

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

April 15, 2020

Welcome to the first-ever online, short-form edition of *PIQUE Weekly*, a temporary (very temporary, I hope) version of the SHSNY newsletter for these lockdown times. It's our attempt to keep you up to speed on: 1) not only Covid-19 (how could we avoid it?), but also 2) the news of ongoing humanist/atheist/politically-liberal info/posts/arguments I still get here in isolation, and 3) on what's left of our (now online) social schedule – see page 5. Stay well, stay home, stay strong. – JR

IMAGINE A HUMANIST PRESIDENT

Jonathan Engel

What if our president were a humanist? (We can dream, can't we?) The Trump regime's response to the Covid-19 crisis has been pretty predictable, as well as terrifying, infuriating, and depressing. And would be borderline comical if it weren't so tragic. The only way Donald J. Trump would be a humanist would be if he were the last human being on earth, because the only *Homo sapien* he sees as truly human is himself.

But what would it really be like facing this pandemic if the president hewed to humanist principles?

For one thing, a humanist president would be guided by science, research and reason. As opposed to Trump, who is guided by his gut (filled with Big Macs, no less) and is always talking about what he thinks, or feels, or believes. Not, of course, what he knows, which is nothing. A humanist president, on the other hand, would take guidance from experienced experts in their fields and would tailor America's response to the data that they receive on a daily basis, not by preconceived notions.

Ah yes, preconceived notions, aka dogma, the bane of freethinkers everywhere. As the pandemic ramped up, Trump was urged to activate the Defense Production Act in order to compel American corporations to help stem the virus by manufacturing personal protective equipment for health care workers and ventilators for patients. Many medical experts have called for the Federal government to take charge of allocating resources around the country to ensure that such resources go where they are most needed. But the Trump regime slavishly follows the conservative dogma of "Government: Bad", and so is incapable of providing our desperately needed federal response. A humanist president and administration would be guided solely by

the evidence of what's needed and what works.

Another notion of conservative dogma, the mirror image of "Government: Bad", is "Religion: Good". And so we had our non-humanist president proclaim a "Day of Prayer" against the virus, which was held on March 15. It's understandable if you missed it, as (surprise, surprise) it did no good. Or as media outlet Patheos put it the next day: "*Prayer v. Coronavirus: We Have a Winner*".

Even worse are the exemptions from social distancing rules being given to houses of worship to hold services during the pandemic. In Florida, for example, Governor Ron DeSantis was late in ordering social distancing and, once he did, exempted houses of worship from his decree. Why? Because his dogma and that of his supporters says "Religion: Good", no matter any evidence to the contrary.

And of course, unlike Trump, a humanist president would always put the health and happiness of human beings at the top of their priority list. At the early stages of the pandemic there was a cruise ship (aka a floating germ incubator, but that's just my opinion) off the coast of California. Medical experts said that we should develop a means for getting the passengers and crew (some of whom were showing signs of the virus) off the ship as quickly and safely as possible. What did Trump say? That he didn't want the passengers back on U.S. soil because he didn't want to increase the number of verified cases on the mainland United States. That would put the lie to his then message that he had everything under control.

What a miserable excuse for a human being.

A humanist president would be concerned first and foremost with the health and safety of all the earth's people, and would follow the science and evidence in what they think, what they say, and what they do.

If only ...

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IT IS TRUMP'S FAULT

David Frum

(Excerpted from The Atlantic, 4/7/2020)

"I don't take responsibility at all."

– Donald Trump, in the Rose Garden, March 13

That the pandemic occurred is not Trump's fault. The utter unpreparedness of the United States for a pandemic is Trump's fault. The loss of stockpiled respirators to breakage because the federal government let maintenance contracts lapse in 2018 is Trump's fault. The failure to store sufficient protective medical gear in the national arsenal is Trump's fault. That states are bidding against other states for equipment, paying many multiples of the pre-crisis price for ventilators, is Trump's fault. Air travelers summoned home and forced to stand for hours in dense airport crowds alongside infected people? That was Trump's fault too. Ten weeks of insisting that the coronavirus is a harmless flu that would miraculously go away on its own? Trump's fault again. The refusal of red-state governors to act promptly, the failure to close Florida and Gulf Coast beaches until late March? That fault is more widely shared, but again, responsibility rests with Trump: He could have stopped it, and he did not.

