

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

October, 2018

As leaves fall and we brace for falling snow, we consider patriotism and the pledge, the Church's moral mess in New York, New Jersey and Ireland, as well as holy cows, holy home runs, the fire in the American engine, and the libertarian freedom scam. We *reconsider* the meaning of human existence, introduce five atheists you already know and a new measurement of time, and we pose a few How-much-do-you-trust-him? questions for Trumpers. But first, Arendt vs. Thoreau. —JR

CHANGE THE WORLD, NOT YOURSELF

Katie Fitzpatrick

(Reprinted from "Change The World, Not Yourself — Or How Hannah Arendt Called Out Henry David Thoreau", on Aeon, 8/25/2018)

It is not often that a neighborhood squabble is remembered as a world-historical event. In the summer of 1846, Henry David Thoreau spent a single night in jail in Concord, Massachusetts after refusing to submit his poll tax to the local constable. This minor act of defiance would later be immortalized in Thoreau's essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" (1849). There, he explains that he had been unwilling to provide material support to a federal government that perpetuated mass injustice - in particular, slavery and the Mexican-American war. While the essay went largely unread in his own lifetime, Thoreau's theory of civil disobedience would later inspire many of the world's greatest political thinkers, from Leo Tolstoy and Gandhi to Martin Luther King.

Yet his theory of dissent would have its dissenters, too. The political theorist Hannah Arendt wrote an essay on "Civil Disobedience", published in *The New Yorker* magazine in September 1970. Thoreau, she argued, was not civil disobedient. In fact, she insisted that his whole moral philosophy was anathema to the collective spirit that ought to guide acts of public refusal. How could the great luminary of civil disobedience be charged with misunderstanding it so profoundly?

Thoreau's essay offers a forceful critique of state authority and an uncompromising defense of the individual conscience. In *Walden* (1854), he argued that each man should follow his own individual "genius" rather than social convention, and in "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" he

insists that we should follow our own moral convictions rather than the laws of the land. The citizen, he suggests, must never "for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislation". For Thoreau, this prescription holds even when the laws are produced through democratic elections and referenda.

Indeed, for him, democratic participation only degrades our moral character. When we cast a ballot, he explains, we vote for a principle that we believe is right, but at the same time, assert our willingness to recognize whatever principle - be it right or wrong - the majority favors. In this way, we elevate popular opinion over moral rectitude. Because he places so much stock in his own conscience, and so little in either state authority or democratic opinion, Thoreau believed that he was bound to disobey any law that ran counter to his own convictions.

His theory of civil disobedience is grounded in that belief. Thoreau's decision to withhold his financial support for the federal government of 1846 was, no doubt, a righteous one. And the theory that inspired that action would go on to inspire many more righteous acts of disobedience. Yet despite these remarkable successes, Arendt argues that Thoreau's theory was misguided. In particular, she insists that he was wrong to ground civil disobedience in the individual conscience. First, and most simply, she points out that conscience is too subjective a category to justify political action. Leftists who protest the treatment of refugees at the hands of US immigration officers are motivated by conscience, but so was Kim Davis - the conservative county clerk in Kentucky who in 2015 denied marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Conscience alone can be used to justify all types of political beliefs and so provides no guarantee of moral action.

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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.

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Second, Arendt makes the more complex argument that, even when it is morally unimpeachable, conscience is “unpolitical”; that is, it encourages us to focus on our own moral purity rather than the collective actions that might bring about real change. Crucially, in calling conscience “unpolitical”, Arendt does not mean that it is useless. In fact, she believed that the voice of conscience was often vitally important. In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), for example, she argues that it was the Nazi officer Adolf Eichmann’s lack of ethical introspection that enabled his participation in the unimaginable evils of the Holocaust.

Arendt knew from the experience of Fascism that conscience could prevent subjects from actively advancing profound injustice, but she saw that as a kind of moral bare minimum. The rules of conscience, she argues, “do not say what to do; they say what not to do”. In other words: personal conscience can sometimes prevent us from aiding and abetting evil but it does not require us to undertake positive political action to bring about justice.

Thoreau would likely accept the charge that his theory of civil disobedience told men only “what not to do”, as he did not believe it was the responsibility of individuals to actively improve the world. “It is not a man’s duty, as a matter of course,” he writes, “to devote himself to the eradication of any, even to the most enormous, wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it” Arendt would agree that it is better to abstain from injustice than to participate in it, but she worries that Thoreau’s philosophy might make us complacent about any evil that we aren’t personally complicit in.

Because Thoreauvian civil disobedience is so focused on the personal conscience and not, as Arendt puts it, on “the world where the wrong is committed”, it risks prioritizing individual moral purity over the creation of a more just society. Perhaps the most striking difference between Thoreau and Arendt is that, while he sees disobedience as necessarily individual, she sees it as, by definition, collective.

Arendt argues that for an act of law-breaking to count as civil disobedience it must be performed openly and publicly (put simply: if you break the law in private, you’re committing a crime, but if you break the law at a protest, you’re making a point). Thoreau’s dramatic refusal to pay his poll tax would meet this definition, but Arendt makes one further distinction: anyone who breaks the law publicly but individually is a mere conscientious objector; those who break the law publicly and collectively are civil disobedients. It is only this latter group – from which she would exclude Thoreau – that is capable of producing real change, she implies. Mass civil disobedience movements generate momentum, apply pressure, and shift political discourse. For Arendt, the greatest civil disobedience movements – Indian independence, civil rights, and the anti-war movement – took inspiration from Thoreau but added a vital commitment to mass, public action. In sharp contrast, Thoreau believed that “there is but little virtue in the action of masses of men”.

“On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” is an essay of rare moral vision. In it, Thoreau expresses uncompromising critiques of the government of his era, while also capturing the powerful feelings of moral conviction that often undergird acts of civil disobedience. Nevertheless, it is Arendt’s account of the practice that is ultimately more promising. Arendt insists that we focus not on our own conscience but on the injustice committed, and the concrete means of redressing it. This does not mean that civil disobedience has to aim for something moderate or even achievable but that it should be calibrated toward the world – which it has the power to change – and not toward the self – which it can only purify.

