

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

March, 2020

Election time! No, not that neverending mudwrestle on MSNBC and TrumpTV (Fox), but our every-three-years SHSNY ballot for a new Board – see below. And meet the candidates on pages 8-9. Also herein, we consider the rule of law, its subversions on the religious right, and our own corruption.

We look back at Darwin Day, imagine invisible energy, admit our existence is absurd, smack the Orange in the Oval a few times, and end with poetry. Cheer up, it's almost Spring! –JR

SHSNY ELECTION NOTICE

The triennial election for the Board of Directors of the Secular Humanist Society of New York will take place this spring. Notice is given hereby, as it will be in the April and May issues of PIQUE.

Candidate statements appear herein, beginning on page 8, as will those of any other declared candidates in subsequent issues. All those statements, along with ballots, will be mailed to all dues-paid members on or before May 1 (two ballots to Family Memberships). Returned ballots will be due May 15.

Results will be announced in the June issue of PIQUE, and the new 3-year Board term will begin June 1.

Who is eligible?

All dues-paid members of SHSNY are eligible. You may nominate yourself or another member(s) – by letter to the P.O. Box (see masthead, below) or e-mail to editor@shsnny.org – at any time before March 15. Please include a brief statement (100-300 words) summarizing the candidate's/your qualifications and vision for the future of SHSNY, which may be written by the candidate and/or the nominator. If you nominate someone else, please include a statement by the nominee that s/he is willing to serve.

Who will stand for election?

Our by-laws* require a minimum of five members on the Board, which elects the officers of SHSNY. Currently, the Board consists of 15 members (see masthead, below), not all of whom, for various reasons, are standing for re-election. But all of them hope that even more people *willing to work for SHSNY* will nominate themselves, join us, and bring fresh attitudes and new ideas to our organization.

Candidate statements begin on page 8.

*If you are a member of SHSNY and do not have a copy of the bylaws, email your P.O. address to editor@shsnny.org.

THE RULE OF LAW IS EVERYTHING

Jonathan Engel

We've all read and heard recently about the degradation of the rule of law in the United States that has occurred under the Trump regime. It is therefore imperative that the American people understand what the rule of law is, and why it is essential to a functioning democracy.

You've probably heard people say that here in the U.S. we have "the rule of law, not men" (which in our modern times should be amended to "individuals", as opposed to "men"). What this means is that decisions are made based on consistent laws that are applied to objective facts and that this concept applies to everyone. Therefore, in theory at least, nobody gets special treatment, good or bad, because the same set of agreed-upon laws apply to all. Where the rule of law applies, people know that they always have an avenue to redress for wrongs they have suffered.

Why is this important? The obvious answer is that for a cohesive society, people need to know that they will get equal treatment under the law, and this is why this concept was enshrined in our Constitution by way of the 14th Amendment. People who are arrested need to know that the disposition of their case will depend on well-established law being applied by impartial fellow citizens and not by the whims and biases of some all-powerful magistrate. But there is so much more. The rule of law is everything.

For example, we have a Bill of Rights in this country, right? It guarantees us certain freedoms, including, for example, freedom of the press. So if a powerful politician wants to shut down a newspaper because of negative coverage, they can't do it because of the guarantee of freedom of the press. But what if the powerful politician does it anyway? What can the newspaper do? They could sue, but

BOARD OF DIRECTORS: Jonathan Engel, *Pres.*; John Wagner, *V.P.*; Claire Miller, *V.P.*; Brian Lemaire, *Secty/Treas.*; John Rafferty, *Editor/Pres. Emeritus*; Nancy Adelman, Kiwi Callahan, Matt Callahan, Maria Graber, Dorothy Kahn, Carl Marxer, Carlos Mora, Bob Murtha, David Orenstein, Sharif Rahman

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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).

without the rule of law the validity of their lawsuit is meaningless. If the same politician who wants the newspaper shuttered also controls the courts, that newspaper is going down. No matter what rights are conferred by the Constitution, if they can't be enforced by an impartial tribunal, they are worthless.

Although losing the rule of law would destroy faith in the justice system, we would still have business and commerce, right? Wrong. What is the value of a business contract when enforcement in court is open to question? Virtually zero. Without the rule of law we are fated to wind up with the type of crony capitalism they have now in Russia, where obscenely rich oligarchs control all business, and the enforcement of commercial laws and contracts depends not on the strength of one's legal case, but rather on the oligarch's fealty to dear leader Putin.

But we're a democracy, couldn't we just vote out the bad politicians who deprive us of the rule of law? No, it's not that simple or easy. Again we look to the example of Russia. Russia has elections, but Putin always wins. One way that he ensures this is by having his most dangerous opponent locked up prior to the vote. It's hard to win an election from a jail cell. And by the way, the comparison to Putin's Russia is no coincidence. Trump's role model has established the template for the authoritarian takeover of democratic societies. Countries such as Hungary, Turkey, and the Philippines have wonderful constitutions and the appearance of elections, but with the ruling regimes having taken control of the courts, there is no real democracy, no free press, no guaranteed civil rights. Which is exactly what Trump wants here.

The rule of law is the glue that holds democracy together. Without it, all of our rights and freedoms can easily crumble to dust. It must be defended as if our republic depends on it, because it does.

RIGHT MATTERS

Adam Schiff

(Excerpted from his closing argument in the Senate's impeachment trial of Donald Trump, 1/23/2020)

You don't realize how important character is in the highest office in the land until you don't have it. ...

Right is supposed to matter. It's what made us the greatest nation on Earth. No constitution can protect us if right doesn't matter anymore. And you know you can't trust this president to do what's right for this country. You can trust he'll do what's right for Donald Trump. He'll do it now, he's done it before, he'll do it for the next several months, he'll do it the election if he's allowed to. This is why, if you find him guilty, you must find that he should be removed. Because right matters, because right matters. And the truth matters. Otherwise we are lost.

