

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

May, 2018

DAY OF REASON BRUNCH - MAY 6 - PAGE 7 - BOOK NOW!

The clear-thinking, fast-acting issue. We wrap up our Tough Questions, introduce Monthly Fallacies, and ridicule conspiracies. We explain why we should get/stay active, and explain how. We consider a (fake) criminal Blaise Pascal, real Mormon gangsters, sock puppets, tax-dollar chaplains, Fox News's latest Rapture That Isn't, and bowling as religion. But first, some more bad news. —JR

OH, CRAP

John Rafferty

After credible allegations of sexual assault, David Silverman, who has been the firebrand President of American Atheists since 2010, was fired by the American Atheists Board of Directors on April 10.

Reporting on the story, BuzzFeed lists three specific complaints against Silverman: appointing a woman he was having a sexual relationship with to a senior position at American Atheists; sexually assaulting a woman in a hotel room during American Atheists' 2015 convention in Memphis, and coercing an intoxicated college student looking for a job into an unwanted sexual encounter.

Although Silverman "categorically" denies he did anything wrong in a statement on his Facebook page, the allegations are more than disturbing; they are believable, credible, and well sourced. His denial is disappointing, and by refusing to acknowledge his wrongdoing, Silverman only compounds his moral and professional failure.

I repeat: Oh, crap.

While I promised last month ("What Should We Think/Say/Do About Lawrence Krauss and Michael Shermer?", PIQUE, April) to continue in these pages to "face the issue" of not only instances of sexual harassment but of "widespread and pervasive" gender bias in the freethought movement in America, I didn't expect this dramatic a follow-up this soon.

Help!

I am specifically asking the women readers of PIQUE for help. For your stories, opinions, suggestions, demands. (Last month's Page 1 article produced *one* — count 'em, 1! — response from a woman; see page 12.) Tell me, tell us — at editor@shsny.org — what must be done?



SCHOOL PRAYER, REVISITED

Jonathan Engel

In 1962, in the case of "Engel v. Vitale", the U.S. Supreme Court held that organized prayers in public schools (even so-called "non-sectarian" prayers) constituted an impermissible violation of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. But that hasn't stopped the religious right in this country from trying to inject religion back into our schools. Remember, we're talking here about public schools; religiously oriented private schools have always had the right to have organized prayer in their buildings, and still do. It therefore behooves us to examine this issue yet again and to look at the arguments being made today in favor of bringing back organized prayers to public schools.

The calls for organized prayers in public schools always escalate when there are stories in the media about problems affecting youth, whether drug problems, educational attainment, school violence, etc. So naturally this has happened again in the wake of the horrific school shooting at the M.S. Douglas High School in Lakeland, Florida. The argument usually goes something like this: "We've seen a breakdown of morality because we have banished prayers, and therefore God, from our schools, and this is responsible for (insert name of societal ill here)". Is there any truth to this? Let's use our powers of reason and logic to find out.

Would bringing prayer back to public schools actually prevent school shootings such as occurred in Parkland, FL, Newtown, CT, and elsewhere? There is no evidence to suggest that this is the case, just as there is no evidence that a person's level of religiosity is correlative to the extent they live their lives in a moral and ethical manner. Has God "abandoned" our schools because we have eliminated organized prayer from the curriculum, and would God protect us if we put prayer back in schools? I'll begin answering this question with another question: What kind of a god would put little

BOARD OF DIRECTORS: John Rafferty, *Pres./Editor*; Claire Miller, *V.P.*; Brian Lemaire, *Secty.*; Donna Marxer, *Treas.*;

Kiwi Callahan, Matt Callahan, Jonathan Engel, Maria Graber, Dorothy Kahn, Carl Marxer, Carlos Mora, Bob Murtha, Sharif Rahman, John Wagner
SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, F.D.R. Station, New York, NY 10150-7661 / www.shsny.org / 646-922-7389

Individual membership \$40 per year; Family membership \$65; Subscription only: \$30.

Articles published in PIQUE are archived at www.shsny.org. Original-to-PIQUE articles may be reprinted, in full or in part.

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).

kids in danger of a horrible death in order to punish the adults who actually make the decisions on such issues? Furthermore, is it even possible for mere mortals to remove God from schools? It is my understanding that people who believe in God (especially Christians, who make up the bulk of believers in this country) believe, among other things, that their God is everywhere and is also all-powerful. If that is true, God must be present in schools because she is everywhere and her omnipotence would mean that no one can remove God from a school or anywhere else. And yet Newtown and Lakeland happened anyway.

Have prayers really been eliminated from public schools? The answer is no. There is an old joke: "As long as they keep giving math tests, there will always be prayers in schools." It's a joke, but it contains an important truth. For those who believe in the Christian god, there is no need for prayers to be said out loud (or collectively, for that matter) for God to be able to hear them. In fact, in his famous "Sermon on the Mount", Jesus advised otherwise, that his followers pray in private, not like the "hypocrites" who pray out in the open so that all can see them pretending to be pious. Let's remember: no one can read minds. If they say it silently and to themselves, anyone can say a prayer any time and any place, and not only would no one stop them, no one would even know they were praying.

So would prayer in school (or anywhere else) prevent mass shootings? It certainly doesn't seem that way. After every mass shooting we see an outpouring of "thoughts and prayers", especially from those who think thoughts and prayers are a viable alternative to common sense gun laws. And yet the mass shootings keep coming. Logic therefore dictates that prayers do not stop mass shootings. Consider this as well: the United States is the most religious country in the western world, and yet we have significantly more mass shootings than any other western country. We may also want to note that two of the most notorious mass shootings in recent years have taken place in churches in South Carolina and Texas. If mass shootings can happen in churches, where God and prayer take center stage, how could prayer possibly stop shootings in schools? For many who push for prayers in public schools as a remedy to shootings, I don't think this question really matters. Regardless of its effect (or not) on shootings, school prayer advocates want to indoctrinate your kids and mine with their religious beliefs. Let's not fall for it. Organized prayers belong in houses of worship, not in our diverse public schools.