Comment: As important a thinker as Arendt was (the concept of “the banality of evil” alone earns her place in the pantheon), I cannot quite get over reading somewhere years ago that she was contemptuous of American culture. And however much every pseudo-intellectual liberal (like me) is fascinated by the image of Thoreau working out his philosophy in lonely solitude on Walden Pond, it tickles me to know that he walked back to Concord every Saturday to bring to his mother his dirty laundry. – JR

IS PATRIOTISM THE SOLE PURVIEW OF THE MILITARY?

Jonathan Engel

Somewhat lost in the kerfuffle (a real word, unlike *Scovfefe*) over the Super Bowl champion Philadelphia Eagles’ non-invitation to visit the White House is a more important issue. As most of us know, Trump has spent the last nine months or so flogging the National Football League for not firing/deporting/waterboarding players who last season took a knee during the pre-game playing of the National Anthem in order to demonstrate their concern over racial injustice in this country.

Trump thinks demeaning (primarily African-American) football players pleases his base, which it probably does, and so he keeps harping on it. At his substitute event, held in lieu of the Eagles’ visit, he said this about standing for the Anthem: “We stand to honor our military and to honor our country and to remember the fallen heroes who never made it back home.” You hear this kind of thing all the time, that the football players who kneel during the Anthem are disrespecting the military. Why the military? The National Anthem is supposed to be for all Americans and all occasions, during peacetime, wartime, and every other time. Why do we now consider it to be solely about the military?

The National Anthem doesn’t get played that much outside of sporting events, which is an interesting issue in and of itself, but one for another day. Since 9/11, major league baseball teams have been playing “God Bless America” during the 7th inning stretch, in addition to the pre-game playing of the National Anthem, although it’s hard to discern why. So that late arrivals can show their patriotism too? Personally, I was quite happy with “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” during the stretch, but I guess that fans singing about the old ballgame just wasn’t nationalistic enough for

the powers that be. At Yankee games they always bring out a military person (active duty or a veteran) to honor during “God Bless America”. This is true of virtually all sporting events, where the military is always front and center. It is only the military that is honored, with an occasional nod to the police.

Are military personnel the only ones who should be so honored? I don’t think so. What about teachers, social workers, nurses, doctors, government workers, farmers, EMTs, public defenders, mental health workers, artists, transit workers, civil rights marchers, lifeguards etc, etc, ad infinitum. Their contributions to society should be recognized too. We are Americans. We are not Spartans, Klingons, or any other kind of warrior culture, nor were we intended to be so by the people who founded this nation. That’s why the Constitution provides that the Commander In Chief of the Armed Forces must be a civilian.

Maybe honoring all sorts of Americans from all walks of life would help to unify us around the Anthem, instead of dividing us. It’s time for us to reclaim the idea of patriotism as a willingness to do what’s best for all Americans, instead of just boasting about how powerful our military is. Not that veterans don’t deserve our thanks and praise; they do. It’s just that they’re not the only ones. Many people contribute to the greatness of our country in their own ways, and perhaps a recognition of this fact will help to ease some of the divisions that are currently tearing us apart.

NO PLEDGE, NO PROBLEM

Hemant Mehta

(Excerpted from “Atlanta Charter School Eliminates Pledge of Allegiance Due to Student Protests” at friendlyatheist.patheos.com 8/9/2018)

The Atlanta Neighborhood Charter School in Georgia announced that students would no longer begin each day with a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance.

They’ll say a school chant, and work on writing another kind of pledge that all the students can be proud of, but the purely symbolic act of faux-patriotism is no longer a part of the morning routine.

The reason for eliminating the ritual has everything to do with how the Pledge has become politicized, with students refusing to say it (or stand for it) for a variety of reasons. To their credit, administrators listened to the kids.

Here’s the school’s elementary campus president:

“One change that we made to our morning meeting agenda this year is that we will not be including the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance each morning. ... This decision was made in an effort to begin our day as a fully inclusive and connected community. Over the past couple of years it has become increasingly obvious that more and more of our community were choosing to not stand and/or recite the pledge. There are many emotions around this and we want everyone in our school family to start their day in a positive manner. After all, that is the whole purpose of our morning meeting.”

Look at that: Passive resistance led to a real change.

It’s absolutely the right move. If any other country made kids pledge an oath to their flag every day in school, we’d call it a form of brainwashing. True patriotism doesn’t require daily pledges – and that’s especially true when we live in a country where “liberty and justice for all” is only aspirational, not the status quo.

This Reddit comment speaks volumes:

deathtotheemperor: If I made my wife stand up and recite our marriage vows every morning, people would think I was fucking psycho. The Army didn’t make me swear to support and defend the Constitution every day, I took my oath once and that was that.

Making kids recite the Pledge even once is questionable.

Making them do it every day is stupid and nonsensical.

To be clear, the school is fine with this. The kids are fine with it – which is why the change is being made at all. (And even if students disagree, they’ll have the opportunity to say the Pledge later in the day.)

If you hear any complaints, they will only be coming from outside critics who think forced “patriotism” belongs in every school no matter what.

May other schools follow in this one’s footsteps.

Comment: Three cheers! The pledge has long been a bugbear of mine, ever since I was a Junior High teacher and had to watch a couple of Jehovah’s Witness kids squirm silently during the pledge at weekly Assembly. That daily oath of obedience is more appropriate in North Korea than in North America. – JR

7 FACTS ABOUT IMMIGRATION

Robert Reich

(Secretary of Labor 1993-97)

The Trump administration is denying passports to Americans who have Hispanic last names along the U.S.-Mexico border. It’s another bigoted crackdown on immigration. Know the facts: Here are 7 truths about immigration in under 70 seconds. Please help spread them.