There comes a point when a man must refuse to answer to his leader if he is also to answer to his own conscience. – *Hartley Shawcross, barrister, politician, and prosecutor at the Nuremberg War Crimes tribunal*

ARE "WE, THE PEOPLE" CORRUPT?

Kevin Baker

(Excerpted from "Losing My Religion" in the March, 2020 Harper's Magazine "Easy Chair")

The fact is, though, that the average Trump supporter today is neither a raging nihilist nor a blameless victim, and that he or she did not turn to the Republicans out of desperation. Such assumptions are the real condescension, robbing Trump voters of agency and responsibility. The hard truth of the matter is that Donald Trump and his party are exactly what much of white America has wanted for a long, long time. ...

Here is a startling idea: *the people* can be corrupted.

Have the American people been corrupted now, as so many of our commentators imply, by their suffering and desperation? But how could that be? The people have been much worse off in the past, and they have at times responded by joining together and taking action. A handful of bankrupt men started the original Populist movement in a humble Texas farmhouse one night in 1877, when the nation's farm economy collapsed. Workingmen occupied General Motors' Flint plant in 1937, in the midst of the Great Depression—the culmination of a labor movement that had struggled for decades to win workers' rights. Women won the vote for themselves after seventy years of agitation.

Another thesis is that social media, tilted with the help of the Russians, has polarized us, "tribalized" us, as we have not been divided since the Civil War. Yet we have always been divided. ...

America has always hung in the balance. America is exceptional in that there is no other place where so many people have come from so many other places to live in relative peace and democracy for so long. People all over the world have seen the United States as a light unto the nations, and with their strength our country has done many great and good things in the world. But we did not banish human nature.

That other America has always been with us, too: those "strangers" who have invariably seen America—the land and its other peoples—as something to be exploited, to be subjugated. The idea of America has often been a close-run thing between us, with the same battles for human freedom and dignity needing to be fought again and again, and in that sense, our nation is not exceptional at all.

There have always been the Nativists, the Know-Nothings, the Klan, the John Birchers, the Knights of the Golden Circle, the Tea Party, the Proud Boys. All the believers in manifest destiny, and the white man's burden, and a thousand conspiracy theories, going all the way back to Jamestown and Plymouth Colony.

It's true enough that most white conservatives are not monsters, and that some of them are not bigots—though they have demonstrated no unease whatsoever with the bigotry of their leaders. It's true that we should go on trying to persuade them, with restraint and respect. Contrary to what every columnist in the country seems to believe, no one I know lives in a "blue bubble". We have right-wing

acquaintances, relatives, even friends, and we listen to what they have to say.

But it's important to understand that they have been voting the way they have for decades not out of despair or bruised feelings but to get what they want. It does no good to pretend otherwise. A people can be corrupted as well as a man, and our people can be corrupted as much as any other people. Red America is responsible for most of their own problems—and ours—thanks to the policies and the candidates they have supported for decades. But rather than acknowledge any of that they have simply doubled down, foisting upon us this wretched, hollow man, this constant liar who vulgarizes all he touches, who smears and mocks, and who sells himself at every turn, even to foreign dictators. The people, yes—they did this.

WE MUST NOT MERELY DEFEAT THE REPUBLICAN PARTY

Osita Nwanevu

(Excerpted from "With Malice Toward All" in the March issue of The New Republic)

The character of the GOP is not an open question. Even those who suggest otherwise know it—the American political establishment meets each fresh stain the GOP leaves on the American conscience not with genuine surprise, but with performances of disbelief. Impotent in the face of a party that defied all political convention and wisdom with its victory in the last election, and unwilling to reshape a political order that offers them sinecures, political elites have only indignation and repetition as recourse. Their pearls, too often clutched, have been crushed into a fine powder. The straw has flattened the camel.

FUNDING OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IS A "6-LANE HIGHWAY" THROUGH THE CHURCH-STATE WALL OF SEPARATION

Peter Laarman

(Reprinted from Religiondispatches.org, 1/23/2020)

(Ed: Mr. Laarman is a United Church of Christ minister)

Yesterday's oral arguments at the Supreme Court [re *Espinoza v. Montana*] over the constitutionality of Montana's ban on direct state aid for religious education barely registered in a media environment saturated by impeachment news.

But there's big trouble ahead if, as expected, the justices invalidate the ban.

As Andrew Seidel noted yesterday on Religion Dispatches, this would mark a long-sought big win on the scorecard of the well-organized and decades-old movement to upend traditional understandings of separation of church and state. Not just another crack in Jefferson's "wall" but more like a six-lane highway right through it.

Here's why. Steadily advancing deference to religion, whether through "conscience" clauses or "religious exemptions," already opens the door to fairly blatant employment discrimination. Trump and his enablers have pushed hard

in the direction of such deference, as part of their fervid ongoing courtship of the white evangelical vote.

Meanwhile, most courts have ruled that religiously-affiliated institutions like schools, but also hospitals and others, can't use religious grounds to fire (or not hire) people whose functions are purely secular in nature; e.g., groundskeepers or clerks. But the courts have also said that these institutions are perfectly free to discriminate when it comes to staff who perform "ministerial" or quasi-ministerial functions. Teachers and professors in religious schools certainly fall into this latter category, especially as so many must subscribe to institutional mission statements under which they effectively pledge to uphold church values.

You can see where this is going. First we open the door to direct state aid, thus (in all likelihood) greatly expanding the reach of religious schools, most of them run by people who are distinctly hostile to any whiff of sexual deviation or even mild feminist orientation. Then we open the door to permitting these same schools to discriminate in the hiring and firing of teachers, guidance counselors, and others.

