

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

May, 2013

Do you still believe in a “soul”? How about the reality of a famous Shroud? Mm, neither do we. (*But it's on TV!*) Do you still believe reason can win over the unenlightened? Ha, gotcha. We celebrate equality (or is it inequality?), two of our own who march for science, and Saudi women who pedal for (chaperoned) fun. We discover the dumbest Dumbth in Texas, an unlikely atheist hero in the UK, and religious hypocrisy, even criminality here at home. But first, ancient, bloody history. – JR

IN CASE YOU'RE WONDERING WHY GEORGE W. BUSH AND DICK CHENEY NEVER TRAVEL OUTSIDE THE U.S. ...

(Excerpted from “U.S. Practiced Torture After 9/11, Nonpartisan Review Concludes”, by Scott Shane, in The New York Times, 4/16/2013)

WASHINGTON – A nonpartisan, independent review of interrogation and detention programs in the years after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks concludes that “it is indisputable that the United States engaged in the practice of torture” and that the nation’s highest officials bore ultimate responsibility for it.

The sweeping 577-page report says that while brutality has occurred in every American war, there never before had been “the kind of considered and detailed discussions that occurred after 9/11 directly involving a president and his top advisers on the wisdom, propriety and legality of inflicting pain and torment on some detainees in our custody”. The study [was conducted] by an 11-member panel convened by the Constitution Project, a legal research and advocacy group. ...

The use of torture, the report concludes, has “no justification” and “damaged the standing of our nation, reduced our capacity to convey moral censure when necessary and potentially increased the danger to U.S. military personnel taken captive”. The task force found “no firm or persuasive evidence” that these interrogation methods produced valuable information that could not have been obtained by other means. ...

In addition, the United States is a signatory to the international Convention Against Torture, which requires the prompt investigation of allegations of torture and the compensation of its victims.

Comment: In other words, and as any of us who have had our

eyes open at all during the past decade know, there are dozens of GWB-administration officials, including our ex-President and Vice President themselves, who could, if they ever left American soil, be arrested, tried in the World Court as war criminals, and sentenced to prison.

Update: “I’m comfortable with what I did.”

– George W. Bush, on the Iraq War, April 14, 2013

WOULD THE FIRST GEORGE W. HAVE AUTHORIZED TORTURE?

David Hackett Fischer

(Excerpted from “Hard Choices” and “The Policy of Humanity” in Washington’s Crossing, Mr. Fisher’s account of the forming of the American army—and mind—in 1776-7. This originally appeared in PIQUE in February, 2006.)

Always [in 1776] some dark spirits wished to visit the same cruelties on the British and Hessians that had been inflicted on American captives. But Washington’s example carried growing weight, more so than his written orders and prohibitions. He often reminded his men that they were an army of liberty and freedom, and that the rights of humanity for which they were fighting should extend even to their enemies. ... Even in the most urgent moments of the war, these men were concerned about ethical questions in the Revolution. ...

In 1776, American leaders believed that it was not enough to win the war. They also had to win in a way that was consistent with the values of their society and the principles of their cause. One of their greatest achievements in the winter campaign of 1776-77 was to manage the war in a manner that was true to the expanding humanitarian ideals of the American Revolution. It happened in a way that was different from the ordinary course of wars in general. In Congress and the army, American leaders resolved

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that the War of Independence would be conducted with a respect for human rights, even of the enemy. This idea grew stronger during the campaign of 1776-77, not weaker as is commonly the case in war.

In Congress, John Adams ... resolved that the guiding principles of the American Republic would always be what he called the policy of humanity. He wrote, "I know of no policy, God is my witness, but this—Piety, Humanity and Honesty are the best Policy. Blasphemy, Cruelty and Villainy have prevailed and may again. But they won't prevail against America, in this Contest, because I find the more of them are employed, the less they succeed." ...

The most remarkable fact about the American soldiers and civilians in the New Jersey campaign [of 1776-77] is that ... in a desperate struggle they found a way to defeat a formidable enemy ... they reversed the momentum of the war ... they improvised a new way of war [fighting not for glory or plunder but to win, and at minimum cost in lives] that grew into an American tradition ... and they chose a policy of humanity that aligned the conduct of the war with the values of the Revolution.

