other dictators and strongmen ...

About Vladimir Putin, whom 17 US intelligence agencies have concluded is waging cyber war against American democracy: "Every time he sees me, he says, 'I didn't do that.' And I really believe that when he tells me that, he means it."

To Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte, who has been condemned by human rights groups for his deadly war on drugs and thousands of extrajudicial killings: "I just wanted to congratulate you because I am hearing of the unbelievable job on the drug problem."

About China's Xi Jinping becoming President for Life: "Maybe we'll want to give that a shot someday."

He holds scary rallies ...

"Knock the crap out of him [protester at rally], would you? I promise you I will pay your legal fees."

"I'd like to punch him [another protester] in the face."

He wants military parades ...

He's still unhappy that his \$30 million Veterans Day parade won't include tanks or missiles.

He dresses up in military costumes ...

Okay, not quite there yet ...



But maybe ...



TRUMP CONSIDERING PULLING U.S. OUT OF CONSTITUTION

Andy Borowitz,

(Reprinted from newyorker.com 5/9/2018)

Calling it "maybe the worst deal ever", Donald J. Trump says he is considering pulling the United States out of the United States Constitution.

"I've seen a lot of bad deals in my life, but this Constitution is a total mess," he said. "We need to tear it up and start over."

Trump was scathing in his remarks about the 229-year-old document, singling out for special scorn its insistence on three branches of government. "The branches thing is maybe the worst part of this deal," he said. "The first thing we do when we pull out of the Constitution is get rid of two of those branches."

He also called the First Amendment "something that really has to go".

"No one in his right mind would put something like that in a Constitution," he said. "Russia doesn't have it. North Korea doesn't have it. All the best countries don't have it."

Vowing to replace the Constitution with "a new, much, much better Constitution", he acknowledged that there might be some elements of the original document worth salvaging. "We're going to keep the Second Amendment," he said, "and definitely the Fifth."

AMERICAN ATHEISTS NOW BELIEVE IN HELL

Jen Hayden

(Reprinted from DailyKos, 5/18/2018)

Maggie Haberman of *The New York Times* reported that United Talent Agency has pitched a reboot of the political talk show *Crossfire*.

The show would feature the banter of Anthony Scaramucci, the man who was fired from the White House before his actual start date, and Michael Avenatti, the increasingly camera-friendly attorney for adult film star Stormy Daniels.

The reaction on Twitter was swift:

Maggie Haberman @maggieNytimes

SCOOP – UTA agent has pitched Avenatti and Mooch as a *Crossfire* 3.0 to 2 nets.

...

Chris Hayes @chrishayes

The end can't come soon enough.

...

American Atheists @AmericanAtheist

We now believe in Hell.

LETTER FROM THE UK

John Adams

(North Yorkshire Humanists)

Greetings from the UK and thanks, once again, for PIQUE which goes to all the members of the North Yorkshire Humanists.

I was interested in your piece about prayers in school ("School Prayer, Revisited", by Jonathan Engel, May PIQUE). You will know that in this country a daily act of collective worship of a "mainly, broadly or wholly" Christian nature is compulsory in publicly funded schools. The injunction has been repeated in numerous education Acts of Parliament since the War. It is widely flouted.

In secondary (post 11) schools it is even rare to find a school obeying the letter of the law in this regard. Part of the difficulty in doing so is that of finding someone in the school to conduct the service. Some 53 percent of the adult population in the UK declare that they are not religious. We have the strange conjunction that in the USA there is no state religion but belief is widespread: in the UK we have a state religion and believers are in the minority ... and declining.

There is, of course, a growing opposition to school prayers, not least from school principals who do not wish to flout the law. You can guess where support for the status quo comes from.

By the way, I have never heard a supporter of school prayers suggest that it might make the school immune from mass shootings, principally because we don't, thank goodness, have such things. I read that your President thinks that knives take the place of guns in this country and that one hospital in London is like a "war zone" with the floors "covered in blood". My son is a doctor in a London hospital and does not know where this blood-covered hospital might be. My sister-in-law is a nurse – she does not

know of it either. There is a reason for this ... it doesn't exist.

When the history of the strange period of your current President's term of office comes to be written, one of (possibly several) ironies will be that the originator of the term "fake news" is himself the principal source of it.

Regards to all ... *John*

AND MORE (not so serious) FROM THE UK
May, Merkel and Macron sign 'Ignore him, he's a twat' letter to Iran

(Reprinted from TheDailyMash.co.uk 9th May 2018)

The leaders of France, Germany and the UK have signed an official letter to Iran advising it ignores Trump because he is a twat.

Following Trump's decision to unilaterally violate the 2015 nuclear agreement, the leaders have rushed to assure Iran's Hassan Rouhani that the president is of no account due to being an utter wanker.

The letter read: "We offer our unequivocal assurances that Trump is, and has always been, an irredeemable dickhead with no idea how anything works.

"Please be aware that you could be running a nuclear enrichment programme in the room he was in and he would have no idea because he would be either watching himself on the news or one of those documentaries about police dogs.