This isn't just the undoing of the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. It's the undoing of the Secular Revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries. Some won't mourn the loss. Many won't even notice. But those who put bishops in the same despised category as kings back in the day knew what they were doing.

And from CFI's The Morning Heresy, 1/24/2020 ...

Good morning. How would you like to feel even worse about the *Espinoza v. Montana* Supreme Court case that was argued on Tuesday? I got you covered. Here's Monica Kristin Blair at *The Washington Post* on how the push for "school choice" is really about white flight:

"In addition to breaking down the separation of church and state and taking much-needed funds away from the public education system, a victory by the mothers would exacerbate school segregation, thanks to the long history of racial segregation within parochial schools, something the justices largely ignored during oral arguments. ...

"While public schools have a segregation problem, it is still true that private schools are more segregated than their public counterparts, and religious private schools are among the worst offenders. What's more, while barring children from enrolling in a private school because of their race is now unconstitutional (albeit hard to prove, as parents of color are usually responsible for proving that their child was a victim of racial discrimination), it is still perfectly legal for private and parochial schools to discriminate based on criteria like disability and sexual orientation."

When I hear from people that religion doesn't hurt anything, I say, really? Well besides wars, the Crusades, the Inquisitions, 9-11, ethnic cleansing, the suppression of women, the suppression of homosexuals, fatwas, honor killings, suicide bombings, arranged marriages to minors, human sacrifice, burning witches, and systematic sex with children, I have a few little quibbles. And I forgot blowing up girls' schools in Afghanistan. — *Bill Maher*

PROJECT BLITZ: THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT'S ROADMAP FOR AN AMERICAN THEOCRACY

Amy Littlefield

(Excerpted from *Truthout.org*, 1/16/2020)

A Christian Nationalist group is quietly shaping bills for state legislatures. Fred Clarkson, a senior research analyst at the social justice think tank Political Research Associates, had studied the Christian right wing for decades when someone tipped him off about an intriguing link on the website of the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation (CPCF) — a group that seeks to “preserve America’s Judeo-Christian heritage and promote prayer”.

In early 2018, Clarkson clicked on the link, which led him to what was essentially a roadmap of the Christian right’s theocratic vision for state legislatures — a 116-page manual of model legislation aimed at advancing an anti-LGBTQ, anti-choice, Christian nationalist agenda.

The manual revealed for the first time how seemingly disparate efforts by state lawmakers were all connected as part of an elaborate legal strategy devised by a coalition of Christian Right groups who called it Project Blitz. ...

“It gets beyond the specifics of religious exemptions into an ever-expanding theocratic vision, where you can not only pick and choose which laws you’re going to honor, but you expand the extent to which you’re going to dishonor them, all the while stepping on the rights and interests of your fellow citizens,” Clarkson said. “It’s a radical breakdown of basic democratic ideas.”

The Project Blitz handbook divided its agenda into three categories based on the amount of opposition it expected the measures to receive.

The first category, intended to appear the most innocuous, included bills to promote “In God We Trust” license plates (now offered in at least 20 states) and the display of the “In God We Trust” motto in public schools. (Some version of display legislation has passed in at least 10 states.)

The next batch of bills centered on emphasizing “Christian heritage” and “the importance of the Bible in history” to promote the idea that the U.S. is a Christian nation.

The third category, which organizers noted might be “the most hotly contested”, sought to empower licensed professionals to deny health care and other services based on religious beliefs and to enable adoption agencies to reject adoptive families on religious grounds. (At least 10 states have passed bills to allow discrimination by child welfare agencies.)

Even as [Clarkson’s group and others] have sought to reclaim religious freedom, Project Blitz has advanced its own Religious Freedom Day model resolutions [and] ... at the federal level, President Trump has departed from his predecessors by using his proclamation of Religious Freedom Day (first designated by Congress in 1992) to promote his administration’s wide-ranging efforts to enable discrimination against LGBTQ people and denials of reproductive health care on religious or moral grounds.

These efforts include the establishment of a new “Conscience and Religious Freedom” division within the

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the issuance of a new rule — struck down by a federal judge — to protect health care workers who deny services because of their religious beliefs.

Clarkson said the framers of the Constitution may have envisioned just this kind of threat.

“They knew the theocrats and the monarchists would be back and that this fight was far from over. And now the theocrats and the monarchists are in the White House.”

WE’RE LESS RELIGIOUS, AND BETTER FOR IT

Max Boot

(Reprinted from “William Barr’s America vs. reality in 2020” in *The Washington Post*, 2/19/2020, and forwarded to *PIQUE* by Giles Kelly)

It has become conventional wisdom on the right that religion is under assault from secular liberals — and that the waning of faith is bad for America.

Attorney General William P. Barr, a conservative Catholic, summed up this alarmist outlook last fall during an incendiary speech at Notre Dame. He bemoaned “the steady erosion of our traditional Judeo-Christian moral system” and the “growing ascendancy of secularism and the doctrine of moral relativism. By any honest assessment,” he thundered, “the consequences of this moral upheaval have been grim.” He went on to cite statistics on rising out-of-wedlock births (“illegitimacy”), along with “record levels of depression and mental illness, dispirited young people, soaring suicide rates, increasing numbers of angry and alienated young males, an increase in senseless violence, and a deadly drug epidemic.”

This tententious reading of U.S. history ignores reality. By most metrics, the country is far better off than when Barr was a boy. He was born in 1950, when segregation was legal and homosexuality was not.