They set a high example, and we have much to learn from them. Much recent historical writing has served us ill in that respect. In the late twentieth century, too many scholars tried to make the American past into a record of crime and folly. Too many writers have told us that we are captives of our darker selves and helpless victims of our history. It isn't so, and never was. The story of Washington's Crossing tells us that Americans in an earlier generation were capable of acting in a higher spirit— and so are we.

WHAT DOES "INCOME INEQUALITY" REALLY MEAN?

Paul Buchheit

(Reprinted from "Five Ugly Extremes of Inequality in America -- The Contrasts Will Drop Your Chin to the Floor", on AlterNet.com, 3/24/2013)

The first step is to learn the facts, and then to get angry and to ask ourselves, as progressives and caring human beings, what we can do about the relentless transfer of wealth to a small group of well-positioned Americans.

1. \$2.13 per hour vs. \$3,000,000.00 per hour.

Each of the Koch brothers saw his investments grow by \$6 billion in one year, which is three million dollars per hour based on a 40-hour "work" week. The coal and oil billionaires used some of the money to try to kill renewable energy standards around the country.

Their income portrays them, in a society measured by economic status, as a million times more valuable than the restaurant server who cheers up our lunch hours while hoping to make enough in tips to pay the bills.

A comparison of top and bottom salaries within large corporations is much less severe, but a lot more common. For CEOs and minimum-wage workers, the difference is \$5,000.00 per hour vs. \$7.25 per hour.

2. A single top income could buy housing for every homeless person in the U.S.

On a winter day in 2012 over 633,000 people were homeless in the United States. Based on an annual single room occupancy (SRO) cost of \$558 per month, any one of the ten richest Americans would have enough with his 2012 income to pay for a room for every homeless person in the U.S. for the entire year. These ten rich men together made more than our entire housing budget.

For anyone still believing "they earned it", it should be noted that most of the Forbes 400 earnings came from minimally-taxed, non-job-creating capital gains.

3. The poorest 47 percent of Americans have no wealth.

In 1983 the poorest 47 percent of America had \$15,000 per family, 2.5 percent of the nation's wealth. In 2009 the poorest 47 percent of America owned zero percent of the nation's wealth (their debt exceeded their assets).

At the other extreme, the 400 wealthiest Americans own as much wealth as 80 million families – 62 percent of America. The reason is the stock market. Since 1980 the American GDP has approximately doubled. Inflation-adjusted wages have gone down, but the stock market has increased by over ten times, and the richest quintile of Americans owns 93 percent of it.

4. The U.S. is nearly the most wealth-unequal country in the entire world.

Out of 141 countries, the U.S. has the 4th-highest degree of wealth inequality in the world, trailing only Russia, Ukraine, and Lebanon.

Yet the financial industry keeps creating new wealth for its millionaires. According to the authors of the Global Wealth Report, the world's wealth has doubled in ten years, from \$113 trillion to \$223 trillion, and is expected to reach \$330 trillion by 2017.

5. A can of soup for a black or Hispanic woman, a mansion and a yacht for the businessman

That's literally true. For every one dollar of assets owned by a single black or Hispanic woman, a member of the Forbes 400 has over forty million dollars.

Minority families once had substantial equity in their homes, but after Wall Street caused the housing crash, median wealth fell 66 percent for Hispanic households and 53 percent for black households. Now the average single black or Hispanic woman has about \$100 in net worth.

What to do?

End the capital gains giveaway, which benefits the wealthy almost exclusively.

Institute a Financial Speculation Tax, both to raise needed funds from a currently untaxed subsidy on stock purchases, and to reduce the risk of the irresponsible trading that nearly brought down the economy.

Perhaps above all, we progressives have to choose one strategy and pursue it in a cohesive, unrelenting attack on greed.

Only this will heal the ugly gash of inequality that has split our country in two.

DO PEOPLE BECOME LESS RELIGIOUS WHEN SOCIETIES GROW MORE EGALITARIAN?

YES.

Amanda Marcotte

(Excerpted from AlterNet.com, 6/25/2012)

Slowly but surely, religion's historical monopoly on the human mind is breaking apart. On its surface, the reason seems straightforward: the rise of secular democracy and especially of scientific understanding should encourage more people to give up on religion.

