

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

December, 2019

December, and it's the Christmas/Hanukkah/Kwanzaa/Solstice/Festivus Issue, so, um, Happy Holidays. Herein we question questions atheists can't answer, pardon our privilege, wake up the woke, and wonder about awe ... and Ohio. We kick churches out of politics, consult Cummings on democracy, Rushdie (and Orenstein) on humanism, and Rodenberry on the future of, you know, Earth. But, in the spirit of the holly-jolly season, let's lead with some holiday heresies. — JR

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, JESUS! (A Jesus and Mo Whatever)

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

(The boys are in bed, Mo reading the Bible, Jesus the Koran)

Jesus: You can't expect not to be judged on your sexual history when it is openly documented in your own holy scripture, Mo.

Mohammed: But it's so unfair! Why should I get called all those cruel words while you get away with it completely?

Jesus: Get away with what, exactly? Sexually speaking, I'm untouchable, pure and innocent until my dying day.

Mo: Jesus ... you are literally the product of the non-consensual impregnation of your mother by yourself.

Jesus: I ... I don't think there's a word for that.



FINDING CHRISTMAS IN HANUKKAH David Rafferty

(Reprinted from Greenwich Time, 12/23/2018)

If you didn't know, Hanukkah has concluded already because as many adherents would say, it was "early" this year. "Early?" Relative to what? Why, Christmas, of course. Just one more indication of how some contemporary Jewish people view a holiday that gets puffed up in importance so Jewish kids won't feel left out during the Christmas season. But what if I were to tell you that the true meaning of this Festival of Lights actually flips the script and makes a seemingly second-rate holiday the most important part of the Christmas story since three wise men looked to the sky and said, "What's that light?"

"Hanukkah is a complicated holiday — it's not what people think it is," says author and cantor J.D. Kleinke. "It's not our Christmas. It's not quite the happy simple story that we tell our children." Ah, the story. We tell the children that a small band of Jewish patriots defeated an evil army to preserve Jewish culture and that as proof of the miracle there was menorah oil that burned for eight days instead of one. But as Kleinke says, the reality is more complicated.

You see, Hanukkah celebrates more of a culture war than an actual war. The actual fighting was more of a civil war than one of aggressor and defender. In the limited space I have, let's just say that after the fall of Alexander the Great and the rise of Greek kings in the Levant, many Jews were broadening their interpretation of the faith, adopting a more Greek way of life, becoming progressive Jewish Hellenists.

After a time, the Greek king Antiochus put down a nativist Jewish rebellion against these Hellenistic Jews, but instead of capitulating, a band of what we would today call guerrillas was formed, calling themselves the Maccabees. It took many battles but the smaller force of Maccabees ulti-

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SHSNY is a Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association (AHA), an Affiliate Member of Atheist Alliance International (AAI), an Affiliated Local Group of the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH) program of the Center for Inquiry (CFI), and an Endorsing Group in the Secular Coalition for New York (SCNY).

mately defeated Antiochus' army, returned to Jerusalem, rid the temple of its Hellenistic idolatry and rededicated it for the nativist Jews. That day of dedication became Hanukkah. To celebrate after winning, a new menorah was built but there was only enough oil for one day, yet it lasted eight. So there you have it, eight days of Hanukkah.

Unlike American Christmas though, Hanukkah never got its Linus moment, when the Peanuts character recites scripture from Luke describing what Christmas is all about in "A Charlie Brown Christmas". Hanukkah is misunderstood, confusing even to many Jews, even the parts about the menorah. Hanukkah is essentially a celebration of a war of ideologies. Or as Kleinke puts it, "It was us versus us, not us against the Greeks or Syrians."

Now while the Hellenists considered themselves Jews, they had assimilated more into the Greek culture in which they lived. The Maccabees were radical fundamentalists who not only wanted to purge the Greeks, but their own countrymen who did not ascribe to the literal word of the Torah. Or to put it in a more contemporary way, the Hellenists were Jews who were starting to expand their liberal, democratic worldview, all while still adhering to, yet building on, the principles outlined in the founding documents of their faith. While the Maccabees were religious fanatics who lived in the past, believing that only through strict, absolute adherence to the sacred founding documents of Judaism could the Jewish people ever survive. But winners as they say write history; so the fundamentalist, backward looking guerrilla fighters are the heroes in this story. But what if it were different?

Remember, this all happened 139 years before Jesus was born. Imagine now being born into a world where the Maccabees lost and the Hellenist Jews prevailed. Where in the time of Herod and Pilate, most Jews are still free to worship the god of Abraham, but are more comfortably assimilated into Greek and Roman culture and therefore unlikely to be oppressed. Maybe there's no unrest in the Levant, nobody is looking for messiahs anymore, and so preachers and prophets who wander out of the desert are ignored and forgotten to history. Hanukkah may not be the holiday modern Jews think it is, but here's the kicker: no Hanukkah, likely no Christmas. Imagine that.

THE ATHEIST AND CHRISTIAN WAR ON CHRISTMAS Jim Underdown

(Excerpted from centerforinquiry.org/blog/the-atheist-and-christian-war-on-christmas/12/12/2018)

I happen to think the "War on Christmas" is a hyped-up Fox News (*sic*) creation that lines up nicely with the rest of their business model: convince the American public that something dear to them is in imminent danger of being ripped from their bosoms, so they'll keep watching ... Fox News. The rippers are, variously, the liberals, Hillary Clinton, socialism, Hollywood, Nancy Pelosi, the left, Hillary Clinton, the atheists, Barak Obama, everyone in California, and Hillary Clinton.

But this war is really more like a highly localized skirmish, and there is at least a little blame to go around for people being uptight during this time of year. So here I will attempt to straighten things out with some frank talk to both the Christians who think Satan's minions (and Hillary) are trying to put a halt to everything Christmas, and to the atheists enraged every time they see Santa Claus. ...

To the Christians ...