The lying about the coronavirus by hosts on Fox News and conservative talk radio is Trump's fault: They did it to protect him. The false hope of instant cures and nonexistent vaccines is Trump's fault, because he told those lies to cover up his failure to act in time. The severity of the economic crisis is Trump's fault; things would have been less bad if he had acted faster instead of sending out his chief economic adviser and his son Eric to assure Americans that the first stock-market dips were buying opportunities. The firing of a Navy captain for speaking truthfully about the virus's threat to his crew? Trump's fault. The fact that so many key government jobs were either empty or filled by mediocrities? Trump's fault. The insertion of Trump's arrogant and incompetent son-in-law as commander in chief of the national medical supply chain? Trump's fault. ...

For three years, Trump has blathered and bluffed and bullied his way through an office for which he is utterly inadequate. But sooner or later, every president must face a supreme test, a test that cannot be evaded by blather and bluff and bullying. That test has overwhelmed Trump.

Trump failed. He is failing. He will continue to fail. And Americans are paying for his failures.

GEE, WHO'D HAVE GUESSED?

(Based on The New York Times, 4/7/2020)

On Sunday, President Trump again promoted hydroxychloroquine, the anti-malaria medicine, as a treatment for the coronavirus. His experts again warned against over-selling a drug yet to be proved a safe remedy. ... If it becomes an accepted treatment, several pharmaceutical companies stand to profit. Mr. Trump himself has a small personal financial interest in Sanofi, the French drugmaker that makes Plaquenil, the brand-name of hydroxychloroquine.

"FIRST AMENDMENT"? WE DON' NEED NO STINKIN' FIRST AMENDMENT.

Michael Stone

(Excerpted from "Trump Administration Using Relief Funds To Bail Out Churches, Pay Pastor Salaries" by progressive secular humanist on patheos.com, 4/8/2020)

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

– First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

Unacceptable, Unconstitutional, UnAmerican: In a clear violation of the separation of church and state, the Trump administration will use taxpayer money to bail out churches and pay pastor salaries.

NPR reports:

In a development that could challenge the Constitution's prohibition of any law "respecting an establishment of religion", the federal government will soon provide money directly to U.S. churches to help them pay pastor salaries and utility bills.

A key part of the \$2 trillion economic relief legislation enacted last month includes about \$350 billion for the Small Business Administration to extend loans to small businesses facing financial difficulties as a result of the coronavirus shutdown orders. Churches and other faith-based organizations, classified as "businesses", qualify for aid under the program, even if they have an exclusively religious orientation.

In a statement, the Small Business Administration said:

Faith-based organizations are eligible to receive SBA loans regardless of whether they provide secular social services. No otherwise eligible organization will be disqualified from receiving a loan because of the religious nature, identity, or religious speech of the organization.

Noting that "There's a good chance that American taxpayers will be footing the bill for church mortgages and preachers' salaries," Religion Dispatches opines:

The government's taxing power should not be wielded to oblige Muslims to bankroll temples, or to coerce Jews to subsidize Christian and Catholic churches, or to force Christians to fund mosques, or to compel the nonreligious to support any of the above. One of this country's first religious freedom laws warned that taxing citizens and giving the money to churches is "sinful and tyrannical". The right to be free from that compulsion is the bedrock of religious liberty.

Bottom line: The Trump administration plans to violate the U.S. Constitution and use taxpayer funds to bail out churches and pay pastor salaries.

SHUT UP, HE EXPLAINED

Actual Question:

"Peter Alexander, NBC. Mr. President, what do you say to Americans, right now, who are scared?"

Actual Response:

"You're a terrible reporter."

JESUS AND MO GET REAL ABOUT COVID-19

[The boys are watching news on TV]

Jesus: It's depressing that unscientific nonsense is so widespread at a time like this.

Mohammed: It is, isn't it?

Jesus: Stupid theories about 5G networks causing Covid-19.

Mo: Ha-ha.

Jesus: Health food shops selling their phony immune system boosting potions.

Mo: Idiots.

Jesus: Instagram celebs pushing their bogus therapies.

