

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

December 22, 2020

Ho, ho, ho, it's Christmas + New Year season, with both holidays rolled into one issue of your favorite newsletter. Speaking of issues, we have one with the historicity (or not) of December's birthday boy himself. (His putative father had issues, too – who could blame him?) We look at a crisis in religion in America today, and at a post-Christian nation to come (whoopee!). We consider the worth of water, what it means to be an adult, take advice from a toy tiger, and try to ignore UFOs. We ask what you want in 2021, and where, after Jan 21, you want YouKnowWho sent. – JR

MYTHS, HISTORY, AND CHRISTMAS

Valerie Tarico

(From "These 5 historical truths suggest Jesus Christ may have never existed", on *Alternet.org*, 12/18/2020)

Most antiquities scholars think that the New Testament gospels are "mythologized history". In other words, based on the evidence available they think that around the start of the first century a controversial Jewish rabbi named Yeshua ben Yosef gathered a following and his life and teachings provided the seed that grew into Christianity. At the same time, these scholars acknowledge that many Bible stories like the virgin birth, miracles, resurrection, and women at the tomb borrow and rework mythic themes that were common in the

Ancient Near East, much the way that screenwriters base new movies on old familiar tropes or plot elements. In this view, a "historical Jesus" became mythologized.

For over 200 years, a wide ranging array of theologians and historians grounded in this perspective have analyzed ancient texts, both those that made it into the Bible and those that didn't, in attempts to excavate the man behind the myth. Several current or recent bestsellers take this approach, distilling the scholarship for a popular audience. Familiar titles include *Zealot* by Reza Aslan and *How Jesus Became God* by Bart Ehrman.

By contrast, other scholars believe that the gospel stories are actually "historicized mythology". In this view, those ancient mythic templates are themselves the kernel. They got filled in with names, places and other real world details as early sects of Jesus worship attempted to understand and defend the devotional traditions they had received.

The notion that Jesus never existed is a minority position. Of course it is! says David Fitzgerald, the author of *Nailed: Ten Christian Myths That Show Jesus Never Existed at All*. Fitzgerald points out that for centuries all serious scholars of Christianity were Christians themselves, and modern secular scholars lean heavily on the groundwork that they laid in collecting, preserving, and analyzing ancient texts. Even today most secular scholars come out of a religious background, and many operate by default under historical presumptions of their former faith. ...

The arguments on both sides of this question – mythologized history or historicized mythology – fill volumes, and if anything the debate seems to be heating up rather than resolving. Since many people, both Christian

NO PIQUE NEXT WEEK

We're taking the holiday off. The next edition will be that of Jan 5, in your Inbox Jan 3. – JR

and not, find it surprising that this debate even exists – that serious scholars might think Jesus never existed – here are some of the key points that keep the doubts alive:

1. No first century secular evidence whatsoever exists to support the actuality of Yeshua ben Yosef.

In the words of Bart Ehrman (who himself believes the stories were built on a historical kernel):

"What sorts of things do pagan authors from the time of Jesus have to say about him? Nothing. As odd as it may seem, there is no mention of Jesus at all by any of his pagan contemporaries. There are no birth records, no trial transcripts, no death certificates; there are no expressions of interest, no heated slanders, no passing references – nothing. In fact, if we broaden our field of concern to the years after his death – even if we include the entire first century of the Common Era – there is not so much as a solitary reference to Jesus in any non-Christian, non-Jewish source of any kind." ...

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2. The earliest New Testament writers seem ignorant of the details of Jesus' life, which become more crystalized in later texts.

Paul seems unaware of any virgin birth, for example. No wise men, no star in the east, no miracles. Historians have long puzzled over the "Silence of Paul" on the most basic biographical facts and teachings of Jesus. Paul fails to cite Jesus' authority precisely when it would make his case.