In fact, recent research from the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago shows that the picture worldwide is much more complex than that. While atheism is on the rise in many places in the world, others are seeing a rise in religiosity, creating a situation where the levels of belief and non-belief vary wildly depending on culture. One intriguing thread can be pulled from the picture, which is that there seems to be a strong correlation between high rates of atheism and countries that prioritize economic equality and make higher investments in a strong social safety net, such as France and the Netherlands.

Could liberal policies help create non-believers? Previous research indicates that when countries embrace progressive social policy, that tends to create a decline in religious belief. The theory, often called the "secularization thesis" is that the combination of good education of its citizens and the fact that citizens can rely on the government instead of the church for poverty relief means that more people will turn away from religion. But could the reasons go deeper than that? Few people base their choice of whether to believe in God or not on something as simple as whether they can go to the church or the state in times of need. Perhaps it's more that economic insecurity itself increases the desire to believe in God. And if atheists want to minimize the power religion plays in society, should they start by demanding a more secure and egalitarian society?

There's a heavy body of research showing that the more stress and uncertainty people face, the more likely they are to engage in what psychologists call "magical thinking": superstition, prayer, belief in the supernatural. In 2008, Jennifer Whitson and Adam Galinsky published a paper in *Science* demonstrating that when you remove the amount of control people have over their situation, they tend to engage more in "illusory pattern perception," which is the psychological process that creates belief in the supernatural. Other research has shown the real-world effects of this psychological tendency, showing, for instance, that people living in war zones tend to engage in more magical thinking, such as carrying lucky charms or believing in the power of prayer, than those who don't.

We can observe these effects in ordinary situations where people feel a lack of control. Take for instance, the sports fan who is usually a rational person but nonetheless refuses to wash his favorite jersey for fear that it will cause his team to lose. Or the usually non-superstitious person who, when playing dice in a casino, blows on the dice

before rolling for good luck. When we don't have control over outcomes, we sometimes try to regain that sense of control by imagining that we're actually exerting control through unseen supernatural means. Religion has a lot more tradition and power behind it than everyday superstitions, but psychologically, the process can be similar. People look to supernatural means to exert control over situations they can't influence through real-world means.

Living in a country with a poor social-safety net and high income-inequality means, for most of its citizens, living a life dogged with constant insecurity and a loss of feelings of control. People worry more about losing their jobs, and if they do lose their jobs, they worry more about becoming homeless or otherwise falling into poverty.

People without guaranteed access to health care worry more about what will happen to them if they get sick. Parents in places where the education system is shoddy worry more about what's going to happen to their kids. The less control they feel over their own destiny, the more tempting it is to conjure up a God who can save you in a society that doesn't bother. It's not so much that people believe the church will come through for them in a pinch. It's that belief in God gives them a sense of control they lack in their real-world lives.

Given these patterns, it makes sense that Russia was, along with Israel, at the top of the list of countries that had the biggest surge in religiosity in the past 20 years. A large part of that is due to the end of communism and its bans on religion, allowing people to recommit to faith. But other formerly communist nations, like the Czech Republic and Poland, didn't see such a surge in believers. In fact, the Czech Republic saw a surge in atheism in the past decade.

Of course, the two countries couldn't be more different for ordinary citizens post-communism. Russia has been a swirl of distress, making it a notoriously stressful place to live. Life expectancy in Russia hovers around 68 years, about 10 years short of the standard in more stable, prosperous Western nations. The Czech Republic, on the other hand, was praised by the U.N. for its remarkably high human development index, which is a rough shorthand to measure the stability and standard of living for the average citizen of a country. Life expectancy there has reached 77 years, closing in on countries like Germany and France.

Atheists who aren't content to simply not believe themselves, but who also want to increase the secularization of a society and the numbers of atheists, need to get behind a politically progressive agenda. Right now, the U.S. is seeing an explosion in income inequality, unemployment, and ever more serious cuts to the social safety net. The inevitable result of this is more stress, and more feelings of loss of control among ordinary Americans. If they aren't going to find safety and security in the real world, they're going to turn their hopes to a supernatural one.

Religion's grip on power is tightly entwined with the economic misfortunes of the people. If we want to build a more secular society, the first step is building a more equitable one.