Consider some of the improvements since 1960. Real per capita gross domestic product has increased 216 percent, from \$18,268 in the first quarter of 1960 to \$57,719 in the first quarter of 2019, driven in part by a 230 percent increase in output per hour for non-farm workers as of 2015. The share of 25- to 34-year-olds who have graduated from college has tripled as of 2016. Infant mortality has fallen nearly 80 percent as of 2018. The homicide rate was unchanged as of 2018 — five murders per 100,000 people — but that disguises a vast improvement since the homicide rate peaked at 10.4 per 100,000 in 1980. While the number of out-of-wedlock births was more than seven times higher in 2018, the share of single mothers has declined since 1997 because more unmarried parents live together. The abortion rate soared after *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 but has fallen more than 50 percent since 1980. How does Barr account for these improvements if the United States is on the road to ruin?

(See the table of statistics on page 7)

Barr’s simplistic idea that the country is better off if it is more religious is based on faith, not evidence. Statistics

on the 10 countries with the highest percentage of religious people and the 10 countries with the lowest percentage based on a 2017 WIN/Gallup International survey of 68 countries show that the least religious countries are either Asian nations where monotheism never took hold (China, Japan) or Western nations such as Australia, Sweden and Belgium, where secularism is much more advanced than in the United States. The most religious countries represent various faiths: There are predominantly Christian countries (the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Armenia), Muslim (Pakistan, Buddhist Thailand, Hindu India) – and countries of mixed faiths (Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Fiji).

Indicators suggest that the less religious nations are much better off. Average GDP per capita in the least religious countries is more than five times higher, while the unemployment rate is more than twice as low and the poverty rate is one and a half times lower. The homicide rate is five times lower. Life expectancy is 22 percent higher, and infant mortality is 1,000 percent lower – in part because the least religious nations spend 50 percent more per capita on health care. The least religious countries are also better educated, with a mean 12 years of schooling per capita vs. 7.5 years in the most religious countries. Income inequality is 24 percent lower in the least religious countries, and gender inequality (as measured by the World Bank) is more than 400 percent lower. Finally, the least religious countries are freer, with an average score of 87.6 from Freedom House, compared to 56.5 for the most religious countries.

Gallup notes that “levels of religiosity diminish as income and education levels of the interviewees increase.” Put another way: Declining religiosity is not the result of a leftist plot. Capitalism has done more than the Supreme Court to break down traditional beliefs.

The United States is unusual not because religious observance has declined over the years but because it remains much higher than expected. A 2018 Pew Research Center survey found that 55 percent of American adults say they pray daily, compared with only 22 percent of Europeans. U.S. church attendance is down from its peak in 1960 but about the same level as in 1940.

Pew concluded that “the U.S. is the only country out of 102 examined in the study that has higher-than-average levels of both prayer and wealth.” But, perversely, the United States does worse in critical areas – such as the rate of homicides by firearms and the rate of children living in single-parent households – than Western nations that are less religious. How does Barr explain this if he thinks religion is a social elixir?

Fundamentalists may be unhappy that religious observance has declined over the decades, but the data shows that, by most measurements, life has gotten much better for most people. There is little evidence that a decline in religiosity leads to a decline in society – or that high levels of religiosity strengthen society. (Remember, Rome fell after it converted to Christianity.) If anything, the evidence suggests that too much religion is bad for a country.

WE CELEBRATED DARWIN DAY IN A BIG WAY

[Pete’s Tavern pic]

We filled the upstairs Speakeasy Room at Pete’s Tavern on February 15 for our 12th Annual SHSNY Darwin Day Celebration. We wined, we dined, we met old friends, made new ones and, best of all, met, heard and paid rapt attention to Dr. Isabel Behncke.

[pic of Behncke at Pete’s]

Professor Behncke’s talk, “Primate Journeys: Darwin’s Influence in Understanding our Primate Origins”, was the fascinating background to the personal story of her 3000km trek in the Congo to study our primate cousins, the bonobos of central Africa.

[pic of Behncke w/bonobo]

Want to know more about this fascinating woman and her work? Google “Isabel Behncke” and watch one or more of her insightful and entertaining videos; one’s a TED talk.

And a good time was had by all, including:

Bernard Alston; Walter and Dolores Balcerak; Isabel Behncke (our speaker) and her friend; William Carter; Sophie Cote and a friend whose name we didn’t catch; Ellen, Ron and Susan Duncan, plus Duke Shareen; Brian, Jon, Karen and William Engel; Harry French and Mary Orovan; Joel Galker; Debbie Goddard; Elizabeth Ijalba; Dorothy Kahn; Sharon Krutzel; Brian Lemaire; Laurence Mailender; Carl Marxer; Claire Miller; Carlos Mora; John Rafferty; Marvin Schissel; Larry Shaw; Harvey Wachtel and a friend; John Wagner and Lorraine Gudas; Mike Weiss; and Bob and Blaikie Worth.

DID YOU MISS NEIL DE GRASSE TYSON’S SUPER BOWL TWEET?

(Lifted from *inverse.com*, 2/4/2020)

While you’re watching, think about this ...

If the football field were a timeline of the 14-billion year Old Universe, with the Big Bang at one end, then at the other end, the width of a single blade of grass spans 30,000 years of human history, from Cro-Magnon to the present.

Putting humanity’s entire existence into perspective by placing it on the infinite timeline of the universe’s history, then the 30,000 year existence of our species, *Homo sapiens*, makes up about 0.0002 percent of the universe’s entire history to the present.

Feeling insignificant yet?

Of course, scientists are not sure how many “blades of grass” that might share similarities with our own species there are throughout the universe. There may be other life forms out in the cosmos that take up entire yards of greenery. And despite our short existence, we are inching closer to discovering their existence.