What's more, he never calls the twelve apostles Jesus' disciples; in fact, he never says Jesus HAD disciples – or a ministry, or did miracles, or gave teachings. He virtually refuses to disclose any other biographical detail, and the few cryptic hints he offers aren't just vague, but contradict the gospels. The leaders of the early Christian movement in Jerusalem like Peter and James are supposedly Jesus' own followers and family; but Paul dismisses them as nobodies and repeatedly opposes them for not being true Christians!

Liberal theologian Marcus Borg suggests that people read the books of the New Testament in chronological order to see how early Christianity unfolded. Placing the Gospels after Paul makes it clear that as written documents they are not the source of early Christianity but its product. ...

3. Even the New Testament stories don't claim to be first-hand accounts.

We now know that the four gospels were assigned the names of the apostles Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, not written by them. To make matter sketchier, the name designations happened sometime in second century, 100 years or more after Christianity supposedly began.

For a variety of reasons, the practice of pseudonymous writing was common at the time and many contemporary documents are "signed" by famous figures. The same is true of the New Testament epistles except for a handful of letters from Paul (6 out of 13) which are broadly thought to be genuine. But even the gospel stories don't actually say, "I was there." Rather, they claim the existence of other witnesses, a phenomenon familiar to anyone who has heard the phrase, My aunt knew someone who . . .

4. The gospels, our only accounts of a historical Jesus, contradict each other.

The gospel of Mark is thought to be the earliest existing "life of Jesus", and linguistic analysis suggests that Luke and Matthew both simply reworked Mark and added their own corrections and new material. But they contradict each other and, to an even greater degree contradict the much later gospel of John, because they were written with different objectives for different audiences.

The incompatible Easter stories offer one example of how much the stories disagree.

5. Modern scholars who claim to have uncovered the real historical Jesus depict wildly different persons.

They include a cynic philosopher, charismatic Hasid, liberal Pharisee, conservative rabbi, Zealot revolutionary, and non-violent pacifist to borrow from a much longer list assembled by Price. In his words, "The historical Jesus (if there was one) might well have been a messianic king, or a progressive Pharisee, or a Galilean shaman, or a magus, or a

Hellenistic sage. But he cannot very well have been all of them at the same time." John Dominic Crossan of the Jesus Seminar grumbles that "the stunning diversity is an academic embarrassment".

For David Fitzgerald ... Jesus appears to be an effect, not a cause, of Christianity. Paul and the rest of the first generation of Christians searched the Septuagint translation of Hebrew scriptures to create a Mystery Faith for the Jews, complete with pagan rituals like a Lord's Supper, Gnostic terms in his letters, and a personal savior god to rival those in their neighbors' longstanding Egyptian, Persian, Hellenistic and Roman traditions. ...

Even if one accepts that there was a real Jesus of Nazareth, the question has little practical meaning: Regardless of whether or not a first century rabbi called Yeshua ben Yosef lived, the "historical Jesus" figures so patiently excavated and re-assembled by secular scholars are themselves fictions.

We may never know for certain what put Christian history in motion. Only time (or time travel) will tell.

JOSEPH POSITS AN ANALOGY

(From the Secular Scotland Facebook page)

Joseph: Happy Mother's Day. I made you this pie.

Mary: Did you buy that?

Joseph: No, I made it from scratch.

Mary: We don't have an oven.

Joseph: God helped.

Mary: . . .

Joseph: You see how crazy that sounds?

SECULAR CHRISTMAS

Helen Bennett

Let's have a secular Christmas,
Let's remember that Yule
Was first a pagan holiday
Before the Christians prayed it away –
You see, I'm nobody's fool.

Let's have a pagan Saturnalia –
The bells burst out in chimes!
As pagans wore their best regalia,
When nobody felt like a failure,
In ancient Roman times.

Let's have a secular Christmas,
We needn't revere a birth,
But let us decorate holiday trees
With splendor, and harbor such thoughts as these:
"Good Will and Peace on Earth."

Let's have a secular Christmas
And admit what we adore:
The Winter Solstice has darkened the world,
But the Flag of Hope has been unfurled,
And the sun returns, once more!