WHAT SCIENCE SAYS ABOUT THE SOUL

Stephen Cave

Nathalie was hemorrhaging badly. She felt weak, cold, and the pain in her abdomen was excruciating. A nurse ran out to fetch the doctor, but by the time they arrived she knew she was slipping away. The doctor was shouting instructions when quite suddenly the pain stopped. She felt free—and found herself floating above the drama, looking down at the bustle of activity around her now still body.

“We’ve lost her”, she heard the doctor say, but Nathalie was already moving on and upwards, into a tunnel of light. She first felt a pang of anxiety at leaving her husband and children, but it was soon overwhelmed by a feeling of profound peace; a feeling that it would all be okay. At the end of the tunnel, a figure of pure radiance was waiting with arms wide open.

This, or something like it, is how millions imagine what it will be like to die. In 2009, over 70 percent of Americans said they believe that they, like Nathalie, have a soul that will survive the end of their body. That figure may well now be higher after the phenomenal success of two recent books describing vivid near death experiences: one from an innocent—the four-year-old Todd Burpo—the other from the opposite: a Harvard scientist and former skeptic, neurosurgeon Dr. Eben Alexander. Both argue that when their brains stopped working, their souls floated off to experience a better place.

This is an attractive view and a great consolation to those who have lost loved ones or who are contemplating their own mortality. Many also believe this view to be beyond the realm of science, to concern a different dimension into which no microscope can peer. Dr. Alexander, for example, said in an interview with *The New York Times*, “Our spirit is not dependent on the brain or body; it is eternal, and no one has one sentence worth of hard evidence that it isn’t.”

But he is wrong. The evidence of science, when brought together with an ancient argument, provides a very powerful case against the existence of a soul that can carry forward your essence once your body fails. The case runs like this: With modern brain-imaging technology, we can now see how specific, localized brain injuries damage or even destroy aspects of a person’s mental life. These are the sorts of dysfunctions that Oliver Sacks brought to the world in his book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat*. The man of the title story was a lucid, intelligent music teacher, who had lost the ability to recognize faces and other familiar objects due to damage to his visual cortex.

Since then, countless examples of such dysfunction have been documented—to the point that every part of the mind can now be seen to fail when some part of the brain fails. The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has studied many such cases. He records a stroke victim, for example, who had lost any capacity for emotion; patients who lost all creativity following brain surgery; and others who lost the ability to make decisions. One man with a brain tumor lost

what we might call his moral character, becoming irresponsible and disregarding of social norms. I saw something similar in my own father, who also had a brain tumor: it caused profound changes in his personality and capacities before it eventually killed him.

The crux of the challenge then is this: Those who believe they have a soul that survives bodily death typically believe that this soul will enable them, like Nathalie in the story above, to see, think, feel, love, reason and do many other things fitting for a happy afterlife. But if we each have a soul that enables us to see, think and feel after the total destruction of the body, why, in the cases of dysfunction documented by neuroscientists, do these souls not enable us to see, think and feel when only a small portion of the brain is destroyed?

To make the argument clear, we can take the example of sight. If either your eyes or the optic nerves in your brain are sufficiently badly damaged, you will go blind. This tells us very clearly that the faculty of sight is dependent upon functioning eyes and optic nerves.

Yet curiously, when many people imagine their soul leaving their body, they imagine being able to see—like Nathalie, looking down on her own corpse surrounded by frantic doctors. They believe, therefore, that their soul can see. But if the soul can see when the entire brain and body have stopped working, why, in the case of people with damaged optic nerves, can’t it see when only part of the brain and body have stopped working? In other words, if blind people have a soul that can see, why are they blind?

So eminent a theologian as Saint Thomas Aquinas, writing 750 years ago, believed this question had no satisfactory answer. Without its body—without eyes, ears and nose—he thought the soul would be deprived of all senses, waiting blindly for the resurrection of the flesh to make it whole again. Aquinas concluded that the body-less soul would have only those powers that (in his view) were not dependent upon bodily organs: faculties such as reason and understanding.