SHSNY CALENDAR: MARCH – MAY 2020

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, MARCH 5, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK
28 East 35 St. (front lounge)
We'll discuss
THREE ROADS TO
QUANTUM GRAVITY
Lee Smolin

[book cover]

Lee Smolin provides an accessible overview of the attempts to build a final “theory of everything”. He explains in simple terms what scientists are talking about when they say the world is made from exotic entities such as loops, strings, and black holes, and tells the fascinating stories behind these discoveries: the rivalries, epiphanies, and intrigues he witnessed firsthand.

Written with exceptional style and clarity, *Three Roads to Quantum Gravity* confronts the deepest questions of the nature of the universe and provides a preview of some of the remarkable scientific developments we can look forward to in the 21st century.

“A mix of science, philosophy and science fiction at once entertaining, thought-provoking, fabulously ambitious and fabulously speculative.” – *The New York Times*

“Provocative, original, and unsettling.” – *The New York Review*

Earle Bowers will lead.

– *Paperback(s) 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, APR 2, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
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 and so 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*

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

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

MEET US ON MEETUP

www.meetup.com/shsny-org/

TEXT US ON TWITTER

@SHS_NewYork

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION
SUN, MARCH 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:

What is this democracy everybody is talking about?

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
THURS, MARCH 26, 7:00 pm
John Raffrty's apartment
141 East 56 St. (10F)
PHILOSOPHY ON THE TUBE:
The Trolley Problem on
"The Good Place"

Several episodes during the four seasons of NBC's hit sitcom – about a hypothetical afterlife wherein four recently deceased (but attractive and young, of course) have a chance to rethink and perhaps redeem their selfish and narcissistic lives – actually dealt with questions of ethics and morality. Including, in Season 2, Episode 5, the classic Trolley Problem, i.e., How can we/should we make life-and-death decisions. Who lives, who dies, and why?

But it's a sitcom – *it's funny!* To reserve your space on the sofa (*limited space!*), email editor@shsny.org. *Hint:* Donations of wine, cheese, and/or cookies are very welcome.



SHSNY CALENDAR: MARCH – MAY 2020

SHSNY FICTION BOOK CLUB
TUES, MARCH 10, 7:00 pm
Nancy Adelman’s apartment
205 Third Ave. (6H)

Come for wine, cheese, and sparkling conversation about

FREAKY DEAKY

Elmore Leonard

Over-the-hill former counter-culture revolutionaries decide to turn bomb-making from political statement to a profitable enterprise, in an explosively funny thriller by “the world’s greatest cops ‘n’ robbers novelist”.

Elmore Leonard wrote more than forty books during his long career, and received the Lifetime Achievement Award from PEN USA and the Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America. He died in 2013.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

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

Advance-Reading Notice:
Apr 14: *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.

May 11: *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.

LESS RELIGIOUS NATIONS ARE BETTER OFF

How the 10 top most religious nations compare with the 10 top least religious nations.

	Top 10 most religious countries	Top 10 least religious countries
Gross domestic product per capita	\$7,955	\$44,278
Unemployment rate	7.9%	4.4%
Poverty rate	29.2%	13.7%
Homicide rate per 100,000 people	5.1	1.01
Life expectancy (years)	66.4	80.9
Infant mortality per 1,000 births	36.3	3.25
Years at school (mean)	7.5	12.1
Income Inequality (Higher numbers mean more unequal)	38.6	31.1
Gender Inequality (Higher numbers mean more unequal)	0.49	0.2
Current health expenditure as percent of G.D.P.	4.24	9.06
Freedom Index (Higher score is better)	56.5	87.6

Sources: Top 10 most and least religious countries from WIN/Gallup International End of Year Survey 2017. These questions were asked in 68 countries. Other data from International Monetary Fund, the United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Reports and U.S. Census Bureau’s 2017 estimates.

Candidates for the SHSNY Board speak for themselves:

CARL MARXER

[pic]

As a video and communications professional, I will continue to be a resource documenting and communicating the information available to SHSNY as a group, and helping make that information more available to the general population. I have won several awards for my documentary film and motion graphics work. With my background as a communicator and educator, I want to use the skills I have gained to spread the knowledge about SHSNY and what it stands for.

I was previously in the Atlanta area for many years, and grew tired of the religious dogma so prevalent there. I wanted to grow my business professionally, and decided to take advantage of the resources that the NYC area has to offer. Lucky for me, I found my cousin, Donna Marxer and the Secular Humanist Society of New York. I was invited to several of the meetings and found like-minded humanists and rationalists that I agree with in thought and philosophy. And I thought I was the only one who had these feelings. I believe though, that there are lots of people who have the same feelings as I do about life, but do not express them because of the pressures of organized religion. I want to help them see that it is OK to express their feelings through and with the support of the SHSNY organization.

My current duties include filming the major meetings and posting them to YouTube and Facebook. I help John Wagner with the SHSNY Facebook page. I sit in on the events committee, so that I can get the details of events I need to film. I help John Rafferty as much as I can with the newsletter mailings.

CLAIRE MILLER

[pic]

I would be glad to serve another term as a member of the Board. The aims of this organization are dear to my heart, as are its members. In these troubling times, it's important to be able to join with like-minded folk, and share our thoughts as well as a few laughs. I've been serving as Events Coordinator and hope to continue in that capacity.

BRIAN LEMAIRE

[pic]

I want to run for re-election to the Board of the Secular Humanist Society of New York. My values align with this organization, furthering the interests of its members, in providing a place for a community for us.

For now I contribute to the organization by performing the functions of Secretary and Treasurer, backing up John

Rafferty in the monthly job of mailing out membership renewals, and in furthering the general tone of the organization: levity, community, and humanity. Isn't that the motto of France?

Anyway, I continue to participate in our monthly and special events, and to look for new ones to offer.