RELIGION AND OUR TWIN CRISES

Jonathan Engel

The United States is currently experiencing two concurrent crises: the Covid-19 pandemic and the failure of Trump and his minions to concede defeat in the recent presidential election. Of course much has been written and said about both of these issues, but very little has been said about the role of religion in propagating these dual menaces.

Many Trump supporters believe that their particular sky deity anointed Trump president. Therefore his election defeat must have been engineered by Satan, so they will not accept the actual results.

And of course there are those who believe that their right to sing hymns together in an enclosed space trumps (pun intended) everybody else's right to stay alive. Don't believe me that the lunacy is all about religion? Here are some news items from just the past week:

- Kayleigh McEnany: "God had planned for me to be Trump's Press Secretary."
- Jenna Ellis (Trump attorney) says Jesus wants her to overturn the election.
- Trump-loving megachurch pastor: "Covid vaccine is preparing the structure for the anti-Christ."
- "There is a miracle taking place": Pat Robertson claims Texas lawsuit is God intervening in stolen election.
- GOP lawmaker who said there was a political agenda behind Covid coverage prays for a miracle from his ICU bed. (Have to admit this was one of my favorites.)
- "There's no pandemic": Tennessee pastor explodes at CNN reporter asking if he'll take Covid vaccine.
- Conservative slams evangelicals descending on DC for last gasp march to "pray" for God to intervene on Trump's behalf.
- "We will kill them now": Pro-Trump pastor goes on bonkers rant about "witches" at DC rally.

Every day we hear this insanity and yet there are very few on the left who will call it out for what it is, no less dare to criticize organized religion for what it has wrought. On his MSNBC show "The Beat" Ari Melber recently talked about how only science, and not magical thinking, would lead our way out of the Covid crisis. But he never mentioned the most ubiquitous form of magical thinking in our country, which is religion. We will never elevate science and evidence over magical thinking unless we get real about the root cause of our delusions.

A SIGN THAT WE HAVE WAY TOO MUCH LOCKDOWN TIME ON OUR HANDS

(Excerpted from *nypost.com*, 12/12/2020, and Forwarded by Dennis Middlebrooks)

UFO sightings across the city are up 31 percent from last year and an eye-popping 283 percent from 2018's measly dozen, according to the National UFO Reporting Center.

Yeah, the "National UFO Reporting Center" — it seems that's a thing. — JR

HAPPY NEW YEAR MILLENIUM: AMERICA'S POST-CHRISTIAN FUTURE

Adam Lee

(Excerpted from "America's Post-Christian Future, Part 2" at *Daylight Atheism on patheos.com*, 12/16/2020)

Historically, America has been unusually religious compared to the other wealthy, industrialized nations of the world. This country has always flattered its Christian citizens and catered to their wishes. But there's a change in the wind, and Trump's defeat was a foretaste of it.

To learn more about the transition that's about to sweep over us, the University of Michigan political scientist Ronald Inglehart has just published a column, "Giving Up on God: The Global Decline of Religion", that draws on his forthcoming book *Religion's Sudden Decline*. Inglehart writes:

Since 2007, there has been a remarkably sharp trend away from religion. In virtually every high-income country, religion has continued to decline. At the same time, many poor countries, together with most of the former communist states, have also become less religious. From 2007 to 2019, only five countries became more religious, whereas the vast majority of the countries studied moved in the opposite direction. ...

The most dramatic shift away from religion has taken place among the American public. From 1981 to 2007, the United States ranked as one of the world's more religious countries, with religiosity levels changing very little. Since then, the United States has shown the largest move away from religion of any country for which we have data.

He puts this in more concrete terms with a survey, conducted annually since 1981, which asks Americans how important belief in God is to them on a scale from 1 to 10. From 1981 through 2007, the number barely moved at all. But beginning in 2007, there was a steep decline:

Near the end of the initial period studied [i.e., 2007], Americans' mean rating of the importance of God in their lives was 8.2 on a ten-point scale. In the most recent U.S. survey, from 2017, the figure had dropped to 4.6, an astonishingly sharp decline.