"Our promise is that if you stick to the agreement the US will rejoin it within three years once the pretend billionaire has resigned because of corruption.

"Yours truly, the reasonably sane."

Obama also had this thing about not jumping into a pit full of wolves, Trump told

(Reprinted from TheDailyMash.co.uk 9th May 2018)

Donald Trump has been informed that Obama was very much against presidents jumping into pits full of wolves.

After Trump withdrew from his predecessor's nuclear deal with Iran, experts suggested he might also want to tackle Obama's terrible "Wolf Law" which bans sitting presidents from diving naked into the nearest zoo's wolf enclosure and immediately being torn to shreds.

Professor Henry Brubaker of the Institute for Studies said: "Obama's biggest thing wasn't Iran or universal healthcare, it was the principle that presidents should not remove their clothes and throw themselves on the mercy of wolves while shouting 'Come get some you mothers'.

"So far no president has been tough and brave enough to do this, but who knows? Maybe the time has come. I think voters would be really impressed."

Donald Trump has since despatched his death mask-faced sidekick Mike Pence to find a "very upscale" zoo or wildlife park with "plenty of room for cameras".

He tweeted: "This Obama wolf thing is the worst for our country! I am going to be the best wolf meal of all time.

"Doctors have told me I taste absolutely delicious, like very high-grade pork."

THERE IS NO GOOD ENDING TO THE STORY OF PRESIDENT DONALD J. TRUMP

David Cay Johnson

(Editor: For 30 years, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter Johnston has covered Trump's life and career, as detailed in the bestselling book, The Making of Donald Trump. His new book is It's Even Worse Than You Think: What the Trump Administration is Doing to America. The following is excerpted from an interview on salon.com, 4/23/2018. — JR)

There is no good ending to the story. America will survive this, we'll get past it, but whenever Trump leaves, there's no good ending. If Trump is removed by impeachment or by the voters, whether in a Republican primary or a general election, I know what he will do. He's already told us what he will do by his actions. Trump will spend the rest of his days fomenting violence and revolution in this country.

He's careful not to directly say "revolution", but he will call the government illegitimate. He might even call it criminal, since he called Democrats who didn't stand up during his State of the Union speech treasonous. If they're going to impeach Trump, I believe they have to have a plan to indict, try, convict and imprison him. But Trump will be a role model for some people, and there may well be violence over it.

Let me be very clear and quotable about this. At an absolute minimum, Donald Trump has divided loyalties, and the evidence we already have suggests that Donald Trump is a traitor. In fact, I would say that the evidence we already have, the public materials such as emails for example, strongly indicate that Donald Trump is a traitor.

However, I don't even think he understands what he's done.

SH*THEAD OF THE MONTH

John Rafferty

During a May 16 meeting of the Republican-controlled, science-denying House Science, Space and Technology Committee, Rep. Mo Brooks (R-AL) told Philip Duffy, president of the Woods Hole Research Center and former senior adviser to the U.S. Global Change Research Program, that land erosion is responsible for sea-level rise.

He said the California coastline and England's White Cliffs of Dover tumble into the sea every year, and that contributes to sea-level rise.

"Every time you have that soil or rock or whatever it is that is deposited into the seas, that forces the sea levels to rise, because now you have less space in those oceans, because the bottom is moving up."



You have to have been a Republican to know how good it is to be a Democrat.

— *Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis*

SECULAR FINLAND IS THE HAPPIEST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD

Patrick Collinson

(Excerpted from "Finland is the happiest country in the world, says UN report", in The Guardian (UK), 3/14/2018)

Finland has overtaken Norway to become the happiest nation on earth, according to a UN report. The 2018 World Happiness Report also charts the steady decline of the US as the world's largest economy grapples with a crisis of obesity, substance abuse and depression.

The study reveals the US has slipped to 18th place, five places down on 2016. The top four places are taken by Nordic nations, with Finland followed by Norway, Denmark and Iceland. ...

"Finland has vaulted from fifth place to the top of the rankings this year," said the report's authors, although they noted that the other three Nordic countries (plus Switzerland) have almost interchangeable scores.

The report, an annual publication from the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, said all the Nordic countries scored highly on income, healthy life expectancy, social support, freedom, trust and generosity. The rankings are based on Gallup polls of self-reported wellbeing, as well as perceptions of corruption, generosity and freedom.

The UN placing is the latest accolade for Finland, a country of 5.5 million people that only 150 years ago suffered Europe's last naturally caused famine. The country has been ranked the most stable, the safest and best governed country in the world. It is also among the least corrupt and the most socially progressive. Its police are the world's most trusted and its banks the soundest.

"That Finland is the top scorer is remarkable," said Meik Wiking of the Happiness Research Institute in Denmark. "GDP per capita in Finland is lower than its neighboring Nordic countries and is much lower than that of the US. The Finns are good at converting wealth into wellbeing.