JONATHAN ENGEL

[pic]

My name is Jonathan Engel and I am currently the President of the Secular Humanist Society of New York. I've had the privilege of serving on the Board of Directors for the past 4 years, and I am asking for your support to be elected to another term on the Board.

We should never take for granted our right to be secular. Ever since human beings created religion, those who insisted on thinking for themselves have been attacked and persecuted. Sadly, this bias against the rational and reasonable continues to this day. That is just one reason why the work of SHSNY is so relevant and important, and why I am seeking another term on the Board.

I contribute to the work of SHSNY in a number of ways. As many of you know, I am a regular contributor of essays to PIQUE. I have represented SHSNY at various forums, and I give presentations on secular matters to other freethought groups. I organize and chair Board of Directors meetings, and I am involved in outreach to the community.

The work of SHSNY in advocating for reason, rationality, and the decent treatment of every human being is very important to me, and so I hope to continue as a member of the Board of Directors.

KIWI CALLAHAN

[PIC]

I would like to run for re-election. I enjoy working with this organization, and I believe in the work that we are doing to spread the word about our values. I feel that my role as representative to the UN is a good fit for me, and will allow me to contribute to the organization in a way that most closely aligns with my skills.

And I am eager to see how Jon Engel grows into the role of leading the group as well.

JOHN A WAGNER

[pic]

I want to continue my 9 years commitment to the SHSNY's Executive Board where I am currently a vice president. I want to expand and strengthen our humanist community:

- I represent the SHSNY and Atheist Alliance International (AAI) at the UN, where I work on the Committee for

Freedom of Religion and Belief (CoFoRB), the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Committee on Human Rights (CHR).

- I have promoted the development of social media and I believe we should redouble our efforts to use social media to attract new members and to educate the public about humanism. I started and administer our Facebook page, which has grown to over 1600 followers.
- I strive to increase the involvement of members of the SHSNY in secular politics and wrote a number of articles under the “The Humanist Activist”, banner in Pique.
- I am vice-president of the Committee for Secular Equality, a lobbying and educational group set up by the American Humanist Association.
- I am co-chair of the Secular Coalition for New York, a lobbying organization that has been endorsed both by the SHSNY and the American Humanist Association.
- I have helped organize many of the events and educational activities sponsored by SHSNY.
- I have worked to establish more activities and services that will strongly appeal to families with children, people that are in school, those just entering the work force, and those with active careers.
- I believe we should strive for a higher public profile and take credit for ongoing activities and services produced by SHSNY.

I am a Professor of Neuroscience at Weill-Cornell Medical College in NYC and a founder of a biotech start-up called Sveikatal, Inc. I have been a freethinker and humanist since I was a teenager. I grew up in Iowa, received a Ph.D. from Princeton, continued my studies at the U. of California, San Francisco, and was on the faculty at Harvard Medical School. I am a member of SHSNY, the American Humanist Association, NYC Atheists, American Atheists, Gotham Atheists, The Freedom From Religion Foundation, NYC Skeptics, the Iowa Atheists & Freethinkers, and Center for Inquiry-NY. I am also active in progressive Democratic politics and I am on the Board of the Four Freedoms Democratic Party.

I ask for your vote.

NANCY ADELMAN

[pic]

I am a fairly new member of the Board of the Secular Humanist Society of New York, and would now very much like to run for election to a full three-year term. I have been a non-religious and free-thinking person for my entire life, so I fit right in.

I regularly help in getting PIQUE in the mail every month, and host the monthly Fiction Book Club in my apartment (donations of wine or cheese or cookies are always in order). I also feel that I bring some humor to our discussions, as well as offering a gathering, place, even though shared with an uncommonly unpleasant cat.

I ask for your vote.

DAVID ORENSTEIN

[pic]

It continues to be my honor to serve on the Board of the SHSNY at the pleasure of its members and my Board colleagues. I believe that my contributions to the organization in terms of planning, programming and other leadership initiatives helps make our organization vital to the NYC freeethought community.

Still, there is much to do and in the days ahead there remain many mountains to climb for humanists in this city, our country and around the world. I know we can reach many of our goals so long as we remain united in the grand knowledge of accepting science, living in the material world, and of course being good without the need for god.

DOROTHY KAHN

[PIC]

I most certainly want to stand for re-election to the Board. Being associated with the Secular Humanist Society of New York has had such a positive effect on my life that I'm eternally indebted to that stellar couple, John Rafferty and Donna Marxer, for bringing me into this wonderful group. Donna may no longer be with us in the flesh but her spirit of “creative mischief” still enlivens SHSNY.

My main contribution to the group is providing a topic for and moderating the Brunch and Discussion, but I do very much look forward to helping with mailing PIQUE, not to mention the lively and informative Board Meetings.

I sincerely hope that I will be re-elected and be allowed to continue my service.

JOHN RAFFERTY

[pic]

I joined SHSNY in 1998, have been a member of the Board since 2000, Secretary of the organization from 2002 to 2007, President from 2007 to 2019, and Editor of PIQUE from 2002 until, I hope, hell freezes over or I die, whichever comes later.

I am an old, way-overweight, ex-very-heavy smoker with a visceral, perhaps congenital aversion to exercise, authority, religion, received wisdom, Republicans, and so-called “healthy foods”. I like my kids (and their wives) and my grandkids, Irish whiskey, Spaghetti Carbonara, political argument, and the dynamic new leadership of SHSNY (*tip o' the hat, Jon Engel*).

I'd like to keep having fun right here, in these pages and on this Board, and so ask for your vote.

It's a strange myth that atheists have nothing to live for. It's the opposite. We have nothing to die for. We have everything to live for. – *Ricky Gervais*

INVISIBLE ENERGY

Thor Benson

(Excerpted from Inverse.com, 2/20/2020)

The Earth's atmosphere is filled with water, which occasionally takes the form of fog, clouds, or water vapor. The water also contains energy. The most visible and extreme example of this energy is lightning. A new study has revealed that we can capture this energy to create electricity, and this development could change the renewable energy scene forever.