But now we can see that these faculties are just as dependent upon a bodily organ—the brain—as sight is upon the eyes. Unlike in Aquinas’s day, we can now keep many people with brain damage alive and use neuroimaging to observe the correlations between that damage and their behavior. And what we observe is that the destruction of certain parts of the brain can destroy those cognitive faculties once thought to belong to the soul. So if he had had the evidence of neuroscience in front of him, we can only imagine that Aquinas himself would have concluded that these faculties also stop when the brain stops.

In fact, evidence now shows that everything the soul is supposed to be able to do—think, remember, love—fails when some relevant part of the brain fails. Even consciousness itself—otherwise there would be no general anesthetics. A syringe full of chemicals is sufficient to extinguish all awareness. For anyone who believes something like the Nathalie story—that consciousness can survive bodily death—this is an embarrassing fact. If the soul can sustain

JOHN WAGNER & LORRAINE GUDAS RALLY FOR MEDICAL RESEARCH

our consciousness after death, when the brain has shut down permanently, why can it not do so when the brain has shut down temporarily?

Some defenders of the soul have, of course, attempted to answer this question. They argue, for example, that the soul needs a functioning body in this world, but not in the next. One view is that the soul is like a broadcaster and the body like a receiver – something akin to a television station and a TV set. (Though as our body is also the source of our sensory input, we have to imagine the TV set also has a camera on top feeding images to the distant station.)

We know that if we damage our TV set, we get a distorted picture. And if we break the set, we get no picture at all. The naive observer would believe the program was therefore gone. But we know that it is really still being transmitted; that the real broadcaster is actually elsewhere. Similarly, the soul could still be sending its signal even though the body is no longer able to receive it.

This response sounds seductive, but helps little. First, it does not really address the main argument at all: Most believers expect their soul to be able to carry forward their mental life with or without the body; this is like saying that the TV signal sometimes needs a TV set to transform it into the picture, but once the set is kaput, can make the picture all by itself. But if it can make the picture all by itself, why does it sometimes act through an unreliable set?

Second, changes to our bodies impact on our minds in ways not at all analogous to how damage to a TV set changes its output, even if we take into account damage to the camera too. The TV analogy claims there is something that remains untouched by such damage, some independent broadcaster preserving the real program even if it is distorted by bad reception. But this is precisely what the evidence of neuroscience undermines. Whereas damage to the TV set or camera might make the signal distorted or fuzzy, damage to our brains much more profoundly alters our minds. As we noted above, such damage can even change our moral views, emotional attachments, and the way we reason.

Which suggests we are nothing like a television; but much more like, for example, a music box: the music is not coming from elsewhere, but from the workings within the box. When the box is damaged, the music is impaired; if the box is entirely destroyed, then the music stops for good.

There is much about consciousness that we still do not understand. We are only beginning to decipher its mysteries, and may never fully succeed. But all the evidence we have suggests that the wonders of the mind—even near-death and out of body experiences—are the effect of neurons firing. Contrary to the beliefs of the vast majority of people on Earth, from Hindus to New Age spiritualists, consciousness depends upon the brain and shares its fate to the end.

The average man, who does not know what to do with his life, wants another one which will last forever.

– Anatole France

Two SHSNYers marched in the “Rally for Medical Research” in Washington on April 8. Lorraine Gudas, Chair of Pharmacology at Weill Cornell Medical College, and SHSNY Board member Professor John Wagner of the Department of Neurology & Neuroscience, Department of Cell Biology & Genetics at Weill Cornell Medical College, marched to focus on the “sequestration” cuts of more than \$1.5 billion to the National Institute of Health’s (NIH) funding – cuts impacting patients, jobs, and research.



Calling for “more progress, more hope, more life”, the crowd – estimated at 10,000 to 12,000 people by rally sponsor the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) – heard speakers argue that a larger investment in the NIH would generate hope for people living with devastating diseases such as cancer, for young people seeking careers in research science, and for the American economy. Attendees also participated in a text-message campaign aimed at federal lawmakers.

“It’s a shame”, John said, “that a Congressional act can’t sequester disease.”

Comment: Thank you, Lorraine and John – you represent the best of humanist ideals and practice. – JR

MEET THE NEW BOARD LEADER FOR THE 2013 DUMBTH AWARD: STEVE STOCKMAN

Meet Steve Stockman, a Republican newly elected to represent Texas’ 36th District in the House. His previous two-year term, representing a different (gerrymandered) district, was “marked by weirdness”, according to the *Houston Chronicle*.