"In the Nordic countries in general, we pay some of the highest taxes in the world, but there is wide public support for that because people see them as investments in quality of life for all. Free healthcare and university education goes a long way when it comes to happiness. In the Nordic countries, Bernie Sanders is not viewed as progressive - he is just common sense." ...

The UN report devotes a special chapter to why the US, once towards the top of happiness table, has slipped down the league despite having among the highest income per capita.

"America's subjective wellbeing is being systematically undermined by three interrelated epidemic diseases, notably obesity, substance abuse (especially opioid addiction) and depression," said Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University in New York, and one of the report's authors.

Comment: And, while the less-and-less-happy US is the most God-obsessed nation in the developed world, Finland and the other Nordic countries are the most secular. - JR

OUR DAY OF REASON WAS HOURS OF FELLOWSHIP AND FUN

Reported by John Rafferty

We filled the upstairs room at Pete's Tavern for our 11th Annual SHSNY Day of Reason Brunch on May 6, and a rousing good time was had by all.

"This brunch today was great. Good company, good speaker. Thank you!" - Martine Reed



The Bloody Marys (or Mimosas - your choice) were bracing and cold, the pub grub was excellent, and 48 humanists, skeptics (Hi, Spiros) and freethinkers of every persuasion met old friends, made new ones, and spent the hours doing what we do best - we talked.

Great conversation. - John Wagner



But we listened, too, and our speaker, former *New York Times* writer/editor, Dulcie Leimbach, now Editor of PassBlue, did not disappoint.

PassBlue is an independent, woman-led digital publication of in-depth journalism on the US-UN relationship, and Dulcie filled us in on on what it does in covering "The UN, the US, Women, and World Peace".

It was a great brunch, good to see Donna again. - Bill Carter
Thank you very much for a very good morning indeed. We appreciate the great amount of time and effort it takes to have such a successful event. - Ellen Duncan

And thanks to all who made the day such a success: Giddian Beer, Bill Carter, Nadia Chambers, Spiro Condos, Mirta Cotto, Robin DeLuca, Ellen Duncan, Ron Duncan, Jon Engel, Wil Engel, Steven Essig, Joel Galker, Leah Gitter, Pedro Lujans, Harry Graber, Maria Graber,



Steve Green, Lenore Green, Timothy Greene, Dorothy Kahn, Dennis Kendrick, Steven Kuklin (+1), Dulcie Leimbach, John Leimbach, Brian Lemaire, Carl Marxer, Donna Marxer, Charlotte Marzani, Hugh McGuire, Connie McKinnon, Claire Miller, Carlos Mora, Bob Murtha, Massimo Pigliucci, John Rafferty, Bill Reed, Martine Reed, Lori Rose, William Ross, Elinor Rufer (+1), Chic Schissel, Larry Shaw, Heddi Tinker, and John Wagner

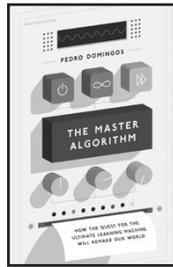
Last word goes to Dulcie:

Thank you so much for a wonderful luncheon event. John and I enjoyed it tremendously and it was good for me to introduce PassBlue to such a smart, attuned audience. I hope you continue your well-earned success. - Kind regards, Dulcie

SHSNY CALENDAR: JUNE - AUGUST 2018

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, JUNE 7, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK
28 East 35 St. (front lounge)
 We'll discuss
THE MASTER ALGORITHM:
How the Quest for the
Ultimate Learning Machine
Will Remake Our World
Pedro Domingos

The race is on to invent the ultimate learning algorithm: one capable of discovering any knowledge from data, and doing anything we want, before we even ask.



Domingos lifts the veil to give us a peek inside the learning machines that power Google, Amazon, and your smartphone. He assembles a blueprint for the future universal learner – the Master Algorithm.

If data-ism is today's philosophy, this book is its bible.

"Pedro Domingos demystifies machine learning and shows how wondrous and exciting the future will be." – *Walter Isaacson*

"An impressive and wide-ranging work that covers everything from the history of machine learning to the latest technical advances in the field." – *Daily Beast*

– *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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SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, JULY 12, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
THE DANGEROUS CASE OF
DONALD TRUMP:
27 Psychiatrists and
Mental Health Experts
Assess a President
Bandy X. Lee

In spite of the American Psychiatric Association's "Goldwater rule", 27 mental health professionals explore President Trump's symptoms and potentially relevant diagnoses to find a complex, if also dangerously mad, man.

"There will not be a book published this fall more urgent, important, or controversial than *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump* ... profound, illuminating and discomforting." – *Bill Moyers*
 – *Kindle available.*

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, AUGUST 2, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
FASCISM: A WARNING
Madeleine Albright

A fascist, observes Madeleine Albright, "is someone who claims to speak for a whole nation or group, is utterly unconcerned with the rights of others, and is willing to use violence and whatever other means are necessary to achieve the goals he or she might have."