**WHO'LL STOP THE PUSH
TO LEAVE JEWISH KIDS IN IGNORANCE?
The New York Post Editorial Board
April 3, 2018**

Hasidic leaders are cheering new rules for what yeshivas must teach, but it'll be up to state and local officials to see that Orthodox kids get the education they deserve.

The rules are the result of State Sen. Simcha Felder's

push to lower standards for yeshivas. Lawmakers mercifully nixed that outrageous demand but did agree to new language, seemingly written just for yeshivas, that spell out new curriculum requirements.

"The entire private-school community from every religious persuasion, will forever remember [Felder] for protecting their freedoms," tweeted Aron Wieder, a member of the Belz Hasidic community.

Trouble is, the yeshivas have been accused of giving short shrift to secular subjects like English, math and science, and the new wording may leave them legal wiggle room to keep bypassing critical material.

For yeshiva high schools, for example, the only requirement is that they provide "academically rigorous instruction" that results in "a sound basic education", which can be measured "taking into account the entirety of the curriculum". In other words, evaluations can include religious instruction, even if the secular subjects don't cut it.

Yet the new rules also hand the State Education Department new power to determine if yeshivas are meeting state standards. And SED would have no right to lower the bar just for them. So the onus is now on state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia to look out for the yeshiva kids. Alas, there's no guarantee she'll do that. In the city, the yeshivas' political power has plainly been behind the deadly slow pace of the probe of their curriculum by Mayor Bill de Blasio's Department of Education. Who's to say Elia won't similarly cave?

No one objects to yeshivas providing religious education. But that shouldn't come at the expense of subjects and skills that will enable Orthodox kids to function in a secular world. If the schools get away with that, Felder won't be the only pol with something to answer for.

Comment: Question: Who'll stop the push to leave Jewish kids in ignorance? Answer: No one. – JR

DENNIS MIDDLEBOOKS COMMENTS

To the Editor, The New York Post: There are three certainties in New York: the continued collapse of mass transit, the highest taxes and fees in the country, and the bloc-voting, financially powerful ultra-Orthodox community always getting its way when it comes to receiving special treatment, including not having to adhere to secular laws that apply to everyone else.

By strong-arming his colleagues in Albany to pass these new relaxed education regulations, the loathsome Simcha Felder has betrayed the thousands of students in Orthodox yeshivas who will continue to receive a virtually non-existent secular education, making them ill-equipped to function as fully engaged citizens in our diverse nation. Of course, this is exactly what the leaders of this insular religious community want.

And *The Post* is correct to note that in all probability State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia will avoid any oversight of the yeshivas down the road. Any effective oversight could easily jeopardize her employment.

– Dennis Middlebrooks

MORMON GANGSTER EXTORTS AFRICANS

Michael Stone

(Excerpted from "Top Mormon Leader Tells Africans Tithing Will End Cycle of Poverty" on progressive secular humanist on patheos.com, 4/18/2018)

In a despicable display of greed, the leader of the Mormon church tells poor Africans that giving the church money will end their poverty.

Russell Marion Nelson Sr., President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was in Nairobi, Kenya, [in April] "to deliver a message from the Lord". The message: God needs your money, and if you don't want to be poor, you have to give the Mormon church 10 percent of your income. Nelson told the crowd in Nairobi:

"We preach tithing to the poor people of the world because the poor people of the world have had cycles of poverty, generation after generation. That same poverty continues from one generation to another, until people pay their tithing."

The statement is despicable and deceitful, but not a surprise. The Mormon church has a well documented history of preying on the poor. For example, at the 2017 General Conference, one Mormon leader, Elder Valeri V. Cordón, told a story about how his father chose to tithe before providing food for his hungry and poverty stricken family, suggesting that one should pay the church, even if it means your family starves.

As for the LDS efforts to proselytize in Africa, there is some bitter and ugly irony at play, given the church's profoundly racist past. Until 1978, the church taught that black people were spiritually and morally inferior beings, and barred men of African descent from entering the clergy.

Bottom line: President Nelson and the Mormon church are running a spiritual protection racket, telling the African people and others to pay up or suffer in poverty. It is a despicable practice, but not unique to the Mormon church. Indeed, wherever there is a church, there will be someone telling you to give them money or be punished by God.

It is an immoral, but profitable business model.

WHY I WATCH MSNBC

John Rafferty

In 2007 Lawrence O'Donnell, now host of "The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell", a MSNBC opinion and news program on at 10pm Monday through Friday, criticized a Mitt Romney campaign speech on religion, saying:

"Romney comes from a religion that was founded by a criminal who was anti-American, pro-slavery, and a rapist."

And in the April 3, 2012, broadcast of "The Last Word", O'Donnell commented about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), saying it was ...

"an invented religion ... created by a guy in upstate New York in 1830 when he got caught having sex with the maid and explained to his wife that God told him to do it."

\$66,000 OF YOUR TAX DOLLARS PER HOUR OF PRAYER

Michael Stone

(Excerpted from "Report: Congress Pays Clergy \$66,000 An Hour to Pray", on Patheos.com, 4/29/2016)

Separation of church and state? Congress spends \$66,000 an hour for prayers. Writing for *FreeThought Now*, Andrew Seidel, Staff Attorney for the Freedom From Religion Foundation, documents the wasteful spending.

According to the report, Congress has spent more than \$10 million on prayers since 2000. Adding insult to injury, when expenses are accounted for, the U.S. House and Senate is spending \$800,000 a year on opening prayers.

According to the Congressional Research Service, in 2011 the House Chaplain earned \$172,500 and the Senate Chaplain earned \$155,500. ...

The chaplain has only one duty according to House rules: to "offer a prayer at the commencement of each day's sitting of the House". The same goes for the Senate. That's it. They may do more, but their only job is to kick off the morning with an invocation.

The report also notes that more than 96 percent of prayers in the House were Christian prayers. This fact is an insult to the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which states:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ...