So, back on the job again in January, and in response to the Sandy Hook massacre of children, Stockman introduced “The Safe Schools Act”, a bill to *repeal* federal laws mandating “gun-free zones” around schools. He also voted against re-authorizing the Violence Against Women Act, saying:

“This is a truly bad bill. This is helping the liberals, this is horrible. Unbelievable. What really bothers – it’s called a women’s act, but then they have men dressed up as women, they count that. Change-gender, or whatever. How is that – how is that a woman?”

All disgusting, mean-spirited, and ugly, but not dumb. So how does Mr. Stockman earn a Dumbth nomination? With his new re-election-campaign bumper sticker:

“If babies had guns they wouldn’t be aborted.”

That is one of the great beauties of free speech. If we must have bigots and totalitarians in our midst, it is good to know who they are and what they think, so we can beware of them. – *Minette Marrin, Sunday Times (UK)*

SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY - JULY 2013

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, MAY 2, 6:30 pm
in the front room of
**THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK**

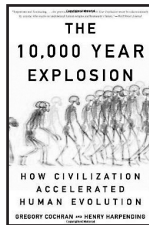
28 East 35 St. (Park-Mad)
(3 doors West of the church - red door)

We'll discuss

**THE 10,000 YEAR EXPLOSION:
How Civilization Accelerated
Human Evolution**

By Cochran and Harpending

Scientists have long believed that the "great leap forward" that occurred some 40,000 to 50,000 years ago in Europe marked the end of significant biological evolution in



humans. In this stunningly original account of our evolutionary history, scholars Cochran and Harpending reject the conventional wisdom and reveal that the human species has undergone a storm of genetic change much more recently. Human evolution in fact accelerated after civilization arose, they contend, and these ongoing changes have played a pivotal role in human history.

— *Paperback & Kindle available.*
Join us even if you haven't finished reading. The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!

PLANNING AHEAD

Book Club: First Thursday
at the Community Church of NY

Movie Night: Second Monday
at Stone Creek Lounge.

Brunch: Third Sunday
at BXL East Bistro.

Great Lectures: 4th Wednesday
at Stone Creek Lounge.

Humanism 101: Last Monday
at the Community Church of NY

More info: www.shsny.org,
and 212-308-2165

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURSDAY, JUNE 6, 6:30 pm
at Community Church of NY
28 East 35 Street (Park-Mad)

**THE SOCIAL CONQUEST
OF EARTH**

Edward O. Wilson

Where did we come from? What are we? Where are we going? One of our greatest living scientists directly addresses these three fundamental questions of religion, philosophy, and science while "overturning the theory that evolution naturally encourages creatures to put family first".

Wilson draws on his remarkable knowledge of biology and social behavior to reimagine evolutionary history, showing that group selection, not kin selection, is the driving force of human evolution. — *Paperback & Kindle*

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURSDAY, JULY 11, 6:30 pm
at Community Church of NY
28 East 35 Street (Park-Mad)

**THIS EXPLAINS
EVERYTHING**

**Deep, Beautiful, and Elegant
Theories of How the World
Works**

Ed: John Brockman

Why do we recognize patterns? Is there such a thing as positive stress? Are we genetically programmed to be in conflict with each other?

These are just some of the 150 questions that the world's best minds, including Jared Diamond, Richard Dawkins, Nassim Taleb, Brian Eno, and Steven Pinker answer with elegant simplicity. Complex concepts discussed in fun, uncomplicated terms.

— *Paperback & Kindle*

BRUNCH & DISCUSSION

SUNDAY, MAY 19, 12 NOON
MONTHLY CASUAL BRUNCH
Brabant Belgian Brasserie

316 East 53 Street

We'll meet at Noon just east of 2nd Avenue at our new brunch venue for outstanding Belgian fare, from salads to shrimp rolls, Grand Fromage Onion Soup, waffles and burgers, pots of lots of mussels, \$6 to \$18, plus a prix-fixe brunch (10 choices, plus 5 omelettes, including a drink) for \$17. Let's talk about:

You have a will and a living will.

Do you have a "moral will"?