For me, the Christmas story is no wackier or more of an imposition than Noah's Ark, talking animals, the parting of the Red Sea, or any other profoundly unsupported (by science) belief you hold. ... Christmas barely makes my radar. I'm accosted by nuttier ideas all day every day. Christmas? Please. Get in line.

But a few things do chap my hide when it comes to Christmas. One is crèches on publicly-owned property. It doesn't matter that Christians are about three-quarters of the U.S. population - a quarter of your tax-paying fellow citizens shouldn't have to subsidize your beliefs on mutually held land. The First Amendment doesn't dry up just because you want to celebrate a holiday, and simple majorities don't supersede the Constitution. ...

The other thing is, try to understand that not everyone is as whipped up about Christmas as you are. People who believe in other things might not answer your effusive "Merry Christmas!" with equal enthusiasm. Would it kill you to say "happy holidays"? By saying so, you're much more likely to be met with sincere good wishes in return.

As an atheist through and through, I (personally) celebrate the winter solstice and New Year's, and I acknowledge Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, and of course, Festivus. So when you say "happy holidays" to me, those holidays are what I think of, and I can truly feel your well-wishes.

To the Atheists ...

It's OK to yuck it up a little - even at the risk of being mistaken for celebrating Christmas. I'm from Chicago. It gets cold and dark there in December, and throwing up a few extra lights and getting together with friends and family helps boost morale.

And hell, we pagans invented the idea of having a holiday in late December! (With apologies to my friends in southern latitudes) We were lighting fires, enjoying winter wine and celebrating the beginning of longer days long before the Christians shoehorned their virgin birth story into our party season. A lot of "Christmas" traditions we think of as having been around a long time - feasts, gift-giving, decorating trees - are recent, and/or came from other times and places. And religions! So we can absolutely take ownership of a little guilt-free solstice celebration.

And atheists, don't bite someone's head off for saying "Merry Christmas". Unless they're really saying, "Merry Christmas you atheist bastard", chances are they're just trying to express innocent well-wishes.

If everyone would just lighten up a little, maybe it would be a little easier to get through the dark and cold, and find the true meaning of the season: Seasonal sales at the nation's retailers.

THEISM ISN'T "UNPROVEN", IT'S FALSE

Louise Antony

(Excerpted from "Arguments Against God", on the NYTimes Opinionator blog, 2/25/2014.)

(Editor: Gary Gutting was (he died January, 2019) an American philosopher, author, and holder of an endowed chair in philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. Louise Antony, American philosopher and author, is currently professor of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.)

Gary Gutting: You've taken a strong stand as an atheist, so you obviously don't think there are any good reasons to believe in God. But I imagine there are philosophers whose rational abilities you respect who are theists. How do you explain their disagreement with you? Are they just not thinking clearly on this topic? ...

Louise Antony: O.K. So the question is, why do I say that theism is false, rather than just unproven? Because the question has been settled to my satisfaction. I say "there is no God" with the same confidence I say "there are no ghosts" or "there is no magic." The main issue is supernaturalism – I deny that there are beings or phenomena outside the scope of natural law.

That's not to say that I think everything is within the scope of human knowledge. Surely there are things not dreamt of in our philosophy, not to mention in our science – but that fact is not a reason to believe in supernatural beings. I think many arguments for the existence of a God depend on the insufficiencies of human cognition. I readily grant that we have cognitive limitations. But when we bump up against them, when we find we cannot explain something – like why the fundamental physical parameters happen to have the values that they have – the right conclusion to draw is that we just can't explain the thing. That's the proper place for agnosticism and humility. ...

I'm challenging the idea that there's one fundamental view here. Even if I could be convinced that supernatural beings exist, there'd be a whole separate issue about how many such beings there are and what those beings are like. Many theists think they're home free with something like the argument from design: that there is empirical evidence of a purposeful design in nature. But it's one thing to argue that the universe must be the product of some kind of intelligent agent; it's quite something else to argue that this designer was all-knowing and omnipotent. Why is that a better hypothesis than that the designer was pretty smart but made a few mistakes? Maybe (I'm just cribbing from Hume here) there was a committee of intelligent creators, who didn't quite agree on everything. Maybe the creator was a student god, and only got a B- on this project. ...

G.G.: O.K., on your view we don't have any way to judge the relative reliability of people's judgments about whether God exists. But the question still remains, why are you so certain that God doesn't exist?

L.A.: Knowledge in the real world does not entail either certainty or infallibility. When I claim to know that there is no God, I mean that the question is settled to my satisfaction. I don't have any doubts. I don't say that I'm agnostic,

because I disagree with those who say it's not possible to know whether or not God exists. I think it's possible to know. And I think the balance of evidence and argument has a definite tilt.

G.G.: What sort of evidence do you have in mind?

L.A.: I find the "argument from evil" overwhelming – that is, I think the probability that the world we experience was designed by an omnipotent and benevolent being is a zillion times lower than that it is the product of mindless natural laws acting on mindless matter. (There are minds in the universe, but they're all finite and material.) ...

G.G.: It sounds like you don't think it much matters whether we believe in God or not.

L.A.: Well, I do wonder about that. Why do theists care so much about belief in God? Disagreement over that question is really no more than a difference in philosophical opinion. Specifically, it's just a disagreement about ontology – about what kinds of things exist. Why should a disagreement like that bear any moral significance? Why shouldn't theists just look for allies among us atheists in the battles that matter – the ones concerned with justice, civil rights, peace, etc. – and forget about our differences with respect to such arcane matters as the origins of the universe?

