

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

February 16, 2021

What does Joe Biden's "liberal Catholicism" mean to those of us not so keen on *any* kind of Catholicism? Find out herein. Herein, too, your friendly neighborhood Editor congratulates a departing friend on a job well done (below), David Rafferty calls for continuing civic responsibility, David Orenstein seizes the day, Jon Engel celebrates a Black life uniquely lived, Larry Shaw warns us about Youknowwho's fascism, Dennis Middlebrooks celebrates a science fictioner, and we all worry about boredom ... and wonder what we'll do when again we can do whatever we want. — JR

WELL DONE, ROY SPECKHARDT

I met Roy Speckhardt in April, 2010, when he joined Art Harris, Lee Loshak and me for breakfast at a West Side bistro and, after a four-way exchange of ideas about humanism, invited the Secular Humanist Society of New York to become a New York Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association. Within a month that happened, and our association with the AHA, and with Roy, has been both happy and productive.

Roy, who joined the AHA staff 20 years ago and was appointed Executive Director in 2005, has overseen the organization's exponential growth and evolution from a small organization to an advocacy powerhouse. During his tenure, AHA quadrupled its membership, and its reach grew from thousands to millions. He has also made hundreds of public appearances, written scores of published articles, and authored the AHA's primer, *Creating Change Through Humanism*. His next book, *Justice Centered Humanism*, will be released in April.

But "to every thing there is a season" (irony intended), and Roy has decided that it is time for a change:

"Being at the helm of such an organization as the AHA, whose mission is so critical to our times and whose influence far outstrips its size, was the greatest honor of my life, but I've decided it's time for me to step down and make room for new leadership. It is my emphatic hope that my seat is filled with a Black or Brown humanist because our movement has gone too long without such diversity at the helm and this would open the door for the AHA to truly achieve its potential as a humanist and anti-racist institution."

Well said, Roy Speckhardt, well done. — JR



WHAT WILL CHANGE?

Some answers to the question posed last week: What do you think will change—and what will you *do*—after we've survived the pandemic?

Nancy Adelman: I will host book clubs, meetings, social events in my apartment. I will still have social distancing and mask wearing because of the variants but hope people will crawl out from under their beds.

Brian Lemaire: When this is over, I'm going to seize the opportunity and visit restaurants and other attractions. The Skyscraper Museum down by the Battery. That semi-outdoor restaurant in Union Square Park that faces the Barnes & Noble on the North side of that park. Many little restaurants. And not one Starbucks!

Dorothy Kahn: I think we will start hugging each other as soon as it becomes safe to do so, or sooner. Last Monday early in the storm I had to cross 34th Street. There was a large pile of snow and ice between me and the sidewalk. A young woman saw the problem and came to my rescue. The memory of the warmth of her arm supporting me will stay with me forever.

Kiwi Callahan: I have always considered myself a "hugger", but I think I will be sticking to handshakes for anyone outside my close friend and family circle for a long time. Matt and I do not plan on eating indoors until NYC has a high level of herd immunity and restaurant restrictions are completely lifted. We've been supporting our local neighborhood restaurants throughout the winter thus far and have grown quite accustomed to eating outdoors in all kinds of weather, so we see no need to put ourselves at risk for the sake of eating out.

I think I'll be wearing a mask on the subway for the foreseeable future regardless of NYC's overall health numbers — this might be a permanent adjustment for me, but

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SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, F.D.R. Station, New York, NY 10150-7661 / www.shsny.org

Individual membership \$40 per year; Family membership \$65; Subscription only: \$30; Student: \$20.

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we'll see how things go.

Jonathan Engel: It depends on what we mean by the pandemic being "over". I'm sure that the return to all the ways of our past will take time to achieve, and we'll have to stay careful for quite some time. But when we get to go out again without masks, I'm going to smile at as many people as I can, to make up for lost time.

Joel Galker: I'm reluctant to predict. I'm a Covid wimp. My impression compared to whose? People I see on the news? If you watch the news it's mainly idiots in bars and restaurants, or people getting vaccinated or going to or volunteering in food pantries; it's doctors, nurses, phone technicians and the like. I wouldn't be surprised if the epidemic decides to keep going for many months. Maybe a year? When Doc Fauci speaks, I listen to what he says, the qualifiers and what he doesn't say.

I don't do closed places and back rooms now, don't go to stores, restaurants and bars. After the all-clear I might do hit and run to some of the places I've stayed away from, the museums, art galleries, and stores, like Kalustyan's, the Container Store, Old Navy, Designer Shoe Warehouse in Atlantic Terminal, the Met, Frick Collection, Strand, maybe two or three galleries in Chelsea, the barber, all while somehow avoiding crowded subways ... which comes down to medical visits and what's within walking distance when I can pick the hour. For now we have virtual meetups, but nobody is fooled. I fear for Zoom events to peter out before my need to hide under the covers. Zoom isn't a lot like life but it's what's life is today.