Fascism, she shows, not only endured through the twentieth century but now presents a more virulent threat to peace and justice than at any time since the end of World War II.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

WOULD YOU LIKE TO LEAD A BOOK CLUB EVENING?

Let's talk, at editor@shsny.org.

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION
SUN, JUNE 10, 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 \$13 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:
What are the parameters of freethought?

DRINKING REASONABLY
WED, JUNE 20, 6-10:00 pm
Whispers Restaurant & Bar
210 West 94 Street
(Broadway - Amsterdam Ave)



The NYC Skeptics' Drinking Sceptically event has expanded to include all of the groups in the Reasonable New York Coalition.

Drinking Reasonably promotes fellowship and networking among skeptics, critical-thinkers, and like-minded individuals in a casual, relaxed atmosphere. We discuss the issues of the day and whatever else is on our minds. But most of all, we have fun!

Come at 6:00 and enjoy Happy Hour prices until 7:00.

Don't drink? Don't let that stop you from joining in the fun.

SHSNY CALENDAR: JUNE - AUGUST 2018

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
WED, JUNE 27, 7 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves
SIX EASY STEPS TO AVERT
THE COLLAPSE OF
CIVILIZATION
David Eagleman

Civilizations always think they are immortal, but they almost always perish, leaving ruins. We can avoid that fate and we've got the internet to make it happen. David Eagleman, who can make his most serious presentations entertaining, explains what the six easy steps we need to take are.



1) *Try not to cough on one another.* More humans have died from epidemics than from all famines and wars in history. Disease precipitated the fall of Greece, Rome and the civilizations of the Americas.

2) *Don't lose things.* As proven by the destruction of the Alexandrian library and the literature of the Mayans and Minoans, knowledge is hard won, but easily lost.

3) *Tell each other faster.* Don't let natural disasters cascade. The Minoans perished for the lack of a tsunami alert system, which we now have.

4) *Mitigate tyranny.* The USSR's collapse was made inevitable by state-mandated errors, such as the Afghanistan War.

5) *Get more brains involved in solving problems.* Educate, Educate, Educate.

6) *Try not to run out of energy.* When energy expenditure outweighs energy return, collapse ensues.

(Note: Yes, this is a re-scheduling of the cancelled April evening.)

REASONABLE NEW YORK
SUMMER SOLSTICE PARTY
2018
SAT, JUNE 23, 12 Noon–4 pm
Ellington in the Park
(lower level)
103 Street in Riverside Park

Come celebrate Reason and our hemisphere's longest and sunniest (we hope) day with dozens of your fellow Reasonable New Yorkers – humanists, skeptics, atheists, agnostics, Brights, Ethicals, stoics, feminists, and freethinkers of every stripe – in lovely Riverside Park.

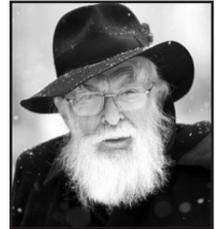


Delicious food and satisfying drink are available from Ellington's grill menu and full bar – so come, meet, mingle, make new freethinker friends, and celebrate the day, the season, the sun, and reason.

PLANNING AHEAD
The usual SHSNY schedule is ...
Book Club: First Thursday
 at the Community Church of NY
Brunch: Third Sunday
 at Stone Creek Lounge
Drinking Reasonably
Third Wednesday
 at Whispers Restaurant & Bar
Great Lectures on DVD:
4th Wednesday
 at Stone Creek Lounge.
More info:
www.shsny.org
 and/or 646-922-7389
Early Bird Registration
ends June 15 — Book Now for ...

NECSS 2018
THU-SUN, JULY 12-15
Fashion Inst. of Technology
227 West 27 Street

The Northeast Conference on Science & Skepticism (NECSS, pronounced "nexus") is a science and critical thinking conference held annually in New York City (this is the tenth). NECSS welcomes leading scientists, educators, activists, and artists (like James "The Amazing" Randi, above) who educate and engage conference attendees through individual presentations, panel discussions, and performance pieces.



NECSS is produced by New York City Skeptics, the New England Skeptical Society, The Skeptics' Guide to the Universe, and The Society for Science-Based Medicine.

Along with other RNY groups, SHSNY will be represented at NECSS. Don't miss it!

Go to: <https://necss.org>



“GODLESS LIBERALS”, IT SEEMS, CARE MORE ABOUT “FAMILY VALUES” THAN CONSERVATIVES

Nicholas Kristof

(Reprinted from “Blue States Practice the Family Values Red States Preach” on The New York Times OpEd page, 11/18/2017)

(Editor: Note, please, that this was written before Roy Moore lost to Doug Jones in the Alabama special Senatorial election. – JR)

As we watch Roy Moore thumping his Bible to defend himself from accusations of child molestation, let me toss out a verbal hand grenade: To some degree, liberals practice the values that conservatives preach.

This is complicated terrain with lots of exceptions, and the recent scandals involving Harvey Weinstein, Louis C.K. and Al Franken underscore that liberals can be skunks as much as anyone else.