Read the entire interview at <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/02/25/arguments-against-god/>

10 QUESTIONS THAT ATHEISTS SUPPOSEDLY CANNOT ANSWER

Courtney Heard

(Excerpted from *godlessmom* on *patheos.com*, 10/28/2019)

(Editor: "Godless Mom" Courtney Heard is my new blog favorite – see/read her on *patheos.com* – JR)

I never like to open my blog posts with an apology, but you and I both know that it's called for. I'm sorry. I know I've answered these ridiculous questionnaires for atheists before and we're all pretty settled on the fact that the askers aren't interested in our answers anyway, but what the hell do you expect me to do when I come across them? I found these questions in a YouTube video and not three seconds into the damned thing, I was already yelling at my computer. There are just so many things to say, and I am not about to keep them to myself, and so you, my darling loves, must also suffer with me. I am so sorry. Onward.

The video proposes ten questions we heathens cannot answer. The first is a fair question, I think.

1. Do you really believe that science is the only answer to all of life's questions?

When people ask this question, it's evident that they don't understand what science is, because the question itself is nonsensical.

Science isn't an answer. Science is a method by which we discover answers. The reason why we turn to science is that science has a mechanism built-in to iron out personal bias. Science cannot answer everything as yet, but it's okay not to know things. The solution to not knowing isn't to make up a story to fill the gap in our knowledge, it's to keep looking until you find the answer. I don't think we will ever

exist in a universe where humans have all the answers, but why would we want to? If we have all the answers already, there's no mystery or wonder left. There are no more frontiers, no more exploration and discovery.

So, no, science is not the answer to all of life's questions, it's merely a potential route to the answer.

2. Why do atheists care if people worship god?

I can only speak for myself, but the answer is that I don't care. If you're not telling me I need to share your beliefs, and you're not pushing for your god belief to affect policy, and you're not knocking on my door trying to steal my finite time with front-stoop Bible study, then I do not care.

The key here is to keep it to yourself. Not everyone shares your god belief, and even the people who do believe in god may not identify with your particular brand of theism. You don't get to expect us to live by your theistic rule book. As long as you're okay with other people having values you may not agree with, and you don't push your god belief on us, policy or children, then we're good. Believe away.

3. Can nothing create something?

I don't know. I also don't believe this happened. When it comes to the beginning of the universe and what set the Big Bang in motion, my answer is that I do not know. Until I do know, with evidence, I maintain that position.

4. How do you know that god doesn't exist?

I don't. However, until I know one does exist, there's no sense believing in god.

5. What is the origin of life?

Dunno, homeslice. Neither do you.

6. Where does our morality come from?

Our morality comes from many places. For instance, our conscience, and the real-world consequences we have to deal with as a result of our actions. Our compassion and empathy play significant roles in our ethics. Of course, our accepted societal norms are also a driving force behind it. This is why what is considered moral in one part of the world may not be considered moral in another part of the world.

Even if there were a source of objective morality, we live in a world where it is obsolete and useless. Every, single, solitary human on Earth has a different moral makeup than everyone else. We live with subjective morality and must develop our ethics within that reality.

Morality is a product of evolution as it lends itself to our survival as a species. We developed the capacity for empathy because recognizing the pain and hurt in others stops us, for the most part, from harming them. Unless our empathy is broken in some way, it helps us avoid killing each other and allows us to value life.

7. If you had evidence of god, would you become a Christian?

No. I would accept god's existence, but I would not worship such a hateful and vengeful creator.

8. If evolution is real, why are there no transitional forms in the present?

This question is also nonsensical. It tells me that you have a

feeble understanding of what evolution is. See, the thing is, technically every single living thing is a transitional form.

You need to learn more about what evolution is, so you can form your questions better next time.

9. Do you live according to what you believe or do you live according to what you lack in belief?

There is no way to live your life according to what you lack in belief. I lack a belief in all gods. You lack a belief in all but one. Do you live your life by your lack of belief in Thor?

10. If god exists, will you not lose your soul when you die?

This question means nothing to me because I do not believe in a soul, nor do I believe in your version of god and the afterlife. Let me ask you a question: If Hinduism is correct, and you live your life as a Christian and a meat-eater, are you prepared to boil in Kumbhipakam?

I guess it turns out atheists can answer these questions, after all, hey church boy? The question now becomes: will you accept my answers?

I'd love to know your answers to these questions. Let me know in the comments and sorry, heathens, for subjecting you to this questionnaire nonsense yet again.

SIX-POINT HUMANISM

David Orenstein

Recently I was asked in an interview to sum up my beliefs as a humanist and non-believer. While it took me some time, I really have it down to about six:

1. There is no immortal soul

I don't believe in the soul; but I do believe in the human spirit to be empathic, humble and lean towards goodness and justice.

2. There is no heaven or hell

I don't believe in heaven or hell; but I do believe that humans have the capacity and choice to create such places on Earth.

3. I trust science over superstition

I don't believe in divine or metaphysical forces; but I conclude that nature and the material cosmos are real and can be understood through science and mathematics.

4. Prayer doesn't change anything

I don't believe in praying to a higher power; but I do believe we must be accountable and own our life choices and be present for others when they are in trouble, ill or dying.

5. Magic isn't real - but being an activist is real

I don't believe that our lives and destinies are prescribed in magic; but that we have a responsibility to be activists for goodness and justice and to call out any one person or entity that is making the world worse for ourselves, our families or our community.

6. Religious faith is a private matter

I believe one's faith practices belong to the self, in the home and in one's faith community. Since faith is a private matter, I conclude it has no place in our politics or in legal decisions that impact another's right to life or liberty.

The first human who hurled an insult instead of a stone was the founder of civilization. — Sigmund Freud

STAR TREK KNOWS Jonathan Engel

One of the things I like about the “Star Trek” franchise is its vision of the future. If Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry is right, hundreds of years from now the people of our planet will be led by a single government, having done away with the nationalism that has produced so many destructive wars (are there any other kind?) Racism and sexism will largely be forgotten, and the United Federation of Planets will bring together far-flung worlds to promote peaceful relations and exploration. (The Romulans will still be making mischief, but hey, that’s what Romulans do). And oh yes, religion and other supernatural beliefs will be part of our discarded distant past.