Mo: It's criminal.

Jesus: People really need to be listening to the experts now.

Mo: Absolutely.

Jesus: What is that you're drinking, Mo?

Mo: Camel piss.

Comment: Mohammed really did prescribe camel urine as medicine, as in this hadith: <http://sunnah.com/bukhari/4/100>

ADD ANOTHER COUNTRY TO TRUMP'S LIST OF "SH*THOLES"

The biggest college in Norway urged students to return from countries with "poorly developed" health systems — such as the United States! — as experts warned that the American hospital system would be overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Norway's University of Science and Technology issued an alert to students abroad urging them to "return home".

"This applies especially if you are staying in a country with poorly developed health services. This also applies for countries with poorly developed collective infrastructure, for example the USA, where it can be difficult to get transport to the airport if you don't have a car. ... The same applies if you don't have health insurance."

NO, WAIT: LETS CALL IT DUMBF*CKISTAN

According to a recent Pew Research Center Report, "... About one-in-five U.S. adults reject the basic idea that life on Earth has evolved at all. And roughly half of the U.S. adult population accepts evolutionary theory, but only as an instrument of God's will."

In other words, 161 years after the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection* in 1859, and in the second decade of the 21st century in the most technologically advanced country on the planet, some 66 million Americans reject the idea of natural evolution out of hand, and 164 million believe that, whatever may have occurred naturally, God unquestionably caused it to happen.

AND FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO GREW UP IN — OR OTHERWISE KNOW — QUEENS

Jonathan Engel

Q: What do you call a virulent disease that afflicts a famous dessert maker from Queens?

A: The Lemon Ice King of Coronavirus.

PLAGUE? CONSIDER THE END OF EVERYTHING

Dennis Overbye

(Excerpted from "Just a Few Billion Years Left to Go", a review of *Until The End of Time: Mind, Matter, and Our Search for Meaning in an Evolving Universe*, by Brian Greene, at nytimes.com, 3/7/2020)

In the fullness of time all that lives will die." With this bleak truth Brian Greene, a physicist and mathematician at Columbia, the author of best-selling books like *The Elegant Universe* and co-founder of the yearly New York celebration of science and art known as the World Science Festival, sets off in *Until the End of Time* on the ultimate journey, a meditation on how we go on doing what we do, why and how it will end badly, and why it matters anyway.

For going on is what we do, building bridges, spaceships and families, composing great symphonies and other works of art, directing movies, and waging wars and presidential campaigns, even though not only are we going to die, but so is all life everywhere in the fullness of eternity, according to what science now thinks it knows about us and the universe. ...

In the end, Greene says, entropy will get us all, and everything else in the universe, tearing down what evolution has built. "The entropic two-step and the evolutionary forces of selection enrich the pathway from order to disorder with prodigious structure, but whether stars or black holes, planets or people, molecules or atoms, things ultimately fall apart," he writes.

In a virtuosic final section Greene describes how this will work by inviting us to climb an allegorical Empire State Building; on each floor the universe is 10 times older. If the first floor is Year 10, we now are just above the 10th (10 billion years). [When] we get to the 11th floor the sun will be gone and probably any life on Earth. As we climb higher we are exposed to expanses of time that make the current age of the universe look like less than the blink of an eye.

Eventually the Milky Way galaxy will fall into a black hole. On about the 38th floor of the future, when the universe is 100 trillion trillion trillion years old, protons, the building blocks of atoms, will dissolve out from under us, leaving space populated by a thin haze of lightweight electrons and a spittle of radiation.

In the far, far, far, far future, even holding a thought will require more energy than will be available in the vastly dissipated universe. It will be an empty and cold place that doesn't remember us. "Nabokov's description of a human life as a 'brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness' may apply to the phenomenon of life itself."

In the end it is up to us to make of this what we will. We can contemplate eternity, Greene concludes, "and even though we can reach for eternity, apparently we cannot touch eternity."

Interviewer: Professor, when did you say the world is going to end?

Lecturer: In about ten billion years.

Interviewer: Oh, thank God, I thought you said "million".

GOOD NEWS: “PROJECT BLITZ” GETS BLITZED Freedom From Religion Foundation

(Excerpted from a press release from FFRF.)