Yet if one looks at blue and red state populations as a whole, it’s striking that conservatives champion “family values” even as red states have high rates of teenage births, divorce and prostitution. In contrast, people in blue states don’t trumpet these family values but often seem to do a better job living them.

According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey of 32 states, those with the highest percentage of high school students who say they have had sex are Mississippi, Delaware, West Virginia, Alabama and Arkansas. All but Delaware voted Republican in the last presidential election.

Meanwhile, the five states with the lowest proportion of high school students who have had sex were New York, California, Maryland, Nebraska and Connecticut. All but Nebraska voted Democratic.

When evangelical kids have sex, they’re less likely to use birth control – and that may be a reason (along with lower abortion rates) that red states have high teen birthrates.

Nine of the 10 states with the highest teen birthrates voted Republican in 2016. And nine of the 10 states with the lowest teen birthrates voted Democratic.

“Red regions of the country have higher teen pregnancy rates, more shotgun marriages and lower average ages at marriage and first birth,” Naomi Cahn and June Carbone wrote in their important 2010 book, *Red Families v. Blue Families*.

The liberal impulse may be to gloat: Those conservatives thunder about “family values” but don’t practice them. But there’s also perhaps a measure of hypocrisy in the blue states.

As Cahn and Carbone put it: “Blue family values bristle at restrictions on sexuality, insistence on marriage or the stigmatization of single parents. Their secret, however, is that they encourage their children to simultaneously combine public tolerance with private discipline, and their children then overwhelmingly choose to raise their own children within two-parent families.”

Liberals, in other words, may be wary of strict moral codes, but they want to make damn sure that their own kids

don’t have babies while in high school. It helps that they believe in comprehensive sex education and reliable birth control.

(Query: Why is this – immediately above – so difficult a concept for the rednecks – and the politicians who pander to them – to understand? – JR)

The conservative hostility to premarital sex also sometimes leads to early weddings, even to child marriages. I wrote in May about the hundreds of thousands of child marriages in America, and of the dozen states with the highest rates of child marriage, all voted Republican in 2016.

“Child marriage is happening at an alarming rate across the U.S., but available marriage-license data show more parents, judges and clerks in red states than in blue states seem comfortable with this human-rights abuse,” said Fraidy Reiss, founder of Unchained at Last, a nonprofit that fights child marriage.

Divorce rates show a similar pattern: They tend to be higher in red states than in blue states, with Arkansas highest of all. “Individual religious conservatism is positively related to individual divorce risk,” according to a 50-state study reported in the *American Journal of Sociology*.

Then there’s adultery and prostitution. One large international survey found that the largest group of customers on Ashley Madison, the dating website for married people, were evangelical Christians. And a major 2013 study found that men in the Houston and Kansas City metro areas were the most likely to call sex ads, while men in San Francisco and Baltimore were the least likely to.

Yet it’s complicated, and there is one religious group that is extremely good at living conservative family values: Mormons. Utah stands out for low teen birthrates, low divorce rates and low abortion rates, and it has the highest rate of teenagers living with married, biological parents.

More broadly, conservative values don’t directly lead to premarital sex or divorce. Rather, statistical analysis suggests that religious conservatives end up divorcing partly because they marry early, are less likely to go to college and are disproportionately poor.

So the deeper problem seems to be the political choices that conservatives make, underinvesting in public education and social services (including contraception). This underinvestment leaves red states poorer and less educated – and thus prone to a fraying of the social fabric.

So let’s drop the wars over family values. Liberals and conservatives alike don’t want kids pregnant at 16, and we almost all seek committed marriages that last. It’s worth noting that Bible-thumping blowhards like Roy Moore don’t help achieve those values, while investments in education and family planning do.

(Comment: “So let’s drop the wars over family values”? Sure, the liberal readers of the liberal NYTimes (and of scurrilous ungodly newsletters like this) will immediately agree: you know, face facts. But the “Bible-thumping blowhards” and their reality-denying followers will always – always – simply insist on their preconceived notions: “Fake News” facts be damned. – JR)

ITALICIZING ONE'S WAY OUT OF ABSURDITY

Adam Gopnik

(Editor: In a longish review and analysis of (among other books) Robert Wright's Why Buddhism Is True, and Stephen Batchelor's After Buddhism, "What Meditation Can Do for Us, and What It Can't", in the August 7 & 14, 2017 issue of The New Yorker, I think Gopnik neatly encapsulates the arguments that the faith-based use when faced with the task of defending the ridiculous. In this excerpt, substitute Christian, Jewish, or Muslim for Buddhist, and the italicizing argument holds, perhaps even better than for Buddhism. – JR)

Can we really tiptoe past the elaborate supernaturalism of historical Buddhism? Secular Buddhists try to, just as people who are sympathetic to the ethical basis of Christianity try to tiptoe past the doctrines of Heaven and Hell, so that Hell becomes "the experience of being unable to love", or Heaven a state of "being one with God" – not actual places with brimstone pits or massed harps. Batchelor, like every intelligent believer caught in an unsustainable belief, engages in a familiar set of moves.