Everyone interested in getting together with 15-20 or more like-minded humanists and rationalists for good grub (huge selection of beers!) and lively talk is welcome.

Bring friends!

MONDAY, MAY 13, 7:00 pm

SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
**STRAWBERRY AND
CHOCOLATE**

*You're sure he's a
homosexual?*

*Oh, yes. We went
for ice cream. There
was chocolate, but he
ordered strawberry.*

Hmm.

An Academy
Award-

nomina-ted sly comedy-drama set during the Cuban Revolution. Can Castro-loyal, straight David and his artistic, gay anti-Castro neighbor Diego be friends? When Diego gets in trouble with the authorities, David decides that friendship comes first.

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.



SHSNY CALENDAR: MAY - JULY 2013

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
WED, MAY 22, 7:00 pm
THE GREATEST SHOW
ON EARTH:

The Evidence for Evolution
Richard Dawkins

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

Dawkins begins this fascinating lecture by explaining that in everything he had written before this book, he had naively assumed that the facts of evolution would explain themselves. Not so, of course, for the Bible-bound deniers. So this one is written to dispassionately demonstrate the truth of evolution beyond any sane, informed, intelligent doubt. If Darwin walked into a 21st Century bookstore, this is the book he could choose to see how his theory has fared.

Great Lectures Night is FREE

HUMANISM 101

MONDAY, MAY 27, 6:30-8:30
Community Church of New York
28 East 35 Street (red door)
Meeting/Discussion #6

Peace, Justice, and a Better Society
Online:

Google 1961 President Eisenhower Military-Industrial Complex Speech *Online* at [americanhumanist.org/Humanism ...](http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism...)

Tony Hileman: Living on the Creative Edge of Our Culture

Book(s)

Rachel Maddow: Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power and/or

Barry Lynn: Piety and Politics: The Right-Wing Assault on Religious Freedom

Note: You can do the online reading in an hour or so, and choose just one of the books. And, if you haven't done the reading, you may still audit the discussion – all are welcome!

Reserve the date ... and your place now!

5TH ANNUAL DAY OF REASON CELEBRATION!
BRUNCH, PRESENTATION & DISCUSSION
SUNDAY, MAY 5, at 12 Noon, at
PETE'S TAVERN, 129 East 18 Street (at Irving Place)
with guest speaker

SHEILA REYNERTSON

Advocacy Coordinator, the MergerWatch Program
“PROTECTING WOMEN’S HEALTHCARE
RIGHTS AND ACCESS”



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WHO'S MORE NAÏVE, THE IGNORANT (THEM), OR THE LIBERAL AND EDUCATED (US)?

Mark Morford

(Reprinted from "37 Percent of People Don't Have a Clue About What's Going On" in The San Francisco Chronicle, and posted on AlterNet.com, 3/20/2013.)

Six percent of Americans believe in unicorns. Thirty-six percent believe in UFOs. A whopping 24 percent believe dinosaurs and man hung out together. Eighteen percent still believe the sun revolves around the Earth. Nearly 30 percent believe cloud computing involves ... actual clouds. A shockingly sad 18 percent, to this very day, believe the president is a Muslim. Aren't they cute? And Floridian?

Do you believe in angels? Forty-five percent of Americans do. In fact, roughly 48 percent—Republicans and Democrats alike—believe in some form of creationism. A hilariously large percent of terrified right-wingers are convinced Obama is soon going to take away all their guns, so when the Newtown shooting happened and 20 young children were massacred due to America's fetish for, obsession with, and addiction to firearms, violence and fear, they bought more bullets. Because obviously.

In sum and all averaged out, it's safe to say about 37 percent of Americans are just not very bright. Or rather, quite shockingly dumb. Perhaps beyond reach. Perhaps beyond hope or redemption. Perhaps beyond caring about anything they have to say in the public sphere ever again. Sorry, Kansas.