If 96 percent of the prayers offered by the House and Senate chaplains are Christian prayers, one must wonder, is not Congress establishing Christianity as the de facto national religion, and in so doing, violating the constitution they swore to uphold?

Perhaps more annoying than the government waste, and the exorbitant salaries for glorified snake oil salesmen, is the blatant disregard and disrespect for the separation of church and state enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, and the secular values upon which this nation was founded.

Bottom line: Congress should not be wasting taxpayers' money on meaningless prayers.

FUN FACT: BEFORE HE TURNED TO PHILOSOPHY, BLAISE PASCAL MADE HIS LIVING VIA MAIL FRAUD

17th Century French newspaper ad:

**SEND ME YOUR MONEY
AND PROFIT THEREBY.**

The Reasoning:

By sending me all of your money,
you have some finite chance

of receiving infinite money in return.

Therefore, it is logical to send me all of your money.

– Pascal, P.O. Box 123, Louvre Station, Paris

(Transcribed from "Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal", by Zach Weinersmith, 4/4/2018)

THAT SOCK-PUPPET IN THE SKY

Brian Lemaire

Ross Douthat wrote another religious-themed op-ed in *The New York Times* on March 16. I started to write a reader's comment to the *Times*, to the effect that ...

What makes you think that a conscious creator exists, not subject to the laws of nature? Tribal allegiances? Think that through. Belief in a god is a childish way of viewing things — a relic of the childhood of humanity.

But his editorial wasn't really about belief in a god. So writing this to the *Times* would have just created resentment, and further digging in, among the believers who accidentally read my comment.

So why does this belief persist, in the face of Darwin's theory of evolution? Because religious belief has been turned to a number of uses:

- As a sock puppet to push moral precepts, e.g., "God teaches that we should not cheat our fellow man."
- To exercise control over the "flock".
- As a means of creating tribal cohesion. The group can then feel superior to, exclude, or proselytize to those outside the group.
- Fear of punishment as a motivator for people with mean personalities to act nicer.
- As a life raft. People experiencing mental anguish sometimes cling to belief in a god as a source of hope.

Related to this: people cling to a hope for a life in the hereafter. That sock puppet is handy in so many ways, don't you think?

THE LORD GOD MADE THEM ALL

Eric Idle

All things dull and ugly
All creatures short and squat
All things rude and nasty
The Lord God made the lot.

Each little snake that poisons
Each little wasp that stings
He made their brutish venom
He made their horrid wings.

All things sick and cancerous
All evil great and small,
All things foul and dangerous
The Lord God made them all.

Each nasty little hornet
Each beastly little squid
Who made the spiky urchin?
Who made the sharks? He did!

All things scabbed and ulcerous
All pox both great and small
Putrid, foul and gangrenous
The Lord God made them all.

WHAT IF WE'RE WRONG?

Greta Christina

(Reprinted from *Free Inquiry*, Aug/Sep, 2017)

I am not asking this question in a general skeptical sense. Not asking what we do when we suspect we're wrong, how we examine whether we're wrong, or how we know when we're wrong. I'm asking a very specific question.

Thousands of people, possibly millions, are sounding alarms about the Trump administration. We're warning about hard-Right nationalism, racism, authoritarianism, xenophobia, corrupt intertwining of government and business, and extreme hostility to opposition and to the press. We're screaming that these are the defining features of fascism; that if we don't push back, hard, right now and for as long as it takes, we could lose this country.

What if we're wrong?

What if it's bad, but not that bad? What if the United States government doesn't start registering Muslim citizens, walling off their neighborhoods, and putting them in concentration camps? What if the government doesn't start shutting down newspapers and killing journalists? What if Trump doesn't begin aggressive global wars, for no other reason than to distract from scandals and soothe his ego? What if the many constitutional crises we are facing don't lead to the collapse of the republic? What if this is less like Hitler or Mussolini and more like Nixon or Reagan?

I am going to answer in a way that, as a skeptic, I rarely do: So what? For starters, if the Trump administration winds up being bad but not that bad, we have to consider the possibility that it turned out that way because of the resistance. Ever since the election, there has been massive resistance to this regime and to the social and political forces that created it. The opposition started immediately and has been widespread, sustained, and fought on many fronts. There have been marches, legal challenges, phone-call blitzes to elected officials, fund-raising, educational efforts, town-hall meetings, hard-core street protests, intensive media investigations into possible corruption and criminal behavior, and much more.

If this administration turns out to be horrible but not utterly devastating, it won't be absurd to think that, to a great extent, it's because of all this work.

History is weird. You can't experiment with it the way you do in many sciences; it's not a video game or a Pick Your Plot book, where you can go back and see what would have happened if you chosen differently. You can certainly look at similar historical situations and see how they unfolded. That's exactly what those of us sounding the alarms are doing: we are looking at history, reading descriptions of the rise of fascism by people who lived it, and listening to the experts in social and political history who have studied fascism. But we can't be sure. Every historical situation is different, and while our fears are well-informed, we have no way of knowing if we are right.

So, what if we are wrong? Shouldn't we be resisting anyway?

I keep thinking of a political cartoon by Joel Pett

depicting a speaker at a global climate summit showing a PowerPoint slide reading, "Energy independence. Preserve rain forests. Sustainability. Green jobs. Livable cities. Renewables. Etc." An audience member is yelling, "What if it's a big hoax and we create a better world for nothing?"

That's what I keep thinking about. What if we are wrong? We'll have mobilized the left, stood up for basic human rights, forged powerful alliances, refused to let our elections be taken over by a hostile foreign power, educated millions about civic engagement, inspired progressives to run for office, and spoken up against bigoted hatred and willful ignorance. Will all that have been for nothing?

I'm not saying that because it's led to all this mobilization and activism, Trump's election is ultimately a good thing. That would be dehumanizing and callous. Even in the best-case scenario, far too many lives will be damaged and even destroyed by this administration's policies and appointments, by its contempt for democracy and the Constitution, and by the emboldening of the hatefully bigoted far Right. Lives will be ruined, and I'm not going to view those lives as grist for the mill. I'm saying there's a silver lining in this cloud of shit, that even if our worst fears aren't realized, even if our worst fears will never be realized, the least-bad scenario is still worth resisting.