He attempts to italicize his way out of absurdity by, in effect, shifting the stresses in the simple sentence "We don't believe that."

First, there's "We don't believe that": there may be other believers who accept a simple reward-and-punishment system of karma passing from generation to generation, but our group does not.

Next comes "We don't believe *that*": since reincarnation means eternal rebirth and coming back as a monkey and the rest of it, the enlightened Buddhist tries to de-literalize the "that" to make it more appealing, just as the Christian redefines Hell.

In the end, we resort to "We don't *believe* that": we just accept it as an embedded metaphor of the culture that made the religion.

Then there's the shrug-and-grin argument that everyone believes *something*. Is it fair to object that most of us take quantum physics on faith, too? Well, we *don't* take it on faith. We take it on *trust*, a very different thing. We have confidence—amply evidenced by the technological transformation of the world since the scientific revolution, and by the cash value of validated predictions based on esoteric mathematical abstraction—that the world picture it conveys is true, or more nearly true than anything else on offer. Batchelor tap-dances perilously close to the often repeated absurdity that a highly credulous belief about supernatural claims and an extremely skeptical belief about supernatural claims are really the same because they are both beliefs.

Belief has no value in itself that I can see. Its value increases as it is useful, diminishes as it is replaced by knowledge, and goes negative when it's noxious. In ordinary life, the need for it diminishes as the quantity and quality of knowledge increase.

– Ursula K. Le Guin, in *No Time to Spare*

WHAT I HEAR WHEN YOU SAY

"NOT ALL CHRISTIANS"

Neil Carter

(Excerpted from NonReligious on pathos.com, 5/13/2018)

Not too long ago I restated my critique of the standard Christian teaching that, while it would take an eternity of suffering for me to pay the price of just my individual lifetime of sins (most of which appear to be "thought crimes"), Jesus paid for the sins of billions of people's lifetimes over the span of a single Friday. I'm not sure how the math works out on that, but part of the fun of religion is that things don't have to make sense.

In fact, it may work in a belief's favor if it doesn't make sense. I've argued before that, for the Christian faith, nonsensicality may even add to the credibility of a belief.

Inevitably, though, whenever I take aim at a popular Christian belief (like substitutionary atonement), it never takes more than a few seconds for someone to chime in saying that #NotAllChristians believe whatever it is that I just said. Someone always has to speak up and say, "Well, that's not *my* Christianity."

That's nice.

The first thought I always have when they say things like this is: You're right, #NotAllChristians believe the thing that I just said. I mean, really, come to think of it, the only ones who do are the Baptists, the Methodists, the Presbyterians, Pentecostals, most Catholics and most Anglicans, Vineyard churches, Bible churches, Nazarenes, Churches of God, Congregational Methodists, Independent Baptists, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Brethren, Wesleyans, Apostolic churches, Missionary Baptists, Primitive Baptists, Holiness churches, Evangelical Free churches, Christian Reformed, Full Gospel, Foursquare churches, Churches of Christ, Disciples of Christ, most community churches, Calvary Chapel, and literally hundreds of other species of Christian churches.

But yours takes a different view? Okay. Glad to hear it.

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #313

More than 100 educators are working to revamp the Arizona standards for teaching kids science. In March they produced a draft of proposed new standards, but were blindsided by the Arizona Department of Education, whose staff had deleted or qualified the word "evolution" everywhere throughout the document.

In some cases, "evolution" was crossed out and replaced with phrases including "how traits within populations change over time" or "biological diversity". In other parts of the draft, the phrase "theory of evolution" was added.

What low-level functionary sneaked his/her anti-science ignorance into the draft? Actually, it was Republican anti-abortion religious nut Diane Douglas.

She's the Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction.



GIVE ME THAT OLD TIME RELIGION

Pete Seeger

(Rewrite of the lyrics to "Give Me That Old Time Religion")

Give me that old time religion
Give me that old time religion
Give me that old time religion
It's good enough for me.

We will pray with Aphrodite,
We will pray with Aphrodite,
She wears that see-through nightie,
And it's good enough for me.

We will pray with Zarathustra,
We'll pray just like we use ta,
I'm a Zarathustra booster,
And it's good enough for me.

We will pray with those Egyptians,
Build pyramids to put their crypts in,
Cover subways with inscriptions,
And it's good enough for me.

We will pray with those old Druids,
They drink fermented fluids,
Waltzing naked though the woo-ids,
And it's good enough for me.

We do dances to bring water,
Prepare animals for slaughter,
Sacrifice our sons and daughters,
And it's good enough for me.

I'll arise at early morning,
When my Lord gives me the warning,
That the solar age is dawning,
And it's good enough for me

FREE SPEECH AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Robyn E. Blumner

(Excerpted from the Editorial "Free Speech and Identity Politics" in the Dec2017/Jan2018 issue of Free Inquiry.)