As often happens in science, this new breakthrough happened by accident. Scientists at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, were working on using protein nanowires as sensors that could be put in wearable electronic devices. What they didn't expect was for the sensors to work before they even applied a current to them.

These protein nanowires are sustainably made using microorganisms, and they're less than 10 microns thick. These researchers discovered that by placing the nanowires between electrodes they could generate a charge. They're calling the device the "Air-gen". The study was just published in the journal *Nature*.

Derek Lovley, a microbiologist at the university and one of the authors of the study, tells Inverse that the water from the humidity in the air releases its charge as it is absorbed by the layer of wires.

"We just put a very thin layer of those wires on an electrode, then put a smaller electrode on top and that protein nanowire film absorbs humidity from the atmosphere ... The water holds a charge that is released as the water is absorbed. That's how we get an electric current."

They've only made a very small device that can power something like an LED light so far, but Lovley says the device is scalable, especially since they recently had another breakthrough.

"We had this bottleneck—I just couldn't produce very many wires," Lovley says. "We recently constructed a new microbe that makes it very easy to produce large quantities of wires. Now that we've solved that microbiological bottleneck, we can make a lot of wires to make larger devices."

Lovley says he was able to create a strain of *E. coli* that allows him to produce wires much more easily. He says this device could likely be scaled up to the point where you could create as much energy as you need with enough of them. The difference between a device like this and a solar panel is that a solar panel is 2D—meaning it can only be scaled up by adding more panels to your array—but this device can be scaled up in three dimensions. It works at night and can even work inside.

Lovley says the device works in pretty much any environment, regardless of how humid it is. He says it could even work in the Sahara Desert.

"The Air-gen is a 3D technology because you can stack the devices on top of each other," Lovley says. "It works 24/7. It doesn't need the Sun. It also doesn't need wind. It can work indoors."

Comment: Really? Wait a minute ... really?! – JR

LIVING WITH ABSURDITY

James A. Haught

(Reprinted from Daylight Atheism, patheos.com, 1/27/2020)

Existentialists see that life is profoundly absurd. Here's why: People search for a meaning to it all, but the universe has no discernible purpose, no moral code, no cosmic guidelines. Honest thinkers feel adrift, floundering on their own, lacking sure rules. Biology and evolution put us here, but that's all we can know.

We are doomed to spend our lives without knowing why we exist, or why the universe exists. Nature doesn't care whether humans live or die. All lives eventually fizzle in death, rendering the struggle mostly a trip to nowhere.

Craving purpose, some simple souls invent gods, heavens, hells. But existentialists know it's just a fantasy; the holies are imaginary. The best anyone can do is recognize the engulfing absurdity and resist it by creating personal meaning, adopting values that help humanity. For example, strive to raise good children, work hard at a worthwhile job, support people-helping political goals. However, the absurdity nonetheless remains ever-present.

In addition to the ultimate riddle of a pointless universe, I see glaring daily absurdities around us.

The Trump administration is a ludicrous example. How can the world's richest, most powerful, most technically advanced nation be led by a crude, shallow, narcissistic kook who has uttered more than 8,000 countable lies? Every day, Washington is a carnival of absurdity.

Gun massacres are another horrible freakshow of American life. The killers get no benefit from mowing down defenseless companions or strangers. Yet it happens with sickening frequency. And conservative politicians praise the sacred "right to bear arms". How absurd is that?

Muslim suicide bombings likewise are a hideous absurdity. The murderers think they're serving a god (who doesn't exist) and will be rewarded with virgin nymphs (who don't exist) in a paradise (that doesn't exist). It doesn't get much more absurd than this.

Twisters, floods, wildfires, hurricanes, droughts and other climate catastrophes inflict hundreds of billions in damage. Yet President Trump says global warming is a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese. More absurdity.

America had 70,000 drug overdose deaths in 2017, and more than 400,000 died in agony from cigarette diseases. It's dismally absurd that so many kill themselves needlessly.

Personally, here's my supreme example: America has 250 million adults, and 17 percent of them attend church on a typical Sunday. Thus more than 40 million people pray each Sabbath to imaginary spirits that don't actually exist, and sing hymns to them. What a farce.

Most absurd of all, one-fourth of the world's two billion Christians now are Pentecostals who "speak in tongues". Goofy, goofy.

From this perspective, the world is mostly a big loony bin. Some existentialists feel despair over the dearth of meaning, but I have a different reaction. I think life is fun, even without transcendental purpose. Every day is a fasci-

nating circus, another adventure in human complexity. The zoo of humanity is delightful, as well as dismal.

We make our own purpose by finding our own values, creating rewarding lives with affectionate mates and children, pursuing solid careers, enjoying all the joys we can reap. A Unitarian seminar I once took was titled “Dancing over the dark abyss.” That’s a formula for coping with the absurdity that engulfs us.

READERS RESPOND

To the Editor: Joel Galker in January PIQUE (“None? A Question for Secular Humanists”) complains about being called a “none”. But “none” is a neologism merely used to describe someone who checks “none of the above” when filling out forms that ask for religious preferences. Galker says “Secularism might be something more than the ‘none of the above’ suggested on surveys.”

I agree, because “secularism” and “none” do not necessarily have identical meanings. I am both a none and a secularist, different words and different concepts, but I won’t complain if described as either. – *Marvin Schissel*

To the Editor: Regarding “Dunno” in the February issue of PIQUE, Stephen Hawking spent a good part of his life thinking about the question of the beginning of the universe. In his last, posthumous, book, *Brief Answers to Big Questions*, he addressed the question of “something from nothing”, and offered a proof that it does not require a god or supernatural being.