As a matter of pure intellectual curiosity, it might be interesting to know whether the Trump administration would turn completely fascist if unchecked. But I'm not willing to run that experiment. Other countries have, with disastrous results. The worst outcomes are all too plausible; the risks are far too great.

My wife, Ingrid, is a nurse practitioner, and she often says that in the medical field, they don't run tests if the results won't change what they do. So when I think about political resistance to the Trump administration and the rise of the hard right in the United States, and when I question whether our predictions of doom are correct, mostly what I think is this: if I'm wrong, would it change what I do? Should it change what I do?

The answer is no. the work is worth doing anyway.

The Humanist Activist

YOU TOO CAN BECOME A HUMANIST ACTIVIST

John A Wagner

Are you happy about the way our government is operating? Are you worried that rules that protect the environment are being weakened, or are you happy that Trump's administration is getting rid of regulations that stifle business development? Are you angry that the new tax law is designed to punish states (like New York) that have high state and local taxes, or are you glad that there is finally pressure to stop these states from unnecessary social spending by bleeding hearts? Are you worried that America's more aggressive foreign policy stance will start WWII, or are you glad that we are finally spending the money that is needed to update our nuclear arsenal and support those who protect our country. Do you like an unfettered free market, or are you worried that an

unconstrained free market will inevitably lead to unfair wealth and income distribution?

Where do you stand? I don't really care. Well, that is not exactly true; but what I really care about is whether you are politically active and making an effort to improve our government. I care that you are forming your political views by being informed and by discussing them with others. As a humanist, are you basing your views on sound principles? Do you test your ideas by expressing them and letting others criticize them? Do you listen to those who disagree with you and try to understand their point of view?

Today I am urging you to go beyond that minimum. I am urging you to become a political activist.

Being a political activist is not easy. The biggest barriers are that it takes time and involvement with a group. I must admit that for years I limited my political activism to writing a few letters (or an e-mail that has even less impact) or sending some money to an organization that I felt worthy. I have supported NOW, the National Resources Defense Council, the AHA, SHSNY (of course), the Secular Coalition for America, the Population Connection, 314 (a PAC that tries to get scientists into office), individual political candidates, American Atheists, the Freedom from Religion Foundation, and many others. When I was a graduate student making \$2400 a year, I made my first contribution to the Center for Inquiry. Most of my life contributing money was all I could do; getting an academic career going and being a father took almost all of my time. Perhaps that is all you can do too, but I hope not. Now is the time to get involved.

I want you to become an activist today. There is no better time than during the Trump Administration, and no better place than in New York City. New York is full of activists. Indeed, NYC is one of the two cities in the world that have lots of active political clubs. These clubs are organized around the Democratic and Republican parties. They discuss issues. They endorse judges, legislators, and other candidates at the local, state, and national level. They collect signatures to get candidates on the ballots, and they work to get candidates elected. They organize opportunities to meet with candidates or their aides. The more senior members are always willing to teach new members the ropes and to get them—you—involved.

So, find a club and join it. Do it today. You can find your local club with a Google search. Sorry, if you are a Republican, you will have to find a club on your own, but here* is a site that lists the Democratic Clubs.

I think that the best club in the city is the Four Freedoms Democratic Club on the Upper East Side, but I am a founding member, so I am proud and a little prejudiced. Because of it, my Representative in Congress, my Assemblyperson and my State Senator all know me by name. I have talked to all of them about political issues.

Now it is your turn to make our state and country a little bit more humanist.

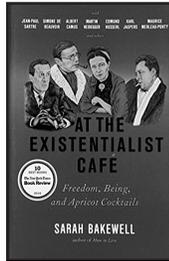
Join a political Club. Be a Humanist Activist.

* <http://manhattandemocrats.org/about/manhattan-democratic-clubs/>

SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY - JULY 2018

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, MAY 3, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK
 28 East 35 St. (front lounge)
 We'll discuss
AT THE EXISTENTIALIST
CAFE: Freedom, Being, and
Apricot Cocktails
Sarah Bakewell

Named one of the Ten Best Books of 2016 by *The New York Times*, here's a spirited account of perhaps the major intellectual movement of the twentieth century and the revolutionary thinkers – Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger – who came to shape it, by the best-selling author of *How to Live*.



“When reading Sartre on freedom, Beauvoir on the subtle mechanisms of oppression, Kierkegaard on anxiety, Camus on rebellion, Heidegger on technology or Merleau-Ponty on cognitive science,” Ms. Bakewell writes, “one sometimes feels one is reading the latest news.”

“Tremendous ... Highly recommended for anyone who thinks.” – *Library Journal*. “... both breezy and brainy.” – *Washington Post*

– Paperback and Kindle available.

Join us even if you haven't finished reading.

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

LIKE SHSNY ON FACEBOOK

<https://www.facebook.com/SHSofNY>

MEET US ON MEETUP

www.meetup.com/shsny-org/

TEXT US ON TWITTER

@SHS_NewYork

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, JUNE 7, 7-8:30 pm
 Community Church of New York
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.

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 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*

WOULD YOU LIKE TO LEAD A BOOK CLUB EVENING?

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

LET'S HAVE A DISCUSSION!
MON, MAY 8, 7 pm
 Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
 140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
SHALL WE HAVE A FICTION BOOK CLUB?

Last month's spirited *Discussion* somehow evolved (as good discussions tend to do) into conjecture about whether SHSNY could support another Book Club.

Several of us think we can; one even volunteered her large apartment in the Flatiron district for monthly wine-cheese-cookies get-togethers. Are *you* ready to suggest a book and lead a discussion?

That's the topic of this month's *Let's Have a Discussion* evening, our new monthly social/food-and-drink/get-together.