Did you frown at that last paragraph? Was it a terribly elitist and unkind thing to say? Sort of. Probably. But I'm not sure it matters, because none of those people are reading this column right now, or any column for that matter, because reading anything even remotely complex or analytical is something only 42 percent of the population enjoy doing on a regular basis, which is why most TV shows, all reality shows, many major media blogs and all of Fox News is scripted for a 5th-grade education/attention span. *OMG LOL kittens! 19 babies having a worse day than you. WTF is up with Justin Timberlake's hair?!?*

It is this bizarre, circular, Catch-22 kind of question, asked almost exclusively by intellectual liberals because intellectual conservatives don't actually exist, given how higher education leads to more developed critical thinking (you already know the vast majority of university professors and scientists identify as Democrat/progressive, right?) which leads straight to a more nimble, open-minded perspective. In short: The smarter you are, the less rigid/more liberal you become.

Until you get old. Or rich. And scared. And you forget. And you clamp down, seize up, fossilize. And the GOP grabs you like a mold.

Oh right! The question: How to reach the not-very-bright hordes, when they simply refuse to be reached by logic, fact, or modern mode? How to communicate obvious and vital truths (conservation, global warming, public

health, sexuality, basic nutrition, religion as parable/myth, the general awfulness of Mumford & Sons*) the lack of understanding of which keeps the country straggling and embarrassing, the laughingstock of the civilized world?

And who are these people, exactly? And are they all really in Kentucky and Florida and Mississippi? Are they all in the Tea Party? Is failing education to blame? A dumber-down media? Reality TV? In the wealthiest and most egomaniacal superpower in the world, why is the chasm so wide?

There is no easy answer, but there is a great deal of irony. It is a wicked conundrum that you and I can debate the definition of elitism, whether or not it's fair to criticize those who believe that, say, gay marriage means kids will be indoctrinated into homosexuality, or that evolution is still a theory, or that Jesus literally flew up out of a cave and into the sky, when the discussion itself is, by nature, elitist, exclusionary, requiring fluid, abstract thinking the very people we're discussing simply do not possess, and therefore cannot participate in.

Discussion of elitism is elitist. Intelligence can talk itself blue about what to do about all the dumb; the dumb will never hear it.

It's a fact even recognized by Louisiana's own Gov. Bobby Jindal, who had the nerve to defy his own state's (and his own party's) famously low IQ by saying, after the last election, "The GOP must stop being the stupid party. It's time for a new Republican Party that talks like adults."

Of course he's right. But where would that leave their base? And who will tell the megachurches? And does Jindal not know Louisiana is where they teach that the existence of the Loch Ness monster is evidence that evolution is a lie?

Brings to mind a stunning study about facts and truths. Have you ever heard it? It goes something like: Here is hard evidence, scientific evidence, irrefutable proof that something is or is not true. Here is dinosaur bone, for example, which we know beyond a doubt is between 60 and 70 million years old. Amazing! Obviously!

But then comes the impossible snag: If you are hard-coded to believe otherwise, if your TV network or your ideology, your pastor or your lack of education tell you differently, you will still not believe it. No matter what. No matter how many facts, figures, common senses slap you upside the obvious. You will think there is conspiracy, collusion, trickery afoot. The Bible says that bone is only eight thousand years old. Science is elitist. Liberals hate God. The end.

It is not enough to say people believe what they want to believe. They will also believe it in the face of irrefutable counter-evidence and millennia of fundamental proof.

This! This is what stuns and stupefies liberals and progressives of every intellectual stripe. We cannot understand. We cannot compute. We think, "Well, if more people just had the facts, just heard a reasonable and cogent argument or read up on the real science, surely they would change their minds? Surely they would see the error in their thinking?"

Oh, liberals. All those smarts, and still so naïve.

Here is the body of Jesus! We found it! In a cave in a hole deep in an iron-gated alcove beneath the Vatican! Turns out he is not the Messiah after all! Turns out – look at those tribal tattoos! Those mala beads! That blond hair! – he’s a wild non-dualist guru from parts unknown. Christianity is a total fabrication! Always has been, always will be.

Here is hard evidence coupled with an ocean of common sense that more guns equal only more violence and death! Stat after stat, mass shooting after mass shooting proving we have it all wrong about protection and fear. Also! At least 2,605 people have died by gun violence in America since the Newtown shooting. Can we ban guns now? No?

Here is overwhelming evidence that global warming is ravaging us like a furious god, and not only are we complicit, not only have we blindly raced forth into the abyss, we are, if all goes according to current trends and speeds and attitudes, totally f–king doomed.

Ah, unicorns. You look better every