I thought of this recently while watching an episode of “Star Trek: Enterprise”. In case you’ve forgotten, that’s the series that’s a prequel to the original Star Trek. It stars Scott Bakula as Captain Archer, the first captain of the first Enterprise. In this episode Archer and his crew respond to a distress call from a damaged ship. Being good galactic citizens, they take the damaged ship’s crew on board while Enterprise’s engineers try to repair their damaged vessel.

It turns out that Enterprise’s guests are something of a religious cult, led by an all-powerful, messianic fanatic. The cult soon takes over the ship; each cult member has explosives implanted in their bodies that they will detonate on orders from their dear leader (religiously oriented suicide bombers; who’d have guessed?) And so Archer surrenders Enterprise to the cultists in order to save the ship. It turns out that what the leader really wants is control of Enterprise’s weapons so that he and his minions can return to their home planet and strike a decisive blow in their war against “heretics”. The cultists believe that final victory against the heretics will bring back their gods, who will usher them to paradise, while destroying all others in a blaze of fire. Just like the Christian rapture. And what exactly is the heretics’ crime? They think that it took the gods ten days to create the universe, while the cultists know that it only took nine. There is a happy ending (this is television after all), but with a chilling coda. Captain Archer and his crew manage to retake Enterprise and capture the cultists. Archer then takes them back to orbit around their home world, and takes the cult’s leader down to the planet itself. It is a wasteland, completely obliterated by the war. All that pain and destruction over nonsensical, illogical, evidence-free beliefs.

Will the non-fictional Earth we live on actually realize Roddenberry’s vision? Or are we doomed to destroy ourselves by slavishly adhering to supernatural beliefs and ancient grudges? It’s quite possible that our first test is upon us: climate change. Will we accept the science and do what it takes to minimize the damage, or will we rely on mythical gods to save us? If we don’t pass this test, we may not get the chance to take any others. Star Trek knows; do we?

Boy: Dad, how come there are no Christians or Jews or Muslims on “Star Trek”?

Dad: Because it’s the future, Son.

PARDON MY PRIVILEGE Lionel Shriver

(Excerpted from “Lefty Lingo” in *Harper’s Magazine*, December, 2019)

Front and center in overused progressive vocabulary is, of course, “privilege”. From Lyndon Johnson onward, we expressed concern for the “underprivileged”. Shining a spotlight instead on the “privileged” fosters resentment in the people who feel shafted and an impotent guilt in people at whom the label is hurled. The word functions something like a rotten tomato without the mess. I myself have been decried in the *Independent* as “dripping with privilege”. This is a shape-shifting substance in which one can bathe or nestle.

Whereas a privilege can be acquired through merit – e.g., students with good grades get to go bowling with our teacher in sixth grade – privilege, sans the article, is implicitly unearned and undeserved. The designation neatly dispossesses those so stigmatized of any credit for their achievements while discounting as immaterial those hurdles an individual with a perceived leg up might still have had to overcome (an alcoholic parent, a stutter, even poverty). For privilege is a static state into which you are born, stained by original sin. Just as you can’t earn yourself into privilege, you can’t earn yourself out of it, either.

Even taken on its face, the concept is elusive. “Privilege is an unbelievably hard thing to define,” the British journalist Douglas Murray observes in *The Madness of Crowds*:

It is also very nearly impossible to quantify. ... Is a person with inherited wealth but who has a natural disability more privileged or less privileged than a person without wealth who is able-bodied? Who can work this out?

Not I, although I confess I’m under-motivated.

BARACK OBAMA ON “WOKE”

(Speaking to young people at the Obama Foundation Summit, October 29.)

You know, this idea of purity, and you’re never compromised, and you’re always politically woke and all that stuff, you should get over that quickly.

The world is messy, there are ambiguities, people who do really good stuff have flaws. People who you are fighting may love their kids and share certain things with you. And I think that one danger I see among young people, and particularly on college campuses – Malia and I talk about this – but I do get a sense sometimes now among young people, and this is accelerated by social media, there is this sense sometimes that the way of me making change is to be as judgmental as possible about other people, and that’s enough.

If I tweet or hashtag about how you didn’t do something right or used the wrong verb, then I can sit back and feel good about myself, because man, you see how woke I was? I called you out. Then I get on TV, watch my show, watch “Grown-ish”. You know, that’s not activism. That’s not bringing about change, you know. If all you’re doing is casting stones, you’re probably not going to get that far.

SHSNY CALENDAR: DECEMBER 2019 - FEBRUARY 2020

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

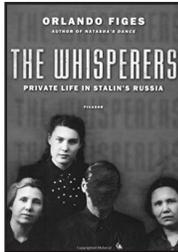
THURS, DEC 5, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

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

THE WHISPERERS

Private Life in Stalin's Russia
Orlando Figes

Drawing on a huge range of sources, Orlando Figes tells the story of how Russians tried to endure life under Stalin. Those who shaped the political system became, very frequently, its victims. Those who were its victims were frequently quite blameless.



The Whisperers is a triumphant act of recovery. In this powerful work of history, Figes chronicles the private history of family life during the violent and repressive reign of Josef Stalin — of the paranoia, alienation, and treachery that poisoned private life in Russia for generations. A panoramic portrait of a society in which everyone spoke in whispers, *The Whisperers* is "rigorously compassionate. . . . A humbling monument to the evil and endurance of Russia's Soviet past and, implicitly, a guide to its present" (*The Economist*).

The Whisperers re-creates the sort of maze in which Russians found themselves, a society in which everyone spoke in whispers — whether to protect themselves, their families, neighbors or friends — or to inform on them.

— Paperback and Kindle available.

Join us even if you haven't finished reading.

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

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, JAN 2, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York

THE FOUR HORSEMEN: *The Conversation That Sparked an Atheist Revolution*

In 2007, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett filmed a landmark discussion about modern atheism. The video went viral. Now in print and Kindle (and audiobook) for the first time, the transcript of their conversation is illuminated by new essays from three of the original participants and an introduction by Stephen Fry.