In a mere ten years, the importance of belief in God has dropped by half among the American populace! This statistic even shocked me for how huge and rapid a change it was. ...

In *The Twilight of American Evangelicals*, I cited the pastor Ed Stetzer, who argues that younger generations are just having a secular *rumspringa* and will return to the church as they get married and have kids. Not only is that not happening, the opposite is true: millennials and Gen Xers are getting less religious as they get older:

- 25 percent of GenX were Nones in 2008; it was 36 percent in 2019.
- 33 percent of millennials were Nones in 2008; it was 43 percent in 2019.

... As both a cause and an effect of their disaffiliation, millennials are also more likely to reject the claims of moral

authority that religion puts forward for itself. By a majority, they recognize that human beings are perfectly capable of telling right from wrong using their own conscience, without a dusty book of dogmas. An even larger majority recognizes that religion frequently makes people less moral and less tolerant:

A majority (57 percent) of millennials agree that religious people are generally less tolerant of others, compared to only 37 percent of Baby Boomers.

... Less than half (46 percent) of millennials believe it is necessary to believe in God to be moral. They're also much less likely than Baby Boomers to say that it's important for children to be brought up in a religion so they can learn good values (57 percent vs. 75 percent).

And there's one more piece of evidence which heralds bigger changes on the horizon.

Until now, conservative evangelicals have consoled themselves that their numbers haven't declined by as much as the mainline Protestant denominations. Their self-congratulatory explanation for this is that it's because they're rock-ribbed and firm in their faith, not like the squishy liberals. The reality is that it has more to do with demography.

Simply stated, the mainline churches' membership is aging and graying. They passed the point twenty years ago where elderly and retired members outnumbered those of childbearing age, and ever since, they've been slowly dying off. Evangelicals and Catholics are reaching that same point now - which means they, too, are going to dwindle in the years to come. ...

But the more human beings advance—the more we learn about taking control of nature, the more we succeed at making life better and fairer for everyone—the more superfluous religion seems. It's a vestige of the childhood of our species, and we're learning to put away childish things. It's a transition that's happening all over the world. But in America, because religion has always wielded disproportionate influence and power, the change is going to be especially stark. In the years to come, we're going to witness it for ourselves.

A RETURN TO DECENCY, HONOR, AND HOPE

Peter Rogatz

As the chaos of the Trump presidency continues to play itself out, I am engrossed reading the first volume of Barack Obama's memoir, *A Promised Land*. The contrast between Trump and Obama is more than painful. Obama's grace and humility and his respect for the office he held were noteworthy. Trump, from the day he took office, turned the presidency into a tawdry display of unprincipled self-dealing, marked by contempt for those he was elected to serve and neglect of his basic responsibilities to the American people.

Joe Biden's decades of distinguished public service offers hope for a return to decency and honor in the conduct of the presidency.

Reflecting on the immense gap between Obama's and Trump's approaches to public service, I am reminded of a

very moving poem by e.e. cummings, dedicated to his fellow poet, Marianne Moore:

In a vicious world – to love virtue
In a craven world – to have courage
In a treacherous world – to prove loyal
In a wavering world – to stand firm.

In a cruel world – to show mercy
In a biased world – to act justly
In a shameless world – to live nobly
In a hateful world – to forgive.

In a venal world – to be honest
In a heartless world – to be human
In a killing world – to create
In a sick world – to be whole.

In an epoch of unself – to be oneself.

McCONNELL CONCEDES

New York Times headline, December 15:

McConnell Congratulates President-elect Biden, Saying the Electoral College 'Has Spoken'

Senator Mitch McConnell today congratulated President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris on their electoral victory seven weeks ago.

It was further reported that the Senate Majority Leader endorsed arithmetic, geography, and the Copernican theory, and added that he agreed with the scientific community that the Moon is not made of green cheese.