Come, join in, discuss, argue, laugh, have fun, and vote on next month's topic. – JR

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION
SUN, MAY 13, 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:
Should humanists confront, argue with conspiracy theorists?

(See pages 9-10)



SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY - JULY 2018

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, MAY 30, 7 pm

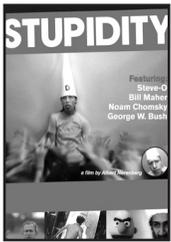
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge

140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves

STUPIDITY

A Film by

Albert Nerenberg



STUPIDITY sets out to determine whether our culture is hooked on deliberate ignorance as a strategy for success. From Adam Sandler to George W. Bush,

from the IQ test to TV programming, to the origins of the word moron, *Stupidity* examines the “dumbing down” of contemporary culture.

Stupidity careens at warp speed through sound bites on topics from television news and reality TV shows, to internet sites and popular films.

“Alternately enlightening and hilarious”, featuring opinions and comments from some of today’s most recognizable figures, cultural critics, authors and academics, including John Cleese, Noam Chomsky, Selma Hayek and Bill Maher, *Stupidity* reveals that humans choose stupidity.

PLANNING AHEAD

The *usual* SHSNY schedule is ...

Book Club: First Thursday

at the Community Church of NY

Let’s Have a Discussion:

Second Monday

at Stone Creek Lounge.

Brunch: Third Sunday

at Stone Creek Lounge

Great Lectures on DVD:

4th Wednesday

at Stone Creek Lounge.

More info: www.shsny.org

and/or 646-922-7389

Book now to guarantee your place!

SUNDAY, MAY 6, NOON

SHSNY’s 11th Annual DAY OF REASON BRUNCH

at PETE’S TAVERN, 129 East 18 Street

Our speaker will be:

DULCIE LEIMBACH

“The UN, the US, Women, and World Peace”



PassBlue is an independent, woman-led digital publication offering in depth journalism on the US-UN relationship and its effects on women’s issues, human rights, peacekeeping and other urgent global matters, as reported from its base in the UN press corps. PassBlue’s overall mission is to educate the American and wider public on the fundamental role of the US to the UN and how the UN works – its successes and failures – through high-quality reporting by writers throughout the world.

Dulcie Leimbach, PassBlue’s Editor, worked for more than 20 years at *The New York Times* on numerous editorial and news desks as an editor and a writer. Her presentation promises to be a fact-filled and fascinating eye-opener.

BRUNCH IS JUST \$28 ...

... for your choice of 11 entrees, tax, tips and a drink included. Join up to 50 of your fellow and sororal freethinkers for one of SHSNY’s best annual get-togethers. Meet old friends, make new ones, schmooze, network and discuss ideas (what we do best).

BUT DON’T WAIT!

Our upstairs private room at Pete’s only seats 50 (at a squeeze). So guarantee your place by booking now, at www.shsny.org, using your credit card or PayPal.

10 TOUGH QUESTIONS FOR THE ATHEIST TO ANSWER

Part 3 - Conclusion

Bob Seidensticker

(Excerpted from *patheos.com*, 4/22/2017)

(Editor: Our Part 1 repro of Mr. Seidensticker's rebuttal of Christian apologist Warner Wallace's essay, "The Christian Worldview is the Best Explanation", appeared in February PIQUE. It addressed the first three of Wallace's "tough questions", i.e.: How did the universe come into being?; Why does there appear to be design (fine tuning) in the universe?; and How did life originate? Part 2 (April) considered: Why does there appear to be evidence of intelligence in biology?; How did human consciousness come into being?; Where does free will come from?; and Why are humans so contradictory in nature? We conclude herein. – JR)

*In dark ages people are best guided by religion,
as in a pitch-black night a blind man is the best guide;
he knows the roads and paths
better than a man who can see.
When daylight comes, however,
it is foolish to use blind, old men as guides.
– Heinrich Heine*

8. Why Do Transcendent Moral Truths Exist?

Wallace: "We have an intuitive sense of moral 'oughtness'; we recognize that some things are right and some things are wrong, regardless of culture, time or location. We understand that it's never morally 'right' to torture people for the mere 'fun' of it. . . . These moral vices and virtues are objective in the sense that they stand above (and apart from) all of us as humans; they are not simply creations of our liking. Instead, they are independent and transcendent." Transcendent law requires a transcendent Law Giver.

I'll use William Lane Craig's definition of objective morality: "moral values that are valid and binding whether anybody believes in them or not." I doubt Wallace would object.

Now back to the question. Wallace asks why objective moral truths exist. They don't.

Take, for example, our response to an adult abusing a child. What could explain that moral revulsion? Wallace says that we tap into objective moral truths, but he doesn't explain where they're stored, how they got there, how we access them, or if we access them reliably. He confuses a universal response or a deeply held response (which it is in the case of child abuse) with an objective response (which it isn't). A far more plausible explanation is the natural one: we humans are the same species, so we share the same moral programming.

Wallace also raises the is/ought problem: how do you get an ought (a moral prescription) from an is (a fact of nature)? You can say, "When someone is injured, you ought to help them," but what grounds this demand?

His error is in imagining an objectively grounded ought. I've seen no evidence that such things exist, and Wallace provides none. An ordinary ought works just fine

here. Our moral programming gives us this ought, and most other people will share the opinion.

Another way of seeing the problem: if morals don't come from what is—that is, reality—then where do they come from? Where could they come from? Don't point to the supernatural before showing compelling evidence that it exists.

Finally, note how morals change with time. We are horrified at the slavery and genocide in the Old Testament, for example, and congratulate ourselves to the extent that we've erased them from Western culture. Objective morals that change over time aren't objective.

9. Why Do We Believe Human Life to be Precious?

We kill weeds and pests, and we eat livestock, but we'd never consider this for a fellow human. How do we justify this if we're all just the results of evolution?

Are "it's wrong to kill a human" or "it's okay to kill a rat" objective moral statements? Nope. There is no difficulty if there is no objective moral truth to align with. We value our own species more than others because of our biological programming.