John A Wagner: Let's look on the bright side. Every crisis provides opportunity, and the COVID-19 pandemic has opened and accelerated the value of video communications over platforms like Zoom.

No, Zoom will not replace our human need for in-person meetings and close contact. Nothing can replace sharing food with friends, colleagues, or, even, strangers. Nothing can replace a smile followed by a hug; but we are adding to our repertoire, learning new social skills, and creating a new etiquette. It is still easier to read body language when you are in the same room, but Zoom and its successors will mean less travel for business meetings. It means we can more easily bring experts together to discuss problems, give seminars to groups, or ask questions. We will enjoy richer and more varied human experiences.

John Rafferty: I'm going to take me out to a ball game, and I don't care if I never get back.

LATENIGHT LOOKS AT A NEW COVID TEST

China has rolled out an anal swab coronavirus test, more accurate than the throat method. It's more accurate, but it's still being called the number two test." — *Jimmy Fallon*

The plus side is with testing like this, you might not even need a vaccine. You just tell people, 'Hey, we're not having lockdowns, but every time you leave your apartment, some stranger's going to shove a Q-Tip up your butt.' We'll be done with corona in, like, two weeks." — *Trevor Noah*

DANGEROUS BOREDOM

Alyssa Rosenberg

(Excerpted from "Boredom is making the world weirder and more dangerous", *washingtonpost.com*, 2/5/2021)

In his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the cultural critic Neil Postman wrote that "We all build castles in the air. The problems come when we try to live in them." Postman was a pessimist, but not pessimistic enough. It's worrisome when citizens of a democracy take up permanent residency in fantasyland. But it's even more dangerous when they try to renovate reality to match their castles in the air — and to insist that everyone else live there, too. ...

Covid-19 has created fertile ground both for conspiratorial thinking and mischief. This is not merely because the pandemic is a catastrophic global event with mysterious origins, but also because it has left huge numbers of people feeling isolated and bored. And no matter what Postman might have thought in 1985, and no matter how many blockbuster movies and binge-able television series we can watch from home, mass culture isn't a sufficiently powerful anesthetic to make people forget that they're missing out on a full year of school, work and social interaction.

Absent everything that constitutes real life, it's no surprise that Americans desperately seek out substitutes, and that conspiracy theories and generalized online puckishness are popular alternatives.

As Princeton's Damaris Graeupner and Alin Coman wrote in their 2017 paper, "The dark side of meaning-making: How social exclusion leads to superstitious thinking", a sense of social exclusion can drive people to embrace conspiracy theories. As converts burrow into stranger and stranger ideas, they risk isolating from friends and family who don't share their belief in misinformation. In compensation, they find a sense of belonging in the communities built around those ideas, shutting themselves off from competing points of view. So conspiracy theories like QAnon do more than seek to explain overwhelming and unimaginable circumstances. By giving adherents "research" to do and texts to interpret, they also provide a way to fill empty hours with what feels like productive, empowering work.

In retrospect, the GameStop frenzy seems predictable, too, but in a different way. Thanks to the pandemic, a lot of Americans have fewer ways to spend money on amusements and a strong desire to find alternate sources of income; gambling on so-called meme stocks and talking about it with friends is a form of entertainment that can take place entirely online. And the disparate financial impact of the pandemic recalls the 2008 financial crisis, which many GameStop buyers have cited as a formative experience

Under normal circumstances, it would be hard to formulate a policy response to a problem like "boredom". This is not a normal moment. The Biden administration can't provide people with friends or produce a captivating TV show. But it can get shots in arms, to get the people whose arms are attached to back into the real world as soon as possible. The result won't just be a return to normalcy, but, one hopes, a badly needed return to sanity as well.

LET'S TALK ABOUT JOE BIDEN'S "LIBERAL CATHOLICISM"

Ross Douthat

(Reprinted from "Joe Biden's Catholic Moment", NYTimes OpEd, 1/23/2021)

The inauguration of our second Catholic president was, in its way, a very American-Catholic spectacle. A Jesuit delivered the invocation, the president quoted St. Augustine and paused for a moment of silent prayer just long enough for a quick Hail Mary, and the justices and celebrities represented various ethnic-Catholic inheritances – Irish for John Roberts, Italian for Lady Gaga and Nancy Pelosi, Latina for Jennifer Lopez and Sonia Sotomayor. (It was left to Garth Brooks, singing "Amazing Grace", to represent Protestant culture.) As *America Magazine* noted, even Biden's proposed cabinet is stuffed with Catholic Democrats, with few white male Protestants in sight.