Of course, he uses quantum physics, which makes my brain melt; I don’t understand the physics. However, I am encouraged that science and reason, not faith, can provide a way to consider the most profound of questions.

– *George Unser, Humanists and Freethinkers of Fairfield (CT)*

To the Editor: You asked (“Dunno”, February PIQUE) for our answers to “How can you believe something came from nothing?” I’ll start by objecting to the form of the question, which is impossible for me to answer because of its implicit assumption that I must believe this. I assume you arrived at this formulation by uncritically quoting some troll or other.

Let’s stick to the neutral question that should have been asked: Do you believe something can come from nothing, and, whatever your answer, how can you account for the existence of the universe?

If I can be said to have faith in anything, it’s the consistency of the laws of nature, including conservation of energy/mass. No, I don’t believe something can come from nothing.

So what about all this stuff in the universe? Did it come from nothing? Well, I ask, when was there ever “nothing”? If “universe” means what it’s supposed to, it includes all of space-time. The phrase “before the universe existed” (whether or not it began with the Big Bang is irrelevant) is a logical contradiction. There was no “then” then.

There never was “nothing” for the universe to “come from”. The universe just is. – *Harvey Wachtel*

DONALD TRUMP HAS A SPIRITUAL ADVISER

Brad Reed

(Based on and excerpted from RawStory.com, 2/17/2020)

[pic of White)

Paula White, a “prosperity gospel” minister who sells ~~stuckers~~ believers “resurrection seeds” that will grant them eternal life for the low price of just \$1,144, and who says she had an in-person visit with God last month, has landed an “official” job in the administration as President Donald Trump’s “spiritual adviser”.

Oh, and while bringing the light of the Lord’s word to the president, she apparently believes her followers should live in the dark to help keep the lights on at her church. She recently told followers at her Supernatural Ministry School in Miami that they could secure God’s favor by sending her church as much money as possible – even if that meant skipping their monthly electric bills.

Assuming the voice of a backslider, White said that followers who send their money to Florida Power & Light (FPL) every month instead of giving it to her church are treating the electric company better than they treat God.

“Instead of writing [that check] to the house of God as I’m instructed to, what I’m saying spiritually is, ‘FPL, I have now established a spiritual law that put you first.’ So, FPL, save my family. FPL, deliver my drug addicted son. FPL, kill this cancer that doctors say is in my body.”

DONALD TRUMP HAS A HERO

[PIC OF LIMBAUGH]

During his State of the Union speech last month, Donald Trump awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Rush Limbaugh—a radio host who has said that the predominantly African-American NBA should be renamed “the Thug Basketball Association”, that the NFL “all too often looks like a game between the Bloods and the Crips without any weapons”, and that “all composite pictures of wanted criminals resemble Jesse Jackson”.

Comment: And my personal favorite, Rush announcing during the Clinton administration that the White House had “a new dog”, then holding up a picture of 12-year-old Chelsea. – JR

DONALD TRUMP IS A HERO

In spite of the fact that he has said several times that “a lot of people don’t know” that Lincoln was a Republican, a poll of Republicans conducted by TheEconomist/YouGov found that 53 percent of them think that Donald Trump is a better president than Abraham Lincoln was.

“If I were to run, I’d run as a Republican. They’re the dumbest group of voters in the country. They believe anything on Fox News. I could lie and they’d still eat it up. I bet my numbers would be terrific.”

– *Donald Trump, People Magazine, 1998*

TRUMP EXPLAINS ENVIRONMENT SCIENCE ...

At a January rally in Iowa, the President of the United States told his adoring followers that crazy-environmentalist Democrats were plotting to kill them:

"The Green New Deal, which would crush our farms, destroy our wonderful cows. They want to kill our cows. You know why, right? You know why? Don't say it. They want to kill our cows. That means you're next."

... WHILE HIS GOVERNMENT BLEEDS SCIENTISTS

(Excerpted from CFI's The Morning Heresy, 1/24/2020)

In the first two years of the Trump administration, more than 1,600 federal scientists left government, according to employment data analyzed by *The Washington Post* ... a 1.5 percent drop, compared with the 8 percent increase during the same period in the Obama administration.

One-fifth of the high-level appointee positions in science are vacant — normally filled by experts who shape policy and ensure research integrity.

Of those who departed, the numbers were greatest among social scientists, soil conservationists, hydrologists and experts in the physical sciences — chemistry, geology, astronomy and physics.

At the Environmental Protection Agency, nearly 700 scientists have left in the past three years.

LAST MINUTE MESSAGE FOR A TIME CAPSULE

Philip D. Appleman

(From New and Selected Poems, 1956-1996)

I have to tell you this, whoever you are:
that on one summer morning here,
the ocean pounded in on tumbledown breakers
a south wind, bustling along the shore,
whipped the froth into little rainbows,
and a reckless gull swept down the beach
as if to fly were the only thing it needed.
I thought of your hovering saucers,
looking for clues, and I wanted to write this down,
so it wouldn't be lost forever —
that once upon a time we had
meadows here, and astonishing things,
swans and frogs and luna moths
and blue skies that could stagger your heart.
We could have had them still,
and welcomed you to earth,
but we also had the righteous ones
who worshipped the True Faith, and a Holy War.
When you go home to your shiny galaxy,
say that what you learned
from this dead and barren place is
to beware the righteous ones.

Page 10
and Absurdity
Invisible Energy

Page 5
Celebrating Darwin Day

Page 4
Roadmap to a Theocracy

Page 2
Corrupt? Us?

Page 1
The Rule of Law

Pages 1, 8-9
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