PUTIN CONCEDES

Andy Borowitz

(Excerpted from Newyorker.com, 11/25/2020)

Asserting that his "darkest fears have been confirmed", Vladimir Putin today conceded that Joe Biden had won the U.S. presidency, and warned that the United States is on the verge of being controlled by Americans.

Speaking to reporters at the Kremlin, the Russian President alleged that President-elect Joe Biden was "the handpicked instrument of those who would seek to advance American interests. Joe Biden is no more and no less than a puppet of the American people."

READERS RESPOND

To the Editor: Passing on a recent note from an atheist friend: I want to call your attention to a quote from Paul Krugman, who wrote in the *NYT* a couple of days ago: "... rejecting facts comes naturally to people who insist that they're acting on behalf of God. So do election results that don't go their way." — *Bob Worth*

NOW WILL YOU BELIEVE THERE'S A PROBLEM?

For the first time ever, amid fears of scarcity, water joined gold and oil as a commodity traded on Wall Street.

**A PRETTY GOOD CHRISTIAN MUSES ABOUT
THIS YEAR'S "CHRISTMAS STAR", ABOUT
FEELING SMUG AND BEING AN ADULT**

Garrison Keillor

(Excerpted from his blog of 12/16.)

I read that on December 21, Jupiter and Saturn will appear so close to each other in the sky that they'll seem like one bright star, a conjunction that hasn't occurred since the early 17th century and won't occur again until 2080. I would be 138 in 2080 and so this month appears to be my one chance to reap whatever benefit the bright star might confer and who can say what that might be? I wish it would make us smarter. Clear thinking is one thing a great many of us need. We're all feeling a little smug because we had a president who set a low standard. The man couldn't even tell a joke. Humor was not in his toolbox. So compared to him, we felt rather good about ourselves. Now we need to work a little harder to ratiocinate. I am going to go outside on December 21 and let the light shine on me and think about algebra and see if any of it comes back to me or if I remember the Sermon on the Mount.

Time to refresh our understanding of the basic building blocks of adult life:

There is only so much you can do and you ought to do that much and if you do you'll find there is more you can do so try that too. The way to get something done is to do it. The way to stop is to stop. When all is said and done, there is plenty to be done and that goes without saying.

Don't stick beans up your nose. Acts have consequences. Step on a crack and break your mother's back. Life is too short for that and it's getting shorter every day. On the other hand, don't buy cheap shoes.

Lighten up. It could be worse. Be grateful that it isn't. I could compile a Worse list but you already know what's on it. Granted, it is a challenge to live intimately with your best-informed critic but do your best. The cure for a horrible day is to go to bed early and start over in the morning. Long walks help, so I am told.

When you are defeated, concede gracefully and go on to the next order of business. Your friends are fond of you but they have other things to do than deny reality in your behalf. Do what you need to do, go to Florida, and hire better lawyers. And go outside next Monday night and let the light shine into our skulls. ... Care for the children, save the planet, stop hallucinating and pay attention.

ADVICE FROM A TOY TIGER
Bill Watterson

(Transcribed from the comic strip "Calvin and Hobbes")

Six-year-old Calvin: "Live for the moment" is my motto. You never know how long you've got. You could step into the road tomorrow and — *wham* — you get hit by a cement truck. Then you'll be sorry you put off your pleasures. That's why I say "Live for the moment".

What's *your* motto?

Hobbes (his real-to-Calvin) tiger: "Look down the road."

WHAT DO WE WANT IN 2021?

Let's tell each other (and the world) what we want/wish/hope-for in 2021. In 25 words or less, please, emailed to editor@shsny.org. I'll start:

I want to touch, to hold my children and their children, and to walk the streets of my city.

WHERE DO WE WANT DONALD TRUMP TO GO?

His neighbors have filed an easy-win suit to prevent him from taking up legal residence at Mar-a-Lago.

So, assuming he does not fly to some country with which the U.S. does not have an extradition treaty, where *in the U.S.* do you think The Donald should take up residence?