It's normal for American presidents to hew close to the country's religious center. For a long time this meant almost every president belonged to one of the Protestant denominations called Mainline: Between 1881 and 1961, for instance, there were 13 Mainline-affiliated presidents (plus one Quaker and one Unitarian). The last of the 13, Dwight Eisenhower, proved the Mainline's influence by being baptized into Presbyterianism early in his presidency, like a 16th-century prince accepting the state religion to claim a vacant throne.

The decline of the Protestant establishment, the most important fact in American religious life since the 1960s, has altered this dynamic. Instead of being connected to a clear religious center, the presidency has been passed among different religious tendencies that aspire, so far mostly unsuccessfully, to the status of the old Mainline.

Thus George W. Bush represented the cultural alliance between his own evangelicalism and conservative Catholicism, which envisioned itself as a new religious establishment – and then faded amid the Catholic sex-abuse crisis and a new wave of secularization.

Barack Obama embodied an uneasy fusion between an attenuated liberal Protestantism and the African-American church – before the emergence of a more zealous, "woke" progressivism, in his second term and after, left Obama's more detached religious style behind.

Then Donald Trump, a Norman Vincent Peale "power of positive thinking" Christian without the actual belief, became an avatar for prosperity theology and Christian nationalism – a style of religiosity too fundamentally right-wing to lay claim to the religious center.

Now we have Biden. Many emergent forces are changing liberalism's relationship to religion – wokeness, secularization, even paganism. But the new president personally embodies none of them. Instead he has elevated his own liberal Catholicism to the center of our national life.

Calling a form of religion "liberal" can mean two different things: On the one hand, a theological liberalism, which seeks an evolution in doctrine to adapt to modern

needs; on the other, support for policies and parties of the center-left. In practice, though, the two tend to be conjoined: The American Catholic Church as an institution is caught between the two political coalitions, but most prominent Catholic Democrats are liberals in theology and politics alike.

But more than a set of ideas, liberal Catholicism is a culture, recognizable in its institutions and tropes, its iconography and allusions – to Pope John XXIII and Jesuit universities, to the "seamless garment" of Catholic teaching and the "spirit" of the Second Vatican Council, to the works of Thomas Merton and hymns like "On Eagle's Wings" (which Biden quoted in his victory speech).

And, of course, invocations of Pope Francis. A decade ago it was a commonplace to regard liberal Catholicism as a tradition in decline. Its period of maximal influence, the late 1960s and 1970s, had been an era of institutional crisis for the church, which gave way to the conservative pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Conservative Catholics felt that liberal ideas had been tried and failed, liberal Catholics felt that they had been suppressed. But then Francis gave the liberal tendency new life, reopening controversies that conservatives assumed were closed and tilting the Vatican toward cooperation with the liberal establishment, away from associations with conservatism.

The papacy does not issue political endorsements, but there seems little doubt that many figures in Francis' inner circle welcome a Biden presidency. When the American bishops' statement on his inauguration included a stern critique of his position on abortion, there was apparent pushback from the Vatican and explicit pushback from the most Francis-aligned of the American cardinals. So the conservative Catholics who spent the election year arguing that Biden isn't a Catholic in good standing find themselves (not for the first time) in tacit conflict with their pope.

That conflict belongs to the internal drama of Catholicism. In the internal drama of America, though, liberal Catholicism is an interesting candidate to claim the religious center, to fill the Mainline's vanished role.

If you wanted to make a case for its prospects and potential influence, you would emphasize three distinctive liberal-Catholic qualities: an abiding institutionalism, in contrast to the pure dissolving individualism of so much American religion; an increasingly multiethnic character, which matches our increasingly diverse republic; and a fervent inclusivity, an anxiety that nobody should feel discriminated against or turned away.

This inclusivity means that liberal Catholicism sometimes seems to capture the universalist aspirations of the church better than its conservative and traditionalist subcultures. The latter are supposed to be for everybody, but at the moment they tend to appeal to distinctive personality types (he said, looking in the mirror) while remaining somewhat alien to the normal run of Americans – with "normal" lately meaning not just anyone who doubts certain of the church's harder teachings but anyone who doubts the wisdom of a vote for Donald Trump.

On the other hand, liberal Catholicism sometimes achieves its feeling of universality by simply claiming for itself the whole Catholic-influenced world — sure, he’s no longer a practicing Catholic, but did you know that Dr. Anthony Fauci was educated by Jesuits? — without regard to whether that influence actually amounts to much more than a vague spirituality, a generic humanitarianism.