— Hardcover and kindle available

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, FEB 6, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York

GODS, GRAVES, AND SCHOLARS: *The Story of Archaeology* C.W. Ceram

C.W. Ceram visualized archeology as a wonderful combination of high adventure, romance, history and scholarship, and this book, a chronicle of man's search for his past, reads like a dramatic narrative. Here is much of the history of civilization and the stories of the men who rediscovered it.

Dorothy Kahn will lead.

— Paperback(s) and Kindle available

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BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, DEC 15, 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 \$16 breakfast special, the Bloody Marys are hot, the beer is cold, and conversation sparkles.



Come join 15 or 20 fellow free-thinkers for food, fun and lively conversation, including the Dorothy Kahn-led ...

*After-Brunch Discussion:
Is moderation the way
for Democrats to go?*

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD SUNDAY, DEC 29, 11:30 am Stone Creek Bar & Lounge 140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves) WHAT TECHNOLOGY WANTS Kevin Kelly

Kevin Kelly, the editor and publisher of *Whole Earth Review* and one of the founders and editors of *Wired* magazine, explains why most of us have a love/hate relationship with new inventions, and why this conflict is inherent to all technology.

But he also argues that technology is an extension of life — and an acceleration of the mind. The system of technology that Kelly calls the "technium" unconsciously "wants" to head in certain directions, just as do life and evolution. The technium functions as a living, natural system.

Where is it headed? And how do its goals relate to humanity's goals?

SHSNY FICTION BOOK CLUB

TUES, DEC 10, 7:00 pm

Nancy Adelman's apartment

205 Third Ave. (6H)

Come for wine, cheese, and sparkling conversation about

THE FIXED PERIOD

Anthony Trollope

Trollope's only piece of dystopian writing is set in the Republic of Britannula, an imaginary "futuristic" island country that has passed a law decreeing that all citizens who have reached the age of 67 must be removed to "The College" to undergo euthanasia, for the good of society.

What happens when the first and oldest man reaches the end of his "Fixed Period" and must prepare for his "humane" death is a fascinating study of moral and social impossibility.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

To reserve your seat on the sofa, contact: editor@shsny.org

Advance-Reading Notice:

Jan 14: *A Confederacy of Dunces*

John Kennedy Toole

A Pulitzer Prize-winning American comic masterpiece. John Kennedy Toole's hero, one Ignatius J. Reilly, is "huge, obese, fractious, fastidious, a latter-day Gargantua, a Don Quixote of the New Orleans French Quarter." Brilliantly zany.

Feb 11: *Stay With Me*

Ayobami Adebayo

This celebrated, unforgettable first novel ("A bright, big-hearted demonstration of female spirit." –*The Guardian*), shortlisted for the prestigious Women's Prize for Fiction and set in Nigeria, gives voice to both husband and wife as they tell the story of their marriage – and the forces that threaten to tear it apart.

**REASONABLE NEW YORK
WINTER SOLSTICE PARTY
2019**

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 21

6:30 -9:30 PM

DEWEYS PUB

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It's important to acknowledge that Donald Trump's change of address [he's now officially a Floridian] marks the end of a totally insignificant era. Clearing up the chaos of traffic and protests on Fifth Avenue that his presidency has caused will be the only impact his move has on the city. It's not like he's been paying much in the way of taxes. And the truth is, Trump, the lifelong New Yorker, was never a New Yorker. He was a tourist. — Peter Mehlman

HERE COMES THE NEXT GENERATION OF TRUMP CABINET MEMBERS, OFFICIALS, AND ADVISORS

According to federal prosecutors, John Lambert, 23, pretended to be a New York-based attorney at a law firm called "Pope and Dunn", with 15 years' experience in corporate and patent law, while scamming consumers and business out of \$46,000 via his fake website. He has pled guilty and faces a couple of years in jail.

Lambert is a co-founder of Students for Trump.

JESUS, HOW OLD IS JOE BIDEN?

John Rafferty

At a town hall in Las Vegas on November 16, he said:

"The truth of the matter is, there's not nearly been enough evidence that has been acquired as to whether or not [marijuana] is a gateway drug."

GOOD, BUT NOT-READY-FOR-THE-FRONT-PAGE NEWS FROM THE NOVEMBER 5 ELECTION

John Rafferty

- Rep. Jason Lewis, a GOP congressman from Minnesota who lamented that he could no longer call women "sluts", lost his re-election bid to a woman – a married lesbian.
- Christian martyr Kim Davis, the Kentucky county clerk who went to jail rather than give gays a marriage license, lost her bid for re-election.
- Kansas secretary of state Kris Kobach, one of the most aggressive crusaders against voting rights, lost the race for governor in a state where Repubs outnumber Dems 2 to 1.
- In the most poetic justice of the night, Randy Boehning, a North Dakota GOP state representative who sponsored a Native American disenfranchisement law, was unseated by Democrat Ruth Buffalo – a Native American.
- Anchorage, Alaska Superior Judge Michael Corey, who faced outrage when he sentenced a non-Native man who choked and sexually assaulted a Alaska Native woman to no jail time, was defeated in his attempt for reelection.
- Representative Dana Rohrabacher, a right-wing Republican fixture in California who represented Orange County for 15 terms, and who was Vladimir Putin's biggest fan in Congress, lost his bid for re-election.

AND ON A POSITIVE NOTE ...

Andrew Zwicker is a physicist and Head of Science Education at the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory. Unlike Republicans who treat science as a four-letter word, Zwicker, a Democrat, is a proud advocate of the STEM fields.

In 2015, when he ran for the New Jersey General Assembly, he beat a Republican incumbent by less than 100 votes. But it was enough to put him in office. In 2017, when he ran for re-election, he won by a comfortable margin. This year, he won easily again.