(Editor: Readers are referred to “Project Blitz: The Christian Right’s Roadmap for an American Theocracy”, March PIQUE.)

As legislative sessions draw to a close, the Freedom From Religion Foundation is celebrating the defeat of several Christian Nationalist bills.

In Florida, H.B. 341 and its Senate counterpart, S.B. 746, both died, ensuring that public schools will not be forced to offer bible classes. H.B. 7103, a proposal that would have permitted prayer over the loudspeaker at state-sponsored athletic competitions, has also died.

Meanwhile, a similarly problematic bill has been defeated in New Hampshire. H.B. 1148 sought to place the theocratic motto “In God We Trust” in public schools. This is similar to other “In God We Trust” bills that have popped up in states across the country over the past year.

While politicians claim that these laws are intended to showcase the national motto or inspire patriotism, it is clear that their true purpose is to peddle religiosity to a captive audience. These laws are about advancing the Big Lie that the United States was “founded on God” or Christianity, dismantling the wall of separation between religion and government. It is a victory for state/church separation and our secular education system that New Hampshire students will not be subject to this religious pandering.

Florida’s bible class bill and New Hampshire’s “In God We Trust” bill were both the creation of the Christian Nationalist legislative push called Project Blitz. It seeks to inject state legislatures with a whole host of religious bills, imposing the theocratic version of a powerful few on We The People ... an unvarnished attack on American secularism and civil liberties – those things we cherish most about our democracy and now must tirelessly defend.

OF COURSE THERE’S STILL BAD NEWS ...

Michelle Goldberg

(Excerpted from “Red States Are Exploiting Coronavirus to Ban Abortion”, The New York Times, 4/6/2020)

While America’s attention has been consumed by the coronavirus crisis, politicians who have long wanted to do away with abortion rights have seized their chance. Since the pandemic began, governors in several red states have tried to use it as an excuse to ban abortion, lumping pregnancy termination in with elective procedures like cataract surgery and joint replacements. Abortion can’t simply be put off until this catastrophe is over, but as of this writing, a court has allowed a ban in Texas to go into effect.

Authoritarians all over the world have exploited the coronavirus to scrap civil liberties. ... American autocrats are no less opportunist. With the country in a panic, they saw an opening to suspend the guarantees of Roe v. Wade, at least for the moment, and they took it. ...

Despots love to pretend they’re rolling back rights to save lives. Don’t believe them.

NEW TEST SHOWS ATHEISTS HAVE ANTIBODIES TO RELIGION

Andrew Hall

(From *Laughing in Disbelief* on *patheos.com*, 4/3/2010)

Researchers unveiled a blood test that detects whether or not a person has resistance to religion. Soon, everyday people will be able to tell if they and their loved ones carry antibodies which gives them immunity to Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and other non-reality based belief systems.

“Antibodies are our defense system against pathogens,” explained Professor Canard, who teaches at the Theological Institute of Technology (TIT) and developed the procedure. “After the body fights off an invader, antibodies are in the blood, standing guard against future assaults.”

Canard pointed out that people will also find out how many antibodies they carry. Some will have many, which will mean they have something akin to super immunity. Once he saw how low his antibody score was, one subject from the clinical trials immediately took a few online classes in logic and is now 99.99 percent immune to televangelists.

Professor Canard noted that some individuals may not have had a full-blown religious infection to have a healthy amount of immunity. For example, someone who was never religious may have the same amount of antibodies in their blood as a person who was once a Baptist and now an atheist. “Genetics and luck play a role,” he remarked.

The Republican-funded Texas Astrophrenological Technoinstitute (TAT) strongly disagrees with TIT. “Atheism is caused by sin,” one TAT researcher argued. “The only thing this so-called scientific research does is test for sin.”

More than one online commenter noted that this is a classic case of TIT for TAT.

And in related news, President Trump fired Dr. Anthony Fauci as a presidential advisor on infectious diseases and replaced him with Deepak Chopra.

Comment: Yes, April Fools Day was weeks ago – so what? – JR

TRUMP TESTS NEGATIVE FOR COGNITION

Andrew Hall

(From *Laughing in Disbelief* on *patheos.com*, 3/17/2020)

Washington DC – President Trump has tested negative for cognition, according to a statement from the White House. Trump took the test on Friday to allay the fears of his political base. There were rumors the President might be suffering from unwanted brain activity.