Which means that the liberal Catholic worldview is constantly in danger of simply being subsumed into political liberalism, with all religious distinctives shorn away — as Joe Biden’s past pro-life positions have now been entirely subsumed, for instance, by his party’s orthodoxy on abortion. Or alternatively, it’s in danger of being effectively taken over from within by rival forms of faith, like the new progressive orthodoxies that are likely to set our Catholic president’s agenda on the social questions of the day.

This is a challenge for any form of faith that aspires to supply a new religious center to our divided society — how to find a place to stand that’s actually outside partisanship, that’s clearly religious first and liberal or conservative second. On this count it’s fair to say that religious conservatives of every tradition have often failed or fallen short.

But it’s equally fair to doubt that liberal Catholicism, brought back from what had seemed its twilight years to this unexpected apotheosis, is prepared to pass the test.

TODAY’S CIVICS LESSON

David Rafferty

(Excerpted from *Greenwich (CT) Time*, 1/31/2021)

Civics, the study of the rights and duties of citizenship, has sadly become a part-time hobby most people only dip their toes into every four years. Worse, practical civics, how your country works, has been removed from most high schools in favor of the more generic “social studies”. Should it be any wonder then why so many are easily turned off by politics, don’t understand the process and are easily hoodwinked by con men and phonies looking to make a buck off our political ignorance?

Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez got me thinking recently when she spoke about the necessity of ongoing civic engagement, “Our democracy ... was broken even before Trump. (The Republican Party) have shown that they are ready to break any rule, upend any democratic norm, twist any arm, pervert any system just to maintain power. No country has ever been more able to be great for everyone than America, but we never will be if we keep being the worst we can be. If we keep pandering to the lowest common denominator. We cannot go back to brunch.”

Meaning people can’t be content with congratulating themselves and going back to being part-time warriors for democracy just because this one time they barely held off the barbarians. Truly effective, representative government cannot succeed when the governed can only rally themselves to care every four years. Democracy needs full-time, civics-literate sentinels to stand watch against those who would reject inclusive, “We the people” republican government, in favor of the rich, connected and powerful.

“ALL BLOOD RUNS RED”

Jonathan Engel

I’m currently reading a biography called *All Blood Runs Red*, by Tom Clavin and Philip Keith. It’s the story of Eugene Bullard, a Black man from Georgia who left the United States in the early 20th century in order to make his way in the world. I did not start reading this book with Black History Month in mind, but as I’ve gotten deeper into it, I’ve become convinced that it is fortuitous that I’m reading Eugene Bullard’s story during the month of February.

Gene Bullard was born in Georgia around 1895. His father was a laborer who had antecedents in Haiti, and spoke often of France, and how a Black man could live in peace there. So when he was 13 years old Gene ran away from home to try to find his way to Paris. He stowed away on a German freighter bound for Scotland, and when he was discovered, the Captain of the ship threatened to throw him overboard. But Gene was such a hardworking and ingratiating young man that the captain let him stay onboard in exchange for doing odd jobs. Eventually Gene made his way from Scotland to Paris, working as a professional boxer and as a member of a theater troupe.

Then World War I intruded on Gene Bullard’s life. He was still an American citizen at the time, and so Gene enlisted in the French Foreign Legion. Eventually he was promoted to sergeant, wounded several times, and awarded numerous medals for bravery. Unable to continue fighting in the trenches because of his wounds, Gene Bullard switched to the French Air Corps and became quite probably the first Black man to pilot a fighter plane in combat.

After the war Gene returned to Paris and worked at a nightclub owned by a friend. The jazz house band at the club needed a drummer, and so Gene became a drummer. Later on he opened his own club in Paris and continued to lead a fascinating life, the details of which I will omit here in deference to those who may want to read the book for themselves. The reason I think *All Blood Runs Red* is a great book for Black History Month is that Gene Bullard’s story highlights one debilitating aspect of America’s horrible record on race that is sometimes overlooked.

As crazy as it may sound, Gene Bullard was right to run away to Paris at the age of 13. He wound up living a life that he never could have lived anywhere in the United States at that time. He served honorably in the French armed forces in World War I, whereas the U.S. didn’t integrate its military until 1948. In the 1920s how many Black people do you think owned their own nightclub in a major American city where anyone, of any race, was welcome? Eugene Bullard was kind and decent, intelligent, brave, resourceful, and resilient, all the attributes that make for a great leader, and America had no use for him because of the color of his skin. What a waste for this country. How many other peoples’ talents did we throw away or send elsewhere because of our irrational race hatred? Let us dedicate ourselves to making sure that the Gene Bullards in our country never again have to go elsewhere to have the opportunities they deserve. For them, and for all of us.