Suggestions to editor@shsny.org, please.

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Bloody hell Alexa, I ordered baby cheeses



SHSNY CALENDAR: DECEMBER 2020 – MARCH 2021

FICTION BOOK CLUB ONLINE

The SHSNY Fiction Book Club meets online via Zoom for the duration of our enforced isolation. Join the Zoom Meeting at <https://zoom.us/j/97467470190?pwd=dGdEbTkwV0pSRmZRWHYvajFoTXlrZz09>
Meeting ID: 974 6747 0190
Passcode: Read

TUESDAY, JAN 12, 7:30 pm **THE LYING LIFE OF ADULTS** Elena Ferrante

With this new novel about the transition from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, Ferrante proves once again why she has become one of the world's most read and beloved writers. Another gripping, highly addictive, and totally unforgettable Neapolitan story.
– *Paperback & Kindle.*

TUESDAY, FEB 9, 7:30 pm **DRESSED FOR DEATH** Donna Leon

Commissario Guido Brunetti of the Venice police solves murders while navigating Italian society, politics and family life.

TUES, MARCH 9, 7:30 pm **MR. BRIDGE** and/or **MRS. BRIDGE** Evan S. Connell

Mr. Bridge is a classic portrait of a man, a marriage, and the manners and mores of a particular social class in the first half of twentieth-century America.

Mrs. Bridge completes the group portrait of a family, closely knit on the surface but deeply divided by loneliness, boredom, isolation, and sexual longing.

HUMANIST BOOK CLUB

Harry French will send the linking codes for the Zoom meetings. Send your address to: htfrench46@gmail.com
Meanwhile, do the reading ...

THURS, JAN 7, 7:00 pm **A DECENT LIFE:** **Morality for the Rest of Us** Todd May

You don't have to be a saint to live an ethical life. Todd May stands at the forefront of a new wave of practical philosophy that sensibly reframes our morals and redefines what it means to live a decent life.

THURS, FEB 4, 7:00 pm **CASTE: THE ORIGINS OF** **OUR DISCONTENTS** Isabel Wilkerson

Pulitzer-winner Wilkerson's portrait of an unseen phenomenon in America: a hidden caste system, a hierarchy of human rankings. A #1 *NYTimes* bestseller, long-listed for the National Book Award.

THURS, MARCH 4, 7:00 pm **A LOT OF PEOPLE** **ARE SAYING:** **The New Conspiracism and** **the Assault on Democracy** Nancy L. Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead

How the new conspiracism differs from the old, how it undermines democracy, and what is to be done about it.

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HUMANIST HAPPY HOUR ONLINE

SUNDAY, DEC 20, 5:00 pm
Pour something, grab a snack, and join 15 or more humanists and rationalists for lively conversation in our SHSNY Happy Hour! Zoom in at <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/9806344432?pwd=c0NrNUoweDVGWWho2ditvYmJlEVjVGdz09>
Meeting ID: 980 634 4432
Passcode: SHSNy
Join by Skype for Business
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/9806344432>

MONDAY MOVIES: MUSICALS!

Let's have some fun, screening, talking about, and simply enjoying the best "all-singing, all-dancing" Hollywood (and other) classics. Rent 'em on Amazon (\$3.99), watch, then Zoom in at ... <https://zoom.us/j/92351454127?pwd=OVg5NnBaUFc4NWtLbHJJNW1vZ1Y1Zz09>
Meeting ID: 923 5145 4127
Passcode: watch

MONDAY, DEC 21, 8:00 pm **CHICAGO** (Diamond Edition 2003)

Winner of 6 Academy Awards, including Best Picture, with Catherine Zeta-Jones, Renee Zellweger, Richard Gere, Queen Latifah ... *and all that jazz.*

MONDAY, DEC 28, 8:00 pm **FLYING DOWN TO RIO**

In their first onscreen pairing, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were a sensation, stealing the picture from stars Gene Raymond and Delores del Rio. Come on – let's dance the Carioca!