Wallace characterizes the naturalist position: "In the true scheme of things, we are no more important (nor any more precious) than the thousands of species that have come and gone before us. Biological life has no intrinsic value and the universe has no purpose." I agree—life has no absolute value and the universe no absolute purpose. You think it's otherwise? Show me some evidence.

Wallace also characterizes the naturalist position as saying that only the strong survive.

And here he's wrong. This is the "nature, red in tooth and claw" caricature. It's not the strongest that survive, as any high school student who's studied evolution knows, but the fittest. The fittest for any particular evolutionary niche might be the best camouflaged or the best armored or the fastest. In the case of humans, cooperation and trust can make a stronger society which, in turn, helps protect the people in it. And we don't see cooperation just in humans—think of any social animal – wolves, monkeys, or bees.

10. Why Do Pain, Evil, and Injustice Exist in Our World?

Wallace: "People are capable of inflicting great evil on one another and natural disasters occur across the globe all the time. More importantly, no matter what we do as humans, we seem to be unable to stop evil from occurring."

Correct. That's not strong evidence for an omniscient, loving god.

"Atheists often point to the presence of evil as an evidence against the existence of an all-loving and all-powerful God, but all of us have to account for evil in the context of our worldview. Both sides of the argument have to explain the existence and injustice of evil, consider what role it plays in the history of the universe, and come to grips with why justice is often elusive."

Wrong. The atheist has no Problem of Evil to resolve. That's your problem.

ARE YOU THE ONLY ONE AWARE OF THE CONSPIRACY? OR JUST F***ING GULLIBLE?

John Rafferty

(*Shamelessly stolen adapted and Americanized from the thedailymash.co.uk, 4/3/2018*)

Reality certainly seems real. But is it possible we all live in some hugely complex computer game, or in a worldwide collective dream after taking drugs? You don't do drugs? Maybe that's what "the masters" have programmed you to think. Take our quick test to unlock the deepest secrets of human consciousness, or something.

1. *There are no coincidences - everything is planned.*

You are walking to the store and a red Jeep Cherokee drives past. Then on your way back from the store, the same car passes. Is it:

A. A glitch in the universe proving that the aliens operating the "reality computer" have gotten lazy but thought we humans wouldn't notice.

B. Proof that mid-price SUVs are quite popular, and that when people drive somewhere they often drive home afterwards.

2. *All of "reality" is on a loop - just as in "The Matrix".*

You are thinking about your grandmother, then the phone rings and it's her. Is this because:

A. Everything is planned by "the masters" and we actually live and die on a loop which endlessly repeats until we unlock the enigma of the universe and become one with the cosmic consciousness.

B. Your Granny bought a cheap mobile phone from BestBuy and is just checking that it works.

3. *The "explanation of everything" is just beyond our grasp.*

You have a dream in which you know you're dreaming, and in it everything in your life becomes crystal clear, but it all disappears as you wake up, even though you fight with yourself in your dream to stay asleep, but ... *aargh!*

A. Your dream was probably a memory from your past life as High Priest of the Egyptian Sun God Amon-Ra, before you were murdered by Pharaoh because you'd deciphered the secret of the pyramids.

B. You have to stop with the anchovy-and-onions pizzas before bed.

3. *What about those pyramids?*

Apparently scientists did tests and they are bigger on the outside than the inside.

A. Well that proves everything.

B. Who are these scientists? Did they have facial tattoos and also offer to sell you weed? Because I'm fairly sure Stephen Hawking never wrote a book called *Ancient Egypt - The UFO Dimension Theory*.

Check Your Answers:

Mostly "A"s? Congratulations! You have proved that nothing is real. Next week we're doing life after death.

Mostly "B"s? Maybe reality really is just plain old reality. Or is it? Perhaps even this quiz is part of the illusion, designed by the Alien God-Beings to stop us asking the sort of questions that would eventually lead to their overthrow.

The Problem of Evil asks: how can a good god allow all the suffering that we see in the world? Wouldn't he stop more of it - at least the gratuitous suffering? When you drop the god presupposition, this problem vanishes.

"Whatever worldview we adopt, it had better offer a cogent response to the young child who is dying of an incurable disease. Which worldview offers the most satisfying and reasonable explanation for the evil and injustice we see in our world?"

"Satisfying"?! Is that our goal? I thought we were trying to figure out which worldview is accurate! If Wallace wants to rank worldviews based on how happy a story they have to tell rather than how accurate they are, he can do that on his own. I have no interest in participating, but I doubt that Christianity is at the top of the list.

"Christian Theism offers an explanation that naturalism simply cannot offer."

As does Scientology or Shinto or Pastafarianism. Do I care? I'll focus on reality.

Summary:

For each of his questions, Wallace has explained nothing. He has given us his theology, not evidence. His answers often distill down to nothing more than, "Science doesn't have all the answers, therefore God." To this gunfight he has brought a squirt gun.

Sure, science has unanswered questions. It always has. But it has a startling ability to find the answers. If we can look back and see how poorly "God did it" answered the question, "What causes drought and earthquakes?" centuries ago, why continue to apply this discredited answer to the latest series of questions?

By being unfalsifiable, "God did it" could explain anything. In so doing, it explains nothing.

I'd love to see an apologist show some courage in their claims. Is the riddle of abiogenesis or human consciousness or the origin of the universe so intractable that God is the only possible answer? Will you rest your faith on that claim? Will you say that God must be the answer and, if science does eventually resolve it naturally, you'll abandon your faith?

Of course they won't. Science's unanswered questions aren't the reason for their faith. But then if these unanswered questions aren't supporting Christianity for them, why should they for the rest of us? When one of these questions is answered (and, given science's track record, that's a safe bet), Christian apologists will abandon it and retreat to whatever new question catches their fancy.

Science boldly pushes into new territory and gives us new insights. Religion follows and says, "Oh yeah, I knew that." Religion is the dog that walks under the ox and thinks that he is pulling the wagon.

The fact that a believer is happier than a skeptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one.