READERS RESPOND

To the Editor: I was saddened to hear of the passing of the prominent science fiction author and editor Ben Bova from complications of Covid-19 back in late November. He was 88. I had met Ben Bova at the 1993 Asimov Seminar in Upstate New York. Ben was one of the panelists, and he made clear his atheism at the seminar, which dealt with how Space Exploration could be used to benefit humanity. I brought Ben to the attention of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, which interviewed him on its Freethought Radio show back in 2007.

Ben was a very congenial person. He told me that he was a frequent visitor to NYC and that his favorite restaurant was a place near Union Square called "Paulie & Jimmy's". I subsequently dined there a few times and it became one of my favorites. As a science fiction buff, I have read a number of his novels and enjoyed them all. He was truly a major figure in the field of science fiction for many years, winning many awards both as a writer and an editor.
– Dennis Middlebrooks

To the Editor:

There once was a fellow named Dobbs
Who appealed to white racist mobs.
When he went so astray
That Fox tossed him away,
He broke out in whimpers and sobs.

– Dennis Middlebrooks

To the Editor: Trump's impeachment trial: What is the point? He is out of office, and it is most doubtful if he will ever again have the support to hold high office. My answer is that because Trumpism is to the U.S. what Nazism was to Germany, it is a disease that must be utterly destroyed. The American public must see in detail the evil of this man and his followers. If Trump had his way ours would not only be a fascist society, it would be one that turns its back on science, allowing the global warming catastrophe to unfold, leading to a level of worldwide destruction dwarfing anything in human history, including WWII. We will not be free of Trump and his mindless followers until his regime is fully exposed. – Lawrence Shaw

A PULITZER-WINNING HISTORIAN NAILS THE REPUBLICAN PARTY Jon Meacham

(Transcribed from "Morning Joe" on MSNBC, 2/9/2021)

I would argue that the Republican party of today is foundering, is cracking up on their inability to find a coherent answer to a fundamental question, which is globalization and its implications, and the genuine creation of a multi-ethnic, pluralistic democracy.

And, frankly, the rise of Donald Trump is an indication that a lot of people who are allied with the Republican party, and who may be the Republican party today, are not ready to grapple with the end of a predominantly White America.

CARPE DIEM

David Orenstein

As some of you may know I have an artificial aortic heart valve. It was inserted into my chest in 1987, and for the last 34 years it has sustained me. The only drawback to the design is that you can hear it lightly click open and close with every beat of my heart.

During the day, with all the noise of life, its voice is almost silent. But at night, when outside sounds are low, it screams from inside my chest and reminds me of the alien living inside me. The sound is as odd as it is familiar, like that old commercial, "Timex watches take a licking and keep on ticking", or the introduction of every "60 Minutes" episode. It also reminds me that it and I share the same goal, it exists to keep me alive and I wish to live.

This alien has served me well. It has seen me through marriage, divorce and remarriage, helped me become the father of three beautiful children, helped me gain two graduate degrees and a Ph.D. It has seen me through two books and a dozen articles. It has helped me become an excellent professor and change student's lives.

It also reminds me of more fundamental ideas which draw on my common humanity, like:

- Science is an awesome human construct: respect it
- Every moment we are alive is absolutely precious
- Life should not be wasted as it is the only one we know for sure exists
- Our lives are incredibly fragile, so don't harm anyone's through violence or neglect
- And finally, that every life—no matter how well or badly lived—will one day end.

I am astounded by these five facts, confronted at once by my mortality as well as the beauty of seeing the world through the lens of an open-heart surgery survivor.

In fact I think I owe this little device a deep thanks. Not only does it foster in me the wonder of the universe and helps me question my place in it, but it helps provide a lesson as to why I still exist. It also sees to my welfare without asking for anything in return but a daily dose of warfarin.

I guess this confessional post is nothing more than a retelling of the Roman poet Horace, who in few words said what I did in several paragraphs, *Carpe diem*, known better in English as "Seize the Day".

THE HUMAN CONDITION(ER) Zach Weinersmith

(Copied from Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal, 2/5/2021)

The eyes may be the window to the soul, but the softest things in your body degrade most quickly. Your hair will linger on long after you die. It's the part of you that's most dead, the part that won't notice the stilling of your heart and chilling of your blood. And yet it is the part you take the most care of, that you hope the world appreciates. Because in your heart you know nobody will ever understand what your life meant, so you might as well burnish the lie.