Zwicker is an open atheist who was endorsed by the Freethought Equality Fund PAC.



Hemant Mehta, friendlyatheist.patheos.com/

HUMANISM'S GREAT LESSON

Salman Rushdie

2019 Humanist Of The Year

(Reprinted from the November/December 2019 Humanist)

Thinking about my long relationship with humanist ideas, I remember being at a lecture given by the great architectural scholar Sir Nikolaus Pevsner. This was somewhere around 1967 when I was twenty years old at Cambridge University. In this lecture, Pevsner explained the difference between the High Gothic and the Renaissance schools of architecture. In the High Gothic, he said, the eye is led forward towards the altar and up towards God. By contrast, the Renaissance basilica, with its characteristic cross shape, requires one to stand at the center in order to see the whole design. In other words, the human is placed at the center, not God.

I was much struck by this idea. Humankind must be placed at the center of the building of the civilization of the world; the human scale is all-important. And when it is lost, so is something crucial about humanity.

The Renaissance architects used the unit of measurement that was based on the human scale. Monumentalism, by contrast, is the preferred form of tyrants, pharaohs, and führers. The human scale is as important in literature as it is in architecture. Lose that and the work loses its effect, its capacity to arouse and move us. Even the great epic works from the Romana to the Odyssey, from Tolstoy to García Márquez, know that the retention of the human scale is crucial. Humanity must be placed at the center and the work must be of human proportions no matter how large its sweep nor how high its ambitions.

I've been in my life deeply affected both by Renaissance humanism—the humanism of Petrarch and Boccaccio, of Giordano Bruno and Pico della Mirandola—and by its modern descendants with their emphasis on rationalism and a turn away from religion. And I always tell myself to remember humanism's great lesson—the human being is the center. In the words of Alexander Pope, "The proper study of mankind is man."

WONDER, AWE, ATHEISM Courtney Heard (“Godless Mom”)

(Excerpted from “Atheists Deny Themselves This One Question?” on *Godless Mom* at *patheos.com*, 11/19/2019)

I read *The God Delusion* just a couple of years ago. Yes, much to everyone’s utter shock and awe, I had never read it before that. I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking, “what sort of heathen makes it close to her forties without reading this cornerstone godless literature?”

What can I say? I’ve been an atheist all my life in a secular land ... I’ve never needed arguments against God. One can be a raging infidel and never read a single, solitary atheist book, didn’t you know?

Now that I write as *Godless Mom*, though, I have felt more reason to read atheist staples like this Dawkins masterpiece and I’m glad I did. You know a writer is unbelievably skilled when you find yourself in the middle of their book, at 3:30 in the morning, sitting upright in bed with your body hair standing on end, mumbling, “What ... the actual flip ... are we?”

There I was at some ungodly hour going full-on existential dramakaze, shimmery book in hand, staring wide-eyed out my bedroom window as though if I looked long enough, the answer might come to me.

What are we?

Why are we?

These very same questions have haunted me my entire life. As a well-travelled kid, I found myself under the stars in remote places often, straining my neck to take in the entire diamond-studded night sky. I’d feel the questions bubble up and my skin would begin to crawl. There seemed to be an electric charge in the air as the words formed in my head ...

What ... the hell ... is this?

It took my breath away each time as though I’d just fallen a couple of storeys and landed on my back, knocking the wind out of me. I literally forgot to breathe. These words. These questions. They are unanswerable questions tattooed on my psyche that don’t go away. I want to know. I want to understand. I want to believe that one day, just maybe, we actually might.

For now, though, the answer is, “I don’t know.” I don’t know what *this* is. This universe of ours is a colossal mystery and the awe it inspires simply uncontainable.

This is not just something I experience from time to time. This is a core ingredient in what makes up me. The awe and wonder I find in our existence on our Earth in our universe is something that I think about and feel daily.

When I look at my kids or admire my cat; when I watch my dog frolic in the icy lake; when I look out my window from my desk and see the breathtaking hills ever-so-slightly dusted with snow.

Even just watching “*Cosmos*” forces me to take a break and pace the room as my thoughts catch up to my beating heart.

It is my make-up. It is who I am.

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE. REALLY? HOW TO READ THE BIBLE?

Christopher Beha

(Excerpted from “*How to Read the Bible: The Gospel According to John (and Karen)*”, Mr. Beha’s essay/review in Harper’s magazine, November, 2019, of *A History of the Bible: The Story of the World’s Most Influential Book*, by John Barton, and *The Lost Art of Scripture: Rescuing the Sacred Texts*, by Karen Armstrong.)

Beginning with Descartes and Kant, one of the Enlightenment’s chief aims was tracing the limits of human reason, but this element of the Enlightenment project has been largely abandoned by the movement’s self-described heirs. Armstrong ends her book with the worry that we are “losing the art of scripture in the modern world”. A culture that believes that ultimate truths can be apprehended through rational thought won’t have much time for mythos – or for art more generally:

“Too many believers and non-believers alike now read these sacred texts in a doggedly literal manner that is quite different from the more inventive and mystical approach of premodern spirituality.”

The result is “the unhealthy literalism of fundamentalism” on one side and “widespread skepticism” on the other.

Many readers won’t accept these two developments as equivalent evils, but the fact remains that much of what modern secular society rightly holds dear has no basis in human reason. As Armstrong notes, “We have never found a purely rational justification for human rights.” And “Science can say nothing about what we should do or why we should do it.” Moral action requires something more than rational problem-solving. Here is where art – including the art of scripture – has its use.

Like Barton, Armstrong treats scripture as open-ended, a status conferred on certain texts rather than a fixed list of canonical works. “Our moral universe,” she writes, is “shaped by *King Lear*, *Middlemarch* and *War and Peace* as well as by the Bible.” To cut ourselves off from scripture because of the way that some literalists abuse it would entail at least as great a cultural – and spiritual – loss as cutting ourselves off from these other works.