- George Bernard Shaw

HOW CONSPIRACY THEORIES START

Scott Adams

(Transcribed from the Dilbert comic strip, 4/9 – 4/13/18)

Start, 4/9

Alice (at her computer): I can't find my spreadsheet files.

Asok: I saw Dilbert going into the server room.

Alice: That doesn't prove any ...

Asok: Carol said he was mad about something you said.

Suspicion, 4/10

Alice (to Pointy-Haired Boss): I think Dilbert is trying to ruin my career. Carol said he was mad about something I said, and he was in the server room right before I lost my files. This morning he said he "had work to do".

PHB: OMG, he's already started the cover-up.

Cover-Up, 4/11

Pointy-Haired Boss (to Dilbert): Alice says you're trying to cover up the fact that you deleted her files.

Dilbert: I didn't delete her files. You're both insane.

Alice (later, to PHB): What did he say?

PHB: He tried to gaslight me. That proves he's guilty.

Corroboration, 4/12

Ratbert, Human Resources Admin (to Dilbert): I've heard from multiple sources that you deleted Alice's files on the server.

Dilbert: Your multiple sources all heard it from Alice. That's one source.

Ratbert (later, to PHB): He didn't deny it.

Proof Positive, 4/13

Woman Co-Worker (to Dilbert): Alice says you deleted her files on the server.

Dilbert: That didn't happen, she's nuts.

WCW: Ha! You wouldn't be so angry if it weren't true.

Dilbert: What? That doesn't even make sense.

WCW: That's exactly what guilty people say!

IT WAS EXCLUSIVE IN THE U.S. ... ON FOX NEWS, OF COURSE!



**Biblical prophecy claims
the Rapture is coming
April 23, numerologist says**

Is the Rapture finally here? One Christian numerologist says a biblical sign strongly suggests it.

David Meade tells the U.K.'s Daily Express newspaper that on April 23, the sun and moon will be in Virgo, as will Jupiter, which represents the Messiah.

Etcetera, blah, blah.

Comment: Meade made the same claim, also reported on Fox, last September 23, a date which, you probably don't remember, came and went without a divine event. Meade said he made a mistake and the rapture would happen in October. At the end of October, he changed it to November. Then everyone stopped paying attention. Except Fox, which knows the gullibility level of its viewers. – JR

FALLACY OF THE MONTH: BEGGING THE QUESTION

Dennis Martin, PhD

(Excerpted from the Atlanta Freethought Society News newsletter, Feb 2018)

(Editor: I have enjoyed the first few essays in this excellent series and am delighted to begin to reproduce them in these pages. Here's how Dr. Martin introduced the series to AFS readers:

"This is the first in a monthly series discussing the kinds of faulty reasoning that you are likely to run across in everyday discussions and debates. Atlanta Freethought Society's mission includes teaching how to avoid faulty reasoning so that your thoughts are free from mistaken reasoning and unsupported authoritative claims."

As always, your claims and comments are solicited. – JR)

Begging the question, in a nutshell, is assuming (explicitly or implicitly) what you are trying to prove. If someone said "It is raining; therefore, it is raining," this would be an example of begging the question. Because this argument is valid (if the premise is true, then the conclusion must be), begging the question is considered an informal fallacy, i.e., a mistake in reasoning not due to formal structure. Most people would see the obvious circularity and redundancy of the suggested argument. The idea is that even though X proves X, you want your evidence and reasons to be different from the conclusion. You don't just want someone repeating themselves.

Begging the question is also called 'begging the issue', 'question-begging', 'petitio principii' and 'petitioning the principle.' It gets its name from an ancient debating technique where the instructor throws out a topic/question/principle, say "Does God exist?", and instructs student A to debate for it and student B to debate against it. The interlocutors cannot just spout off their opposing views (like today's political debates). They had to first find some common ground, some common premises they could both agree on. So, student A 'petitions' or 'begs' B to accept premises that are needed. Once premises are granted, the reasoning begins. Begging the question occurs when one of those premises actually already contains the conclusion.

For example, A says "Will you grant that Jesus existed?" B says, "Granted." A says, "Will you grant that Jesus was the son of God?" B says, "OK." A says, "Therefore, God exists." A hasn't proven anything. Student A has simply petitioned (begged for) and received the very question or principle that was to be proven in the first place.

That is simply how the fallacy got its name. But begging the question comes in much more subtle forms which the critical thinker should be aware of.

Briefly, *repeated assertion* is when the premise and conclusion are the exact same statement (as the rain example above), whereas *equivalent expressions* is when they say the same thing in different words. *Circular argument* is where A proves B, B proves C, and C proves A (so in order to prove A, you really just assumed A in the beginning.)

Question-begging expressions are terms like "obviously"

and “clearly” used to preface statements which are not obvious or clear. You should always be suspicious when you hear someone use these words. They are a form of begging the question because they assume that what is about to be stated is already proven. They also have the effect of silencing objectors: “Well, I guess if it’s obvious to everyone else in the room, I won’t say anything.”

Finally, the *complex question* or *loaded question* is when someone asks a question that is really more than one question, with the assumption that one of those has already been answered. The word ‘complex’ here doesn’t mean a difficult question; it means a compound question. The first question in the Roman Catholic catechism is “Who made us?” and all the little children answer in unison, “God made us.” (Been there, done that.) But the question is a loaded question, really asking three questions – Were we made? If so, was it by a who? If so, who was it? The original question assumes that the first two questions have already been answered. And a little 5 year-old is not about to say, “Excuse me, Father Jones, that’s a *petitio principii*.” So, I have adopted a critical thinking habit of looking at every question and asking – does this very question assume something that I am not willing to agree to yet?

In sympathetic audiences, the conclusion has already been accepted, so they aren’t usually aware of the circularity. In longer arguments, the conclusion may be chapters away from the original discussion of the premises, and the circularity may go unnoticed. I’ve read books where several chapters laid the basis for an argument, but no argument was ever made. Then in the remainder of the book, the author simply assumes that they have proven their point.