(Editor: The first half of this essay by Center for Inquiry CEO Blumner summarizes the controversy surrounding the "de-platforming" of Richard Dawkins by a radio station in Berkeley, and the muddled thinking of those who called the cancellation a First Amendment violation and those who think Dawkins's criticisms of Islam are racist hate speech that should be silenced. What follows here is her concluding second half. – JR)

I admit that my heart broke a little when I saw the results of the recent Brookings poll of college students who have no understanding of the principle of free speech. Forty-four percent of students said the First Amendment does not protect hate speech, with another 16 percent saying they don't know whether it does. Of course the First Amendment protects hate speech. It protects noxious speech so that the

government doesn't have the power to determine what ideas may be disseminated and what ideas may be censored. That is the very essence of a free society.

But these young people have been told it's their right to live in a world in which no one ever has to feel insulted, marginalized, or micro-annoyed. It is an infantilization of citizenry when we want the government to enforce a bubble of protection for sensitive ears and psyches. And it is a dangerous ceding of individual power—our power—to the government. The judgment of Trump as to what ideas are hateful might be very different from those you and I would choose. Why would we want to give him, or any government official, the power to decide what can be said or heard?

The same poll had 51 percent of college students agreeing that it's okay for a group to shout down a speaker it disagrees with so the speaker can no longer be heard. There was a yawning gap between the percentage of Democrats who agreed with this statement, at 62 percent, versus the percentage of Republicans who did, at 38 percent.

I am guessing this deferential represents the real-life examples of right-wing speakers such as Milo Yiannopoulos and Ann Coulter who have had appearances canceled after violent student protests. If the situation were reversed and Bernie Sanders's speeches unleashed student outrage, those identifying as Democrats might have had second thoughts about whether it's okay to shout down a speaker. Giving your ideological adversary space to make his or her (flawed) case demonstrates maturity, not weakness or assent.

For my fellow liberals—and I realize not everyone reading this is in that category; and all, of every political stripe, are welcome in the world of atheism, secularism, and humanism—this is to my fellow liberals: We have to move beyond identity politics, where we speak through the lens of historical grievances, and start embracing shared civic values as the cornerstone of liberalism.

I recommend *The Once and Future Liberal* by Mark Lilla, a professor of humanities at Columbia University. His thesis is that for decades now, identity politics has been shutting liberals out of political power. To win elections again across a wide swath of the country, liberals must appeal to a sense of shared purpose and end this refrain of blame on white males that pits us against one another. Lilla writes:

"The paradox of identity liberalism is that it paralyzes the capacity to think and act in a way that would actually accomplish the things it professes to want. It is mesmerized by symbols: achieving superficial diversity in organizations, retelling history to focus on marginal and often minuscule groups, concocting inoffensive euphemisms to describe social reality, protecting young ears and eyes already accustomed to slasher films from any disturbing encounter with alternative viewpoints."

[Liberals] must offer a vision of our common destiny based on the one thing that all Americans, of every background, actually share. And that is citizenship.

This identity liberalism that Lilla describes is the same thing that has a Berkeley radio station canceling an event

with Richard Dawkins because he has the audacity to worry aloud how about Islam's legitimately repressive tenets. Any liberal who looks at Dawkins as his or her enemy has no idea what a true enemy is. And in our battle for power—electoral power—you are dooming us to defeat, divided and angry, with liberalism's humane ideas for society's advancement not even in the game.

EDEN NARRATIVE SHAKEN BY EVE'S CLAIMS OF ADAM'S GARDEN MISCONDUCT

Samuel Leal

(Reprinted from <https://bullshit.ist>, 12/1/2017)

Sinful birthers of civilization Adam and Eve, long since believed to have been the cradle from which the human species sprouted into unfortunate existence, are the latest focus within the litany of sexual misconduct allegations that have been brought forth in the wake of what many leading social scientists have now begun referring to as "a TMZ goldmine".

In a statement issued by the pair's creator—metaphysical conjurer of matter and flood enthusiast, God—light was shed on a series of allegations brought forth by Original Woman Eve regarding her time spent with Prodigal Sleazebag Adam during their stint in the fabled Garden of Eden, where they were tasked with overseeing the fruits of the Supreme Being's labor:

"It has recently been brought to the attention of our administration that Mr. Adam, in complete violation of our company's policies and code of conduct, withheld critical information from Ms. Eve in an attempt to obfuscate her understanding of workplace conduct. We would like to clarify once and for all that it was never decreed nor agreed upon by our board of executives that the two were to spend their time in such revealing leaf-wear, and that we have failed horrendously in our duty to inform Ms. Eve that it was totally acceptable to use any assortment of tree bark, fir coats, boysenberry paste, or animal dung to conceal whatever percentage of her body she felt uncomfortable with exposing."

Mr. God concluded the statement by stressing his disappointment in the matter, and proceeded to call it "the worst instance of humanitarian misconduct in [his] time as overseer of the Universe", evidently forgetting that time he made Hitler, and also that time he created malaria.