READERS RESPOND

To the Editor: Following up on Douglas Adams’s comments in the November issue of PIQUE [Untitled “atheist” v. “agnostic” quote, page 11], I claim to be both a real atheist and a real agnostic.

I acknowledge total ignorance of how the universe came into existence and what kind of cosmic force, if any, may have played a role. In that sense, I consider myself an agnostic.

However, I don’t believe that invalidates my credentials as an uncompromising atheist who is confident that no entity exists that corresponds in the slightest way to any being envisioned in any known religion. – Peter Rogatz

To the Editor: Re November 2019 PIQUE, Excellent, John!

– H. Robert Miller

WE ARE IN A FIGHT FOR THE SOUL OF OUR DEMOCRACY

Elijah E. Cummings

(Reprinted from *Washingtonpost.com*, 10/26/2019)

This op-ed is adapted from a foreword that Cummings wrote July 17 for the forthcoming book, *In Defense of Public Service: How 22 Million Government Workers Will Save Our Republic*, by Cedric L. Alexander.

As I pen these words, we are living through a time in our nation's history when powerful forces are seeking to divide us one from another; when the legitimacy of our constitutional institutions is under attack; and when factually supported truth itself has come under relentless challenge.

I am among those who have not lost confidence in our ability to right the ship of American democratic life, but I also realize that we are in a fight — a fight for the soul of our democracy.

As an American of color, I have been able to receive an excellent public education, become an attorney, and serve my community and country in both the Maryland General Assembly and Congress because of one very important fact: Americans of conscience from every political vantage point took our Constitution seriously and fought for my right to be all that I could become.

This is the personal debt that I and so many others with my heritage owe to our democratic republic — to the 20-million-plus Americans who serve our republic and its values in our nation's civil service.

And this is also why I, personally, will remain in the fight to preserve our republic and the humane and equitable values at its foundation for as long as I can draw breath.

It was to our Constitution — and not to any political perspective or party — that I gave my oath when I became an officer of the court, when I joined the Maryland legislature and when I was elected to serve in Congress.

It is this commitment that I bring to my work as chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, the committee that has direct oversight over our federal civil service. From my more than two decades of experience performing this oversight, I can confirm that our nation's federal employees deserve our respect, gratitude and support.

When people in the leadership of the nation attack our courts, the members of our Congress, our civil servants and our media, they are attacking the glue that holds our diverse nation together as the *United States of America*.

And when these attackers do so on the basis of factually unfounded opinion, rather than verifiable evidence, they are engaged in demagoguery of the most dangerous sort.

This is why our civil service, committed to maintaining the rule of law and decision-making based on verifiable facts, is so important to maintaining the legitimacy of our government, both elected and appointed.

Under our democratic republic, elected leaders make

policy but must rely on civil servants, appointed on the basis of merit, to implement those public policies. We must rely on the expertise of our merit-based civil service if we wish to have a government that addresses the factual realities of our lives (to the extent that human beings can ever achieve that goal).

This duty to find and implement the truth, as I have mentioned, is the province of our civil servants, whether they serve in Washington; our states; or in the law enforcement agencies of our country. This is not to say that our government agencies always get it right or that they never overreach. Human beings, however talented and well-meaning, make mistakes.

As citizens of the greatest democratic republic in the world, we have the privilege and duty to recall our nation's founding and to engage our nation on the basis of those fundamental principles.

I hold fast to this conviction because the functioning — indeed, the very legitimacy — of our democratic system has been under attack for some time. I am speaking, of course, of the continuing attacks on our elections — from sources both foreign and domestic — and of the failure of too many of my colleagues in Congress and the White House to adequately defend us against those attacks.

For the unity and future of our republic, our Congress must reassert its constitutional obligation of oversight, seeking and obtaining the answers to serious questions of governance that, until now, have gone unanswered. We must perform this constitutional duty so effectively and convincingly that those Americans who support this president and his administration and those who disagree will reach a shared and united answer as to how our nation must proceed.

I remain confident that we can fulfill this historic duty. To succeed, however, we will need our federal civil service and the Americans who serve us there to give us their complete and unbiased cooperation. To the extent that we are required to do so, we will enforce that cooperation through action in our courts, but I sincerely hope that this route will seldom be necessary. Toward this end, I will close with this pledge. In the words of my heroine, former congresswoman Barbara Jordan, from 1974:

"My faith in the Constitution is whole; it is complete; it is total. And I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, [or] the destruction of the Constitution. I hope and trust that all Americans feel — and will do — the same."

CHURCHES: GET OUT OF POLITICS!

(Excerpted from "Americans Have Positive Views About Religion's Role in Society, but Want It Out of Politics" *Pewforum.org/2019/11/15*)

A large majority of Americans feel that religion is losing influence in public life, according to a 2019 Pew Research Center survey. While some say this is a good thing, many more view it as a negative development, reflecting the broad tendency of Americans to see religion as

a positive force in society.

At the same time, U.S. adults are resoundingly clear in their belief that religious institutions should stay out of politics. Nearly two-thirds of Americans in the new survey say churches and other houses of worship should keep out of political matters, while 36 percent say they should express their views on day-to-day social and political questions. And three-quarters of the public expresses the view that churches should not come out in favor of one candidate over another during elections, in contrast with efforts by President Trump to roll back existing legal limits on houses of worship endorsing candidates.

Most U.S. adults want religious groups to stay out of politics

% of U.S. adults who say houses of worship should ...

Keep out of politics 63%

Express their views 36%

Should churches/houses of worship endorse candidates?

No 76%

Yes 23%

Churches and religious organizations have ...

Too much influence in politics 37%

Not enough influence 28%

About the right influence 34%

Pew Research Center, 2019

In addition, Americans are more likely to say that churches and other houses of worship currently have too much influence in politics rather than too little, while the remaining one-third say religious groups' current level of influence on politics is about right.