1. A record high of 75 percent of Americans now say immigration is a “good thing” for the country.

2. America needs more immigrants, not fewer, because our population is rapidly aging.

3. Historically, new immigrants have contributed more to society in taxes than they have taken from society in terms of public assistance.

4. Most immigrants don’t take jobs away from native-born Americans. To the contrary, their spending creates more jobs.

5. Trump’s claim that undocumented immigrants create more crime is dead wrong. Both legal and undocumented immigrants are significantly less likely to commit crimes than people born in the United States.

6. Violent crime rates in America are actually at historical lows, with the homicide rate back to its level from the early 1960s.

7. Illegal border crossings have been declining since 2014, long before Trump’s “crackdown”. There is no “surge” in illegal immigration.

THREE QUESTIONS FOR TRUMPSTERS

John Rafferty

I have recently been in touch on FaceBook with a fraternity brother from college days. Now of course as old as I am, I still think of Karl as he was then, a sweet kid, an almost too-innocent-to-be-true naif whose parents were worried that college would corrupt him.

Well, obviously, it didn't. What I have gleaned from his FB posts is that he and his (recently deceased) wife, active and happy Mormons, spent much of their lives mentoring and fostering at-risk kids. Good people, in other words.

On the other hand, Karl "posts", "likes" and "shares" right-wing garbage. In the purple-sky universe he lives in, President-for-Life Donald J. Trump has been placed on Earth by Almighty Heavenly Father Himself to save America from socialism, apostasy, and Hilary Clinton. Nothing can shake Karl's belief that whatever Trump does is good and godly. What can you possibly say to people like Karl?

Don't *say* anything ... *ask*. Try these questions:

1. Do you have a teenage daughter or granddaughter? Would you allow her to spend an hour alone with Donald Trump?

2. Do you own or run a small business – say catering or construction/home repair? Would you work for Donald Trump without a contract and a cash deposit?

3. Do you work at a bank or any other financial institution? Would you lend Donald Trump money without deed-of-ownership securities in hand?

Of course, true-believing Trumpsters might answer No to all three questions and still wear their MAGA hats proudly. As I assume Karl is doing now that he has texted me that he doesn't want to debate on FB any longer.

PIQUE COMES TO YOUR MAILBOX ABOUT EVERY THREE MOOCHES

John Rafferty

The Trump administration, while seemingly hell-bent on repealing or replacing any regulation or program ordered in the eight years – an *Obama* – prior to The Coming of The Donald in January, 2017, has nevertheless – and certainly inadvertently – given rise to a new way of looking at the measurement of time itself. For instance ...

A *scaramucci* is a unit of time equal to 10 days. It's coined in honor of Anthony Scaramucci, Director of Communications for Donald ("I'm going to surround myself only with the best") Trump, who lasted, well, one scaramucci in that job.

It's usually shortened to *mooch*.

A *pompeo* is the amount of time it takes to fly to North Korea; achieve nothing except rejection, humiliation, and jet-lag; and fly back to the US, usually only about half a mooch.

And a *trump* is any amount of time that seems way longer than it is, due to how horrible an experience it is.

Readers of PIQUE are invited to submit other temporal measurements, political or otherwise. One of the otherwise

I particularly like – from the notes I, um, cribbed from the internet for this essay but can no longer identify – is the *onosecond*, the blazingly brief time between hitting "Enter" and wishing you hadn't.

HOW TO CREATE ALTERNATIVE REALITIES IN WHAT THE BEST PEOPLE CALL

"TRUMP WORLD"

Donald J. Trump

1. Make up a ridiculous (but self-serving) claim and plant it with a "useful idiot" in the media:

"Sean, have you heard anything about this rumor that Robert Mueller and Hilary have been secret lovers ever since the Clinton administration?"

2. Let it happen:

"... and a White House insider tells me – in an exclusive to Fox News – that senior officials are looking into rumors of a long-standing affair between ..."

3. Let it simmer and spread:

Wolf Blitzer: "While CNN has found no substantiating evidence, rumors still ..."

Chris Matthews: "... just more craziness, panel, or is there any there there? Your thoughts."

4. Up the ante:

National Enquirer Shocker:

Hilary had Mueller Love Child in Russia in 2015!

5. Semi-distance yourself:

"I don't know. A lot of people are talking about it ... and it would explain why her campaign colluded with Russia to keep her secret. Her collusion, not mine, no Trump campaign collusion. I don't know if it's true, but a lot of people are talking about it."

6. Sit back and enjoy:

"And in a Rasmussen poll just released, 38 percent of Americans say they believe the allegations of an illicit affair between Special Counsel Robert Mueller and former Democratic Presidential Candidate Hilary Clinton are either definitely or likely to be true."

JESUS AND MO APPLY LOGIC TO THE BARMAID'S CONSPIRACY THEORY

(From www.jesusandmo.net/comic/clever/)

Mohammed: Why do you think conspiracy theories are so popular, Barmaid?

Barmaid: I suppose some find it comforting to believe events are directed by a hidden force. The explanatory power of a conspiracy theory makes people feel safer in a random and complex world. It also makes them feel clever – like they are among the few who have everything figured out.

Jesus: So where do conspiracy theories come from?

Barmaid: I don't know. Maybe there's an evolutionary advantage in being hard-wired to detect agency, whether it exists or not, and we generate a lot of false positives.

Jesus: Ha, ha, you are so naïve.

Mo: They are created by Satan to tempt people away from the truth.

SHSNY's FICTION BOOK CLUB – SUCCESS!

John Rafferty

The SHSNY Fiction Book Club got off to a great start when eight of us gathered in Nancy Adelman's apartment on September 11. We nibbled cheese and pepperoni and popcorn and cookies, drank more than a couple of bottles of wine (who's counting?) ... and talked!

We talked about, analyzed, evaluated and nit-picked Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*, which we all—except for Richard Elrauch—thought, in agreement with the *NYTimes* review, was/is an “audacious, ambitious book that challenges notions of time, fate and free will”. Three of us loved it enough to have read it twice, but when we considered the question at the core of the novel – If you could live your life over again and again, until you got it right, would you? – the consensus of the group was: Nope.

So, from now until ever, we'll meet at Nancy's on the second Tuesday of the month, starting with ...

October 09: *Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain

Discussion led by Charlotte Marzani

Controversial from its first publication in 1884 as “trashy” and “vulgar”, to “racist” in contemporary times, this accounting by a nineteenth-century boy of his adventures as he travels down the Mississippi river with a runaway slave has been called “a masterpiece” by T. S. Eliot. And Ernest Hemingway declared, “All modern American literature comes from *Huck Finn* ... the best book we've had.”

November 13: *The Children Act*, by Ian McEwan

Discussion led by Richard Elrauch

Who owns a child's – or anyone else's – life? Parents? Society? God? Fiona Maye is a leading High Court judge who presides over cases in the family court. But her professional success belies private sorrow and domestic strife. At the same time, she is called on to try an urgent case: Adam, a beautiful seventeen-year-old boy, is refusing for religious reasons the medical treatment that could save his life, and his devout parents echo his wishes.

Time is running out. Should the secular court overrule sincerely expressed faith? In the course of reaching a decision, Fiona visits Adam in the hospital—an encounter that stirs long-buried feelings in her and powerful new emotions in the boy. Her judgment has momentous consequences for them both.

Yes, this is the basis of the film of the same name, starring Emma Thompson, that's in theaters right now.

December 11: *Inside the O'Briens*, by Lisa Genova

Discussion led by John Rafferty

Devoted husband, proud father of four children in their twenties, and respected police officer, 44-year-old Joe O'Brien begins experiencing bouts of disorganized thinking, uncharacteristic temper outbursts, and strange, involuntary movements, then is handed a diagnosis that will change his and his family's lives forever: Huntington's Disease, a lethal neurodegenerative disease with no treatment and no cure.

Each of Joe's four children has a 50 percent chance of inheriting their father's disease, and a simple blood test can reveal their genetic fate. While watching her potential future

in her father's escalating symptoms, twenty-one-year-old daughter Katie struggles with the questions this test imposes on her young adult life. Does she want to know? What if she's gene positive? Can she live with the constant anxiety of not knowing?

As Joe struggles to maintain hope and a sense of purpose, Katie and her siblings must find the courage to either live a life “at risk” or learn their fate.

JUST THREE BOOK CLUB RULES

1. **Read the book!** You can join the conversation in our other book club about politics, church-and-state or evolution theory even if you haven't read a specific book. But a work of fiction is, by definition, *sui generis*; you have to read it to intelligently discuss it.

2. **Reserve your seat on the sofa.** Yes, of course you can come at the last minute, but please help us organize by reserving your place, in advance, at editor@shsn.org.

3. There's no admission fee, but **contribute what you can.** Wine, cookies, a few dollars – what you can, if you can.

HILLARY CLINTON AND HELEN KELLER OUT OF THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM, MOSES IN. DO YOU HAVE TO ASK WHERE?

John Rafferty

To “streamline” the study of social studies in the state, the Texas Board of Education voted in mid-September to remove former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and blind-and-deaf social/political activist Helen Keller from the state's social studies curriculum.

“Eliminating Clinton from the requirements will save teachers 30 minutes of instructional time, the work group estimated, and eliminating Keller will save 40 minutes,” the *Dallas Morning News* reported.

And despite recommendations from historians and other experts, the GOP-controlled Board also voted to include Moses as a major influence on the nation's founding documents, which in the new statewide curriculum are described as based on “Judeo-Christian values”.

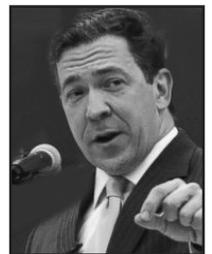
In America. In the 21st century.

CHRIS McDANIEL: SH*THEAD OF THE MONTH

On September 17, Mississippi Republican Senate nominee Chris McDaniel told American Family Radio host Bryan Fischer:

“We have a system where Judge Kavanaugh is obviously well-suited for, and they're gonna drag something up, at least, even theoretically, allegedly, from all those years ago. And all of a sudden, that disqualifies this man? All of a sudden, he's a terrible human being? No, not a chance. You know, I don't – I don't fall for it anymore. I hope the American people aren't falling for it.”

“These allegations, 99 percent of the time, are just absolutely fabricated.”



SHSNY CALENDAR: OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2018

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, OCT 4, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

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

WHAT IS POPULISM?

Jan-Werner Müller

Donald Trump, Silvio Berlusconi, Marine Le Pen, Hugo Chávez — Who are these people who claim to represent “the people”? And who are “the people” anyway, and who can speak in their name?

In this groundbreaking volume, Jan-Werner Müller argues that at populism's core is a rejection of pluralism. Populists will always claim that they and they alone represent the people and their true interests. Contrary to conventional wisdom, populists can govern on the basis of their claim to exclusive moral representation of the people: if populists have enough power, they will end up creating an authoritarian state that excludes all those not considered part of the proper “people”. The book proposes concrete strategies for how liberal democrats should best deal with populists and, in particular, how to counter their claims to speak exclusively for “the silent majority” or “the real people”.

Tim Greene will lead.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

Join us even if you haven't finished reading.

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

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MEET US ON MEETUP

www.meetup.com/shsnny-org/

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SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, NOV 1, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
THE RIGHTEOUS MIND:

*Why Good People are Divided
by Politics and Religion*

Jonathan Haidt

Drawing on his 25 years of groundbreaking research on moral psychology, Haidt shows how moral judgments arise not from reason but from gut feelings. He shows why liberals, conservatives, and libertarians have such different intuitions about right and wrong, and he shows why each side is actually right about many of its central concerns. Haidt gives us the key to understanding human cooperation, as well as our eternal divisions and conflicts.

Harry French will lead.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, DEC 6, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
GRAND HOTEL ABYSS:

*The Lives of the
Frankfurt School*
Stuart Jeffries

In 1923, a group of young radical German thinkers and intellectuals came together to explain the workings of the modern world. Not only would they change the way we think, but also the subjects we deem worthy of intellectual investigation. Their lives, like their ideas, reflected and shaped the shattering events of the twentieth century.

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

Tom Riggins will lead.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, OCT 21, 11:30 am

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

We gather in the saloon's back room, where the pub-grub menu includes a \$15 breakfast



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

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

*After-Brunch Discussion:
Who benefits by Libertarianism?*

DRINKING REASONABLY
WED, OCT 17, 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 anytime for any length of time 6-10, or come at 6:00 and enjoy Happy Hour prices until 7:00.

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



SHSNY CALENDAR: OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2018

Rescheduled from Sep 26:

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, OCT 3, 7 pm

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge

**THE WORLD IN 2050: Four Forces
Shaping Civilization's Northern
Future**, by Laurence Smith

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, OCT 24, 7 pm

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge

140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

SOMEONE ELSE'S TWIN:

*The True Stories of Babies
Switched at Birth*

Dr. Nancy Segal

Dr. Nancy Segal, Professor of Psychology at California State University, Fullerton and herself a twin and an expert on twin research, describes the consequences of unintentional separation of identical twins. She considers not only the effects on separated twins, but the implications for questions concerning identity. How do mothers know their biological children? How much does our family contribute to our sense of self? Are we more like the people who raised us or the people we are born to?

SHSNY FICTION BOOK CLUB

TUES, OCT 9, 7:00 - 8:30 pm

Nancy Adelman's apartment

205 Third Ave (6H)

(Between 18-19 Streets)

Come for Wine, Cheese, and
sparkling conversation about

HUCKLEBERRY FINN

Mark Twain

For complete details on the
October/November/December
book selections, [see page 5](#).

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

Reserve your place today:

SHSNY's 10th ANNUAL FREETHOUGHT DAY BRUNCH

Sunday, October 14, at

PETE'S TAVERN

129 East 18 Street (Irving Place)

with speaker

R. LAURENCE MOORE

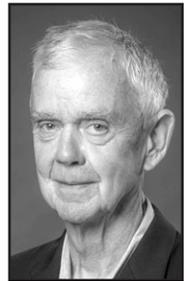
Co-Author of

GODLESS CITIZENS IN A

GODLY REPUBLIC:

Atheists in American Public Life

Prof. R. Laurence Moore, co-author (with Prof. Isaac Kramnic) of *The Godless Constitution*, and now of newly-published *Godless Citizens in a Godly Republic: Atheists in American Public Life*, will discuss the fascinating history – Paine, Ingersoll, Cady Stanton – of much-derided atheists in America, and of the dramatic rise of today's "atheist awakening" and the role of organizations (like ours) intent on holding the country to the secular principles it was founded upon.



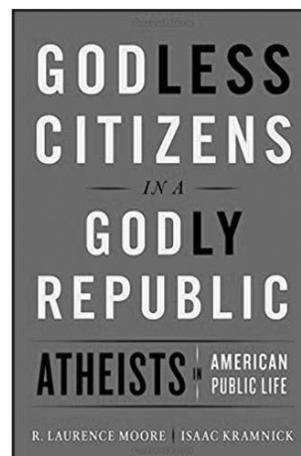
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THE “MEANING(S) OF EXISTENCE”

Giddian Beer

I yield to no one in my admiration for E. O. Wilson. However, I fear that his notions of the power and effects of empathy in his talk “The Meaning of Human Existence” (reported by Daniel Lev Shkolnik on patheos.com and excerpted in September PIQUE) are far off the mark.

First, human empathy has an evil twin, *schadenfreude*, which is pleasure derived from witnessing the pain or humiliation of another. Probably each twin is derived from mirror neurons that fire both when an animal acts and when the animal observes the same action performed (or experienced) by another. Mirror neurons have been found in most primates and some birds. However, the evil twin has only been found in humans. Worldwide, comparing acts of altruism with acts of cruelty, quantitatively and qualitatively, it appears that the evil twin has greater influence on human behavior.

But neither twin has, or has had, a significant effect on what we humans have done to Earth; other traits govern, specifically, greed and stupidity, or greed-inspired stupidity.

In 1962, Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, alerting us to the damages that we humans were inflicting on Earth. Concern for the environment grew. In 1970, “Earth Days” – annual worldwide events to cherish and urge protection of Earth’s environment – were inaugurated. In the US there was strong bipartisan support for environment protection. President Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and, in 1973, the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In the ensuing decade concern continued to increase; nearly every episode of the very popular Carol Burnett Show ended with a plea to protect the environment; this plea was taken seriously by most people. Prospects for the extension of humanity’s existence actually improved.

However, with the 1981 inauguration of Ronald Reagan, those prospects were demolished. He swallowed the rhetorical garbage of fossil fuel producers and their Republican henchmen. He cut EPA funding, cut renewable energy programs and denigrated environment protection. With denial of the environment’s problems, concern about them plummeted, disdain soared in the US and elsewhere.

By 2009, twenty-eight years later, it was apparent to people paying attention that global heating had become critical. Dr. James Hansen (head of NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies and preeminent authority on climate change) published his book *Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity*. It details the causes and consequences of global warming and expresses consternation at the foolishly inadequate schemes to reduce it. Unfortunately, this warning, and a similar warning by Dr. Jared Diamond in his 2005 book, *Collapse*, had no more effect than zephyrs in a hurricane.

Meanwhile, these worldwide trends have been quite obvious for at least two decades: rising global temperature; dwindling polar and glacier ice; growing desertification

and ocean acidity; diminishing useable water; burning of desiccated forests, grasslands and chaparrals; more – and more destructive – floods, storms, fires and droughts, with the most recent years being the most ruinous.

Yet today’s damages, happening now, are like nothing compared to what is coming around mid-century (2050), when world population, currently over seven billion, may approach ten billion. Deserts will cover more of what is now forest, farm or pasture. More fires will rage in desiccated areas. With the concentration of atmospheric CO₂ increasing, global mean temperature will rise faster. Polar ice, including on Greenland, will be significantly reduced. Storms and floods will increase in number and severity. Most coastal areas and islands will suffer increasing inundations, others will submerge completely. Glaciers in temperate and tropical regions will be further depleted or gone. In east and south Asia, western North America and much of Europe, billions of people depend on glacier melt for steady water supply. Some areas will not have enough year round to sustain their agriculture and industry. Precipitation might continue or increase, but rather than full rivers, it would be more like regional toilet flushes, i.e., floods and landslides followed by severely reduced flows.

Swarms of hopeless people will surge from where they cannot live towards where they are not wanted. Growing recognition of approaching calamity will evoke anxiety and desperation. Conflicts over why, whom to blame and what to do will emerge, wars are possible, dystopia looms.

And beyond mid-century the deterioration continues.

Most extinctions are processes; species die off due to destruction or loss of habitat or failure to adapt to new conditions. For species now on Earth these processes are well begun and are accelerating. Planetary heating, along with continuing human activity, will drastically damage all habitats. Initially, animals and plants that do not reproduce rapidly, being unable to adapt, will die off.

Within a dozen or so of *H sapiens* generations (about three centuries) only microbes, probably anaerobic, will remain.

Or no life at all.

So I find two “meanings of the existence” of *H sapiens*:

1. Pervasive abuse and cruelty. During any time period, there are places on Earth where people are being persecuted, bombed, gassed, massacred, enslaved, ethnic-cleansed and/or forced into prostitution.

2. Transience. If duration is a measure of a species’ success, cockroaches, around for 320 million years, are among the most successful; *H sapiens*, currently at 300 thousand years, will soon be among the least.

Greed and stupidity overwhelm ultra-intelligence.

Man can be the most affectionate and altruistic of creatures, yet he’s potentially more vicious than any other. He is the only one who can be persuaded to hate millions of his own kind whom he has never seen and to kill as many as he can lay his hands on in the name of his tribe or his God.

– Benjamin Spock

THE ROT IN THE CHURCH: NEW JERSEY ITERATION

David G. McAfee

(Excerpted from "New Jersey Priest Abuse Hotline Gets So Many Calls That People Can't Get Through", at friendlyatheist.patheos.com, 9/15/2018)

In the wake of the Pennsylvania grand jury report released in August, which detailed in graphic terms the sex abuse by hundreds of priests who had preyed upon children for decades, a hotline was set up by New Jersey officials for citizens to report sexual abuse by priests.

The hotline has been so overwhelmed with calls that the state has had to assign more workers to the hotline – and people are still having trouble getting through.

In an interview with NPR, Attorney General Gurbir S. Grewal said the response underscored the need to have hotlines across the country, "because I am certain that this abuse, given the pattern and practices that the Pennsylvania report identified, was not limited to the Northeast".

AND WILL THE CHURCH COOPERATE IN NEW YORK? DON'T HOLD YOUR BREATH.

Kenneth Lovett

(Excerpted from "EXCLUSIVE: Catholic Church spent \$2M on major N.Y. lobbying firms to block child-sex law reform" in *The New York Daily News*, 5/30/2018)

Not leaving it to divine chance, the state Catholic Conference has turned in recent years to some of Albany's most well-connected and influential lobby firms to help block a bill that would make it easier for child sex abuse victims to seek justice.

The Catholic Conference, headed by Timothy Cardinal Dolan, has ... spent more than \$2.1 million on lobbying from 2007 through the end of 2015, state records show. That does not include the conference's own internal lobbying team.

Filings show the lobbyists were retained, in part, to work on issues associated with "statute of limitations" and "timelines for commencing certain civil actions related to sex offenses". ...

"They are willing to spend limitless money in order to basically keep bad guys from being accountable for their actions," said Melanie Blow, chief operations officer of the Stop Abuse Campaign. "I think they're doing it because they don't want to have to pay out settlements."

Added Kathryn Robb, an advocate and survivor ... "If they need to spend that much money on lobbying, clearly, then, they have some pretty big secrets to hide." ...

The Catholic Conference has argued that opening a one-year window to revive old cases could ultimately bankrupt the Church.

Comment: Aww, what a pity. The Church might have to sell off one or two of the midtown whole city blocks it owns, just to pay off those greedy little whiners. Not fair! – JR

It's hard to be religious when certain people are never incinerated by bolts of lightning. – *Bill Watterson*

IRELAND SAYS "NOPE TO THE POPE"

(Excerpted from friendlyatheist.patheos.com/2018/08/26/)

The crowd [for the Pope's appearance August 28 in Dublin's Phoenix Park] was estimated to be under 130,000 people ... a far cry from the one million-plus people who came out to watch Pope John Paul II in the same location in 1979. (Only a few thousand people agreed to participate in the Say Nope to the Pope protest.)

To put it in context, according to one source, nearly 75 percent of the Irish population saw the Pope in 1979. [This] event represented less than 3 percent of the population.

Why the drop? We can't say for sure ... but who am I kidding, of course we can.

Between the child sex scandals, and the Magdalene Laundries, and the continued opposition to abortion (a constitutional ban which Irish citizens proudly overturned this year), and the Church's continued opposition to LGBTQ rights, the Church has lost all moral authority.

The pope isn't a rock star you're dying to see in your lifetime. He's not an inspirational figure. He's the titular head of an immoral and criminal enterprise. ... There's nothing Pope Francis can say that carries weight with decent people around the world. They know we're all better off ignoring the Church. No amount of PR by the pope is going to patch up the damage the Church has done over the past several decades.