GOP strategist Andrew Canard commented on the situation. “Fans of the President came to fear Trump’s frontal lobes—the area of the brain where higher cognitive functions occur—were operating. Republicans like their leaders to make decisions based on gut instinct and faith. Thinking gets in the way. These test results show the President is fine, and it’s all Obama’s fault.”

While the future is murky, Trump stalwarts are comforted their man thinks the lion says, “Moo!”

Comment: Mm, April Fool is still old news – Your point? – JR

SHSNY CALENDAR: APRIL – JULY 2020

SHSNY FICTION BOOK CLUB ONLINE

We have had (March 31) one successful online meeting of the SHSNY Fiction Book Club via Zoom, and will continue so for the duration of our enforced isolation.

If you would like to be included, and to be notified of each meeting's link and password, email your address to Sharon Krutzel at sharonkrutzel@rcn.com

TUES, APRIL 14, 7:00 pm
THE KING MUST DIE
Mary Renault

Exploring religious upheaval through myth, we're in Ancient Greece, and a matriarchal society with an earth-based religion is in the process of changing to a patriarchal one that worships sky gods.

Renault uses this background to re-tell the Greek myth of Theseus – including the Minotaur, the Labyrinth and Ariadne, in what is perhaps the most inventive and exciting of all her novels.

TUES, MAY 11, 7:00 PM
PURPLE HIBISCUS

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

From the bestselling author of *Americanah*, *Purple Hibiscus* is an exquisite novel about the emotional turmoil of adolescence, the powerful bonds of family, and the bright promise of freedom, all seen through the eyes of fifteen-year-old Kambali as her family's privileged life in Nigeria is disrupted by military coup and revolution.

"One of the most vital and original novelists of her generation." – Larissa MacFarquhar, *The New Yorker*

TUES, JUNE 9, 7:00 pm
To Be Announced

SHSNY BOOK CLUB ONLINE

We're working on creating a Zoom meeting schedule for the Book Club – watch this space in future issues for sign-in info.

Meanwhile, do the reading ...

THURS, MAY 7, 7:00 pm
CULTURE AND COMMITMENT
A Study of the Generation Gap
Margaret Mead

In this classic 1969 study, Mead foretold how the younger vs. the elder generations would become the human agents of change in our society and culture; our grandchildren will teach us, if we can choose to accept change.

Earle Bowers will lead, and thinks that, "in our current polarized era this book seems to me perhaps particularly topical again."

– *Paperback available*

THURS, JUNE 4, 7:00 pm
MIND FIXERS:

Psychiatry's Troubled Search for the Biology of Mental Illness
Anne Harrington

A clear-eyed, evenhanded, and yet passionate tour de force, *Mind Fixers* recounts the past and present struggle to make mental illness a biological question.

Mind Fixers makes clear that psychiatry's waxing and waning biological enthusiasms have been shaped not just by developments in the clinic and lab, but also by a surprising range of social factors, including immigration, warfare, grassroots activism, and assumptions about race and gender.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

THURS, JULY 2, 7:00 pm
To Be Announced

MORAL MISFITS

Sunday Evenings (soon)

Rich Sander (with help from Jason Torpy and a few other friends) has launched *Moral Misfits*, which will soon be a live, online, streaming



"watch party" for freethinkers of every stripe everywhere in America, making our Sunday evenings a whole lot better.

Already in the bank and available for viewing on You Tube are interviews with Professors Massimo Pigliucci and Philip Kitcher, and humanist and freethought activists such as Mandissa Thomas, Anne Klaeyen, Tony Davis, Kevin Cameron, and our own Jon Engel, John Wagner, and (ahem) John Rafferty.

So go to You Tube, type in Moral Misfits, and start watching.

SHSNY BRUNCH & CONVERSATION and GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

... will, of course, not be offered while we all maintain our social distancing. Nor will we gather at Pete's Tavern for our 13th annual Day of Reason Brunch on a Sunday in early May. Let's instead look forward to our 12th Annual Freethought Day celebration.

And in the meanwhile ...

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