BRAVE NEW WORLD RIGHT NOW

John Rafferty

According to FiveThirtyEight newsletter, an embryo that was frozen on Oct. 14, 1992, by anonymous parents attempting in-vitro fertilization was born a healthy baby girl to a happy couple on Nov. 25, 2017. The embryo spent 24 years on ice, which may be a record.

So according to the right-wing loonies who are trying to rewrite the medical texts to insist that life begins at inception, this baby is 24 years old.

And in 2020, of course, eligible to vote for Trump.

IT COULD (PROBABLY) KILL US, AND WE'LL (ALMOST CERTAINLY) DO IT

Tad Friend

(Excerpted from "Superior Intelligence" in The New Yorker, May 14, 2018)

Precisely how and when will our curiosity kill us? I bet you're curious. A number of scientists and engineers fear that, once we build an artificial intelligence smarter than we are, a form of A.I. known as artificial general intelligence (A.G.I.), doomsday may follow. ...

In 1965, Alan Turing's colleague Irving Good pointed out that brainy devices could design even brainier ones, ad infinitum: "Thus the first ultra-intelligent machine is the last invention that man need ever make, provided that the machine is docile enough to tell us how to keep it under control." It's that last clause that has claws. ...

Many people in tech point out that artificial narrow intelligence, or A.N.I., has grown ever safer and more reliable – certainly safer and more reliable than we are. (Self-driving cars and trucks might save hundreds of thousands of lives every year.) For them, the question is whether the risks of creating an omniscient Jeeves would exceed the combined risks of the myriad nightmares – pandemics, asteroid strikes, global nuclear war, etc.—that an A.G.I. could sweep aside for us. ...

The worrywarts' fears, grounded in how intelligence and power seek their own increase, are icily specific. Once an A.I. surpasses us, there's no reason to believe it will feel grateful to us for inventing it – particularly if we haven't figured out how to imbue it with empathy.

Why should an entity that could be equally present in a thousand locations at once, possessed of a kind of Starbucks consciousness, cherish any particular tenderness for beings who on bad days can barely roll out of bed? ...

Thinking about A.G.I.s can help clarify what makes us human, for better and for worse. Have we struggled to build one because we are so good at thinking that computers will never catch up? Or because we're so bad at thinking that we can't finish the job? A.G.I.s provoke us to consider whether we are wise to search for aliens, whether we could be in a simulation (a program run on someone else's A.I.), and whether we are responsible to, or for, God.

If the arc of the universe bends toward an intelligence sufficient to understand it, will an A.G.I be the solution – or the end of the experiment?

When I hear from people that religion doesn't hurt anything, I say, really? Well, besides wars, the Crusades, the Inquisitions, 9-11, ethnic cleansing, the suppression of women, the suppression of homosexuals, fatwas, honor killings, suicide bombings, arranged marriages to minors, human sacrifice, burning witches, and systematic sex with children, I have a few little quibbles. And I forgot blowing up girls' schools in Afghanistan.

– Bill Maher, in an interview with Don Imus on Fox, Nov. 1, 2009

A CLARIFICATION FROM AMERICAN ATHEISTS

To the Editor: May PIQUE was, as always, interesting. In response to things you raised in "Oh, Crap!" and concerns others have raised ...

Please understand that the board of directors of American Atheists is charged with acting in the best interests of the organization, including, likely the board's most important function, choosing our leader. For a number of reasons, including the privacy of many people, many of the details involved in making those decisions must remain confidential, though more may be made public after we receive the results of the investigation we commissioned.

It is worth noting that the decision regarding firing David Silverman was made without dissent from any board member, and that means it was made by a wide variety of atheists, all with well developed senses of justice and a good understanding of how to evaluate information, and with unimpeachable integrity among all. Due process is something all of them understand and cherish.

No one was tried or convicted of anything – the organization was protected and served, as it should be.

Regards,

Ed Buckner

– Former President and current Interim Executive Director,
American Atheists

IN MEMORIAM: ELAINE LYNN

Elaine Lynn, best known to many as our popular and energetic SHSNY Book Club Editor/Leader, died sometime in November at her home in Jersey City.

A long-time member, Elaine served on the Board of SHSNY from 2007 to 2011, as Secretary 2007-2008 and as Vice President and Secretary 2008-2011, when she stepped down to concentrate on the Book Club and on her own research and writing interests.

With a Master's degree in International Relations from the University of Chicago, Elaine worked for many years as a self-described "hotshot federal bureaucrat" before taking early retirement "to pursue my interests in the cognitive sciences and in international affairs".

"I have been a humanist for as long as I can remember," she wrote in her candidate statement for the 2008 SHSNY Board election, "and I'm eager to help, in whatever modest way I can, to make this a more enlightened society. I think people of all political and philosophical persuasions have a home among secular humanists. Since I have joined SHSNY, I've found people I like and respect, whom I'm very happy to be with."

Just as we were happy to be with her. She is missed.



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