Comment: That Nope to The Pope headline above is my theft of the name of the movement that flopped – not for love of the Pope, but for disinterest in him. NTTP was supposed to gather tickets to the event and then not use them, but it wasn't necessary – Ireland really did say Nope to the Pope, something this ex-nominal-Catholic would never, ever have believed he would see in his lifetime. Yay, Ireland! – JR

HOLY HOME RUNS

Jim Underdown

(Excerpted from *Ask The Atheist* at centerforinquiry.org, 8/8/2018)

Q: Why do baseball players point to the sky when they hit a home run, but not when they whiff? – *Peter H.*

A: Because God would strike players dead if they publicly blamed him for what is obviously their own mistake. Sure, He'll take credit for the home runs and triples when the batters' skills and years of dedication, work, and practice pay off, but don't put a strikeout on Him.

Players know all this and elect not to press their luck with Admiral Vindictive up in the sky there.

By the way, if your team is winning, God likes them (and you). If they stink ... well, do the math.



Sometimes I think that the surest sign that intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe is that none of it has tried to contact us. – *Bill Watterson*

THE MACHINE IS ON FIRE

Jill Lepore

(Excerpted from “The Hacking of America” on the OpEd page of The New York Times, 9/14/2018)

Political and technological disruption have fed off each other since the nation’s founding. Now they are dangerously out of whack.

Every government is a machine, and every machine has its tinkerers — and its jams. From the start, machines have driven American democracy and, just as often, crippled it. The printing press, the telegraph, the radio, the television, the mainframe, cable TV, the internet: Each had wild-eyed boosters who promised that a machine could hold the republic together, or make it more efficient, or repair the damage caused by the last machine. Each time, this assertion would be both right and terribly wrong. But lately, it’s mainly wrong, chiefly because the rules that prevail on the internet were devised by people who fundamentally don’t believe in government. ...

In 1987, President Ronald Reagan finally succeeded in repealing the Fairness Doctrine — and he also vetoed a congressional effort to block the repeal. The repeal, which relieved licensed broadcasters of a public-interest obligation to represent opposing points of view, made possible a new kind of partisan talk radio. In 1987, there were some 240 talk radio stations in the country; by 1992, there were 900. Partisan cable television followed, as the repeal led also to the rise of MSNBC and Fox News in 1996.

Meanwhile, a new generation of knowledge-worker-not-auto-worker Democrats abandoned the working class for the microchip. Known in the 1980s as Atari Democrats, they were soon reinvented as the New Democrats. “Thanks to the near-miraculous capabilities of microelectronics, we are vanquishing scarcity,” a New Democrat manifesto announced in 1995, damning “those who cannot and will not participate in the knowledge economy” as “losers”.

The New Democrats’ technological utopianism blinded them to the consequences of abandoning public-interest-minded Progressive-era regulation, at a time when a co-founder of *Wired*, Louis Rossetto, a libertarian and former anarchist, was celebrating the arrival of a freewheeling New Media. In the magazine’s inaugural issue in 1993, Mr. Rossetto predicted that the internet would bring about “social changes so profound their only parallel is probably the discovery of fire”. The internet would create a new world order, except it wouldn’t be an order; it would be an open market, free of all government interference, a frontier, a Wild West — lawless and unaccountable.

Wired began publishing the same year that the Newt Gingrich-affiliated Progress and Freedom Foundation was founded. Its key thinker was the irrepressible George Gilder, who in the 1970s had achieved celebrity as an anti-feminist and in the 1980s as a supply-sider. At a 1994 Progress and Freedom Foundation meeting in Aspen, Colo., Mr. Gilder, along with the futurists Alvin Toffler, Esther Dyson and George Keyworth, wrote a “Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age”, which called for “removing barriers

to competition and massively deregulating the fast-growing telecommunications and computing industries”.

The cyber Magna Carta served as the blueprint for the Telecommunications Act. The libertarians’ objective, which went much further than the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, was to ensure that the internet would lie beyond the realm of government control. On Feb. 8, 1996, President Bill Clinton, New Democrat, signed the bill in the reading room of the Library of Congress, on paper, and then, electronically, with a digital pen, the first piece of legislation signed in cyberspace. The act deregulated the communications industry, lifting virtually all of its New Deal antimonopoly provisions, allowing for the subsequent consolidation of media companies and largely prohibiting regulation of the internet. Still, that the United States government would even presume to legislate the internet — even if only to promise not to regulate it — alarmed the libertarians.

On the day Mr. Clinton signed the bill, John Perry Barlow, a bearded mystic who had written lyrics for the Grateful Dead and had helped found the Electronic Frontier Foundation, an ex-hippie who had become the darling of the Davos set, wrote a Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace. “Governments of the industrial world, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from cyberspace, the new home of mind,” Mr. Barlow wrote, in a statement that he posted on the web, where it became one of the very first posts to spread, as was said, like a virus. “On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone,” he said. “Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. You have neither solicited nor received ours. We did not invite you. You do not know us, nor do you know our world. Cyberspace does not lie within your borders.”

In the spring of 2000, an article in *Wired* announced that the internet had already healed a divided America: “We are, as a nation, better educated, more tolerant, and more connected because of — not in spite of — the convergence of the internet and public life. Partisanship, religion, geography, race, gender, and other traditional political divisions are giving way to a new standard — wiredness — as an organizing principle for political and social attitudes.” Of all the dizzying technological boosterism in American history, from the penny press to the telegraph to the radio, no pronouncement was battier. In the years since, partisan divisions have become fully automated functions, those wires so many fetters.

The machine is no longer precisely constructed, its every action no longer measured. The machine is fix upon fix, hack after hack, its safety mechanisms sawed off. It has no brake, no fail-safe, no checks, no balances. It clatters. It thunders. It crushes the Constitution in its gears. The smell of smoke wafts out of the engine. The machine is on fire.

Some humans would do anything to see if it was possible to do it. If you put a large switch in some cave somewhere, with a sign on it saying “End-of-the-World Switch. PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH”, the paint wouldn’t even have time to dry. — Terry Pratchett

IS LIBERTARIANISM JUST LIBERTY FOR “LOCAL BULLIES”?

Noah Smith

(Excerpted from noahpinionblog.blogspot.com/2011/12/liberty-of-local-bullies.html)

The modern American libertarian ideology does not deal with the issue of local bullies. In the world envisioned by Nozick, Hayek, Rand, and other foundational thinkers of the movement, there are only two levels to society – the government (the “big bully”) and the individual. If your freedom is not being taken away by the biggest bully that exists, your freedom is not being taken away at all.

In a perfect libertarian world, it is therefore possible for rich people to buy all the beaches and charge admission fees to whomever they want (or simply ban anyone they choose). In a libertarian world, a self-organized cartel of white people can, under certain conditions, get together and effectively prohibit black people from being able to go out to dinner in their own city. In a libertarian world, a corporate boss can use the threat of unemployment to force you into accepting unsafe working conditions. In other words, the local bullies are free to revoke the freedoms of individuals, using methods more subtle than overt violent coercion.

Such a world wouldn't feel free to the people in it. Sure, you could get together with friends and pool your money to buy a little patch of beach. Sure, you could move to a less racist city. Sure, you could quit and find another job. But doing any of these things requires paying large transaction costs. As a result, you would feel much less free.

Now, the founders of libertarianism—Nozick, et. al.—obviously understood the principle that freedoms are often mutually exclusive, that my freedom to punch you in the face curtails quite a number of your freedoms. For this reason, they endorsed “minarchy”, or a government whose only role is to protect people from violence and protect property rights. But they didn't extend the principle to covertly violent, semi-violent, or nonviolent forms of coercion.

Not surprisingly, this gigantic loophole has made modern American libertarianism the favorite philosophy of a vast array of local bullies, who want to keep the big bully (government) off their backs so they can bully to their hearts' content.

The curtailment of government legitimacy, in the name of “liberty”, allows abusive bosses to abuse workers, racists to curtail opportunities for minorities, polluters to pollute without cost, religious groups to make religious minorities feel excluded, etc.

In theory, libertarianism is about the freedom of the individual, but in practice it is often about the freedom of local bullies to bully. It's a “don't tattle to the teacher” ideology.

Libertarians: anarchists who want the police to protect them from their slaves. — *Science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson, forwarded by Massimo Pigliucci*

A MONTH-AFTER-LABOR-DAY LATE (AND A MONTH-BEFORE-MIDTERMS TIMELY) EVALUATION OF WHAT LABOR UNIONS HAVE DONE FOR US.

John Rafferty

With five weeks to go until the most important mid-term election of our lifetimes – *of the country's lifetime!* – progressive candidates must win back the working people who voted for Obama twice by focusing attention on kitchen-table issues.

Top of the list? The right-wing Republican and Libertarian decades-old campaigns to break the last vestiges of labor union power in America.

What have unions done for us? Here's a partial list:

- Social Security
- Weekends
- Paid vacations
- The 8-hour work day
- Medicare/Medicaid/Affordable Care Act
- Ending child labor
- Work breaks, including paid lunch breaks
- Equal pay for equal work for women
- Abolition of sweatshops
- Sick leave
- The minimum wage
- Pregnancy and parental leave
- The right to strike
- Anti-discrimination rules at work
- Overtime pay
- Occupational health and safety
- The 40-hour work week
- Worker's compensation
- Unemployment Insurance
- Pensions
- Public education
- Collective bargaining rights for employees
- Wrongful termination laws
- Whistleblower protection laws
- Anti-sexual harassment laws
- Holiday pay

HOLY COW – THE END IS NEAR

(Excerpted from the New York Post, 9/10/2018. Forwarded by the redoubtable Richard Milner, who also provided the appropriate headline above.)

It's the end of the world as we know it. An all-red heifer was born at the Temple of Israel on September 4, fulfilling a biblical prophecy. “The red heifer brings the promise of reinstating Biblical purity to the world”

The sacrifice of a “pure” (i.e., perfectly formed) red heifer is essential to the construction of a third temple in Jerusalem, which would bring the coming of the Messiah and the final judgment.

Comment: Oh, good, “reinstating Biblical purity”. So if the red heifer passes all its purity tests, we get back slavery, genocide and Bronze Age science. – JR

SOME ATHEISTS YOU KNOW ...

AND HERE ARE A COUPLE MORE ...

SALMAN RUSHDIE



In India, as elsewhere in our darkening world, religion is the poison in the blood. Where religion intervenes, mere innocence is no excuse. Yet we go on skating around this issue, speaking of religion in the fashionable language of "respect". What is there to respect in any of this, or in any of the crimes now being committed almost daily around the world in religion's dreaded name?

DIANA NYAD

I'm not a god person ... I'm an atheist who's in awe.



STEVEN PINKER

I was never religious in the theological sense. I never outgrew my conversion to atheist at 13.

STEPHEN FRY



I love how when people watch, I don't know, David Attenborough or a Discovery Planet type thing, you know where you see the absolute phenomenal majesty and complexity and bewildering beauty of nature and you stare at it and then ... somebody next to you goes, "And how can you say there is no God? Look at that."

And then five minutes later you're looking at the life-cycle of a parasitic worm whose job is to bury itself in the eyeball of a little lamb and eat the eyeball from inside while the lamb dies in horrible agony and then you turn to them and say, "Yeah, where is your God now?"

EMMA THOMPSON

The reason that I am an atheist in so far as the world religions that we have, is because I have seen them oppress so many women for so long.

So, to me, religion is the history of the oppression of women.



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Brunch at Pete's Oct 14.
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