THE STUPID, IT HURTS

John Rafferty

The Ohio House on November 13 passed House Bill 164, the "Student Religious Liberties Act". Under the law, students cannot be penalized if their work is scientifically wrong as long as the reasoning is because of their religious beliefs. For instance, if a student submitted biology homework saying the earth is 10,000 years old, as some creationists believe, the teacher cannot dock points.

Every Republican in the House supported the bill. It now moves to the Republican-controlled Senate.

From CFI's The Morning Heresy, 11/18/19 ...

This bill is beyond absurd, beyond parody. It's not enough that religious conservatives seek to use "religious liberty" as an excuse to undermine basic notions of equality. Now they're gunning for knowledge itself. ...

In public schools, America's students must be taught a shared set of facts about the world. They may be taught or believe in different or contradictory things at home or inside houses of worship, but public school is for all children, religious and nonreligious alike. Without a shared reality, education itself becomes pointless and irrelevant. Indeed, why not just cancel school altogether? It's almost as though that's the aim of this stupefyingly foolhardy measure.

If this bill becomes law, we will truly be through the looking glass.

MAYBE WE'RE NOT SO BAD AFTER ALL

Arthur C. Brooks

(Excerpted from Washingtonpost.com, 10/18/2019)

The American fascination with celebrity is strong. So strong that, as my Spanish wife has noted, even our serial killers get flattering biopics. ("Ted Bundy – a monster, yes, but what a brilliant, handsome guy!")

The president of the United States rose to public consciousness not through a single minute of public service but rather via reality television. In a world dominated by social media, people increasingly don't even have to do anything to be sought-after public figures – they can be famous simply for being famous, as the saying goes. In 1968, when Andy Warhol predicted a future in which everyone would be world-famous for 15 minutes, it sounded ridiculous; today it sounds increasingly plausible.

And fame is all we really want, isn't it? All the twisted, celebrity-obsessed aspects of American culture and politics are just a mirror of our own unfulfilled desires to be loved and admired by millions, right? Wrong. The truth is that, despite our prurient interest in celebrities, the overwhelming majority of people do not want to be famous, and the minority of people who truly desire fame are abnormal.

Consider the evidence. The think tank Populace has published an important new study that uses data collected by Gallup about what Americans believe constitutes "success". The authors found that most of us believe that other people see fame as central to personal success. Among a nationally representative sample of 5,242 Americans, 92 percent said fame is part of how they think *other* people define success: "A person is successful if they are rich, have a high-profile career, or are well-known."

But here's the report's really interesting finding: Only three percent said that fame is how they themselves define *their own* personal success. Instead, 97 percent picked this definition: "A person is successful if they have followed their own interests and talents to become the best they can be at what they care about most."

This is not to say people don't seek recognition for their accomplishments. "We are not only gregarious animals, liking to be in sight of our fellows," wrote the great American philosopher and psychologist William James in 1890, "but we have an innate propensity to get ourselves noticed, and noticed favorably, by our kind." University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman has shown that accomplishment is one of the sources of true human happiness, and we naturally seek recognition for it.

However, as most of us come to realize as we grow up, recognition by peers for a job well done transforms into a pathology – and a source of unhappiness – when it becomes a need to be admired by thousands or millions of strangers. Most of us know intuitively what a 1996 study in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* showed: that "intrinsic goals" such as self-acceptance and friendship bring happiness. Meanwhile, "extrinsic goals", such as fame, which rely on the approval of others, lead to "lower vitality and self-actualization and more physical symptoms".

NEXT-GENERATION RELIGION IN IRELAND

John Hamill

(Copied from CFI's *The Morning Heresy*, 11/11/19)

Irish public schools have parents fill out forms that ask them to indicate their kids' religion, which, as you can imagine, is problematic, considering that little kids don't get to pick these religions (or lack thereof) for themselves. So John Hamill of the Free Thought Prophet Podcast wrote to his kid's teacher, saying, among other things:

"To determine whether or not she may be a Protestant, I decided to begin with the Ninety-Five Theses of Martin Luther. Since Aideen was unable to name a single one, I thought that I may be on the wrong track altogether with Christianity. ...

"Broader inquiries focused initially on the Hindu pantheon. I had to explain that neither a god with blue skin and an elephant's head called Ganesh, nor a god with a monkey's head called Hanuman, were in fact cartoon characters. Aideen seemed incredulous that a billion people could believe in such deities. ...

"At this point I was at a loss. Since there is no box to tick on the form indicating that the Department of Education shouldn't ask such deeply stupid questions about ten year olds, I have simply declined to provide the information. I hope you understand."

WOULD EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE PLEASE JUST HOLD STILL FOR ONE DAMN MINUTE?

(Excerpted from *Newscientist.com*, by Leah Crane, 11/4/2019, posted on *The Morning Heresy*, 11/7/2019)

Cosmological crisis: We don't know if the universe is round or flat. Measurements from the Planck space observatory have shown that the universe might be shaped like a sphere rather than a flat sheet, which would change everything we think we know about the cosmos. ...

If the universe is indeed closed [like a sphere], that could be a major problem for our understanding of the cosmos. Another cosmological puzzle is that the nearby universe seems to be expanding faster than it ought to. This is tough to explain with our standard model of cosmology, which includes a flat universe, and the team calculated that this gets even tougher with a spherical universe, along with a few other cosmic mismatches we have yet to explain. It is so bad that they are calling it a "cosmological crisis".

AND MORE "OH, SWELL" NEWS

Two people in China have the Black Death—the plague. CNN says,

"Having caused close to 50,000 human cases during the past 20 years, the plague is now categorized by WHO as a re-emerging disease."

Page 12
Come on ... plague?

Page 10
Elijah Cummings on
Democracy – Page 10

Page 8
Salman Rushdie,
Humanist of the Year

Page 3
Questions atheists
can't answer? – Page 3

Page 1
Blame Christmas on
Hanukkah – Page 1

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