A problem raised by Sextus Empiricus and John Stuart Mill is whether or not all valid arguments beg the question, since the premises implicitly “contain” the conclusion. Or, if you have ever chased down the meaning of a word, then the meaning of the words in the definition, and so on, it seems that eventually you arrive back at the word you were trying to define at first.

Thus, even if all knowledge is eventually interdependent and circular, begging the question is meant to eliminate viciously circular reasoning.

Finally, when I hear news reporters saying, “Here’s a question that begs to be answered,” I chuckle to myself. I think – that journalist probably had to take a logic course way back in college and remembers some big fancy term – “begging the question”. Now, they are going to embarrass themselves on TV and misuse it.

The problem is that the more this happens, the more the term itself begins to change and lose its original import.

There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there always has been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that “My ignorance is just as good as your knowledge.”
– Isaac Asimov

WE NEED SOME NEW WORDS

John Rafferty

(Dug out and reproduced from my FaceBook history, 2016)

Now that “FANTASTIC” and “LEGENDARY” are routinely applied to almost anything in the mundane real world (I’ve seen an ad for “our legendary accounting services”), we need a new word or words to describe what we’re really supposed to believe is/are not true, like Hansel and Gretel, Wagnerian opera story lines, and White House Press Secretary “facts”.

Suggestions for replacement word(s)?

“INCREDIBLE” and “UNBELIEVABLE” used to mean “not to be believed” – literally – but have now taken the place of “very good” or “better than yours”. The Orange One in the Oval Office is the worst, but far, far from the only practitioner of this language conflation, but what word can we use now to characterize one of his, or anyone’s, outright lies? Suggestions?

“AWESOME” is what we used to say while standing at the rim of the Grand Canyon or under the stained glass of a Gothic cathedral; now it’s the automatic response to “CUL8r”.

Things that actually made us goggle-eyed (Lee Harvey Oswald gunned-down on live TV, the opening of the original “Star Wars” flick) we used to call “AMAZING”; today it applies to the results of detergent comparison tests. We need new word(s) to express our all-too-human “Holy s**t!” reflex. Suggestions?

And I know what “WORLD-CLASS” means, but what the hell does it mean?

A Suggestion (also from 2016):

John: My 25-year and 27-year-old granddaughters have just flown back to England after a visit to me in Colorado. Since they were born and bred in the UK, they are obviously British. According to your note, you’re looking for a new word to replace our overused descriptive ones.

After having spent a week with my girls, the word which comes to mind is “BRILLIANT”. The Brits use it far too much but we don’t. Wha’da you think? – *Adrienne Karp*

AND THE PRIESTS WILL WEAR SPECIAL SHOES INSTEAD OF SPECIAL HATS

P Z Myers

What I want to happen to religion in the future is this: I want it to be like bowling. It’s a hobby, something some people will enjoy, that has some virtues to it, that will have its own institutions and its traditions and its own television programming, and that families will enjoy together.

It’s not something I want to ban or that should affect hiring and firing decisions, or that interferes with public policy. It will be perfectly harmless as long as we don’t elect our politicians on the basis of their bowling score, or go to war with people who play nine-pin instead of ten-pin, or use folklore about backspin to make decrees about how biology works.

READERS RESPOND TO APRIL PIQUE

To the Editor: Congratulations for writing about the topic of sexual harassment within the atheist movement (“What Should We Think/Say/ Do About Laurence Krauss and Michael Shermer?”, April PIQUE). When I wrote, some years ago, about the touchy topic of Ellen Johnson’s firing from American Atheists, I was thoroughly excoriated for it. We were not ready to confront the problems within the atheist organizations. We wanted the public to have a pristine image of atheism. It is a mark of maturity that we can now discuss our mistakes, flaws and inconsistencies.

But sexual harassment is not the only kind of harassment that women suffer within our movement. There is just plain old harassment, which robs women of dignity and clout. We need to examine why there are still so few women in our movement, why so many women have been eased out of leadership roles within the movement and why atheist men do not give women the respect we so rightly deserve.

Believe the women who have had the courage to complain. It is only the tip of the iceberg. Love and peace,

– Jane Everhart, former Director of Communications,
NYC Atheists)

To the Editor: You indicated the freethought movement (“especially the leadership”) is “so overwhelmingly male”. It is not, and never has been, viz: Madalyn Murray O’Hair, Ellen Johnson, Margaret Downey, Bobbie Kirkhart, Jennifer

Bardi, Annie Gaylor and daughter Annie Laurie Gaylor, Robyn Blumner. When are these and other leading white women in the freethought movement (excluding the deceased) finally going to check their white privilege?

What can be said is that there has been a dearth of men and women of color in the movement at all levels. I personally do not feel that this has been due to racism, but rather to personal choice.

Moreover, I have attended many meetings over the years of SHSNY and NYC Atheists, as well as numerous conventions of the various atheist or humanist organizations, and I have never encountered an “overwhelmingly male” audience or a lack of female guest speakers like Susan Jacoby and Taslima Nasrin. Lots of married couples attend these meetings and conventions. I have attended some with my friend Carolyn.

– Dennis Middlebrooks
(Mr. Middlebrooks is a former President of SHSNY)

To the Editor: Thank you for a great issue. I was taken aback by the factoid that there are more gun shops than grocery stores plus Starbucks in the U.S. (“Think About This in the Middle of the Night As You’re trying to Sleep”, April).

Tracked it down to an article in GQ by Michael Paterniti. I contacted him through Twitter to ask for corroboration. We’ll see.

– Brian Lemaire

To the Editor: April PIQUE is excellent. – H. Robert Miller

Conspiracy Guiltibility
Pages 9-10

Political Activism,
Humanist Activism,
and You
Pages 4-5

Mormon Extortionists
Page 3

Oh, Crap
Page 1

Day of Reason Brunch
May 6 – Pete’s Tavern
Book now! Page 7

Secular Humanist
Society of New York
FDR Station
PO Box 7661
New York, NY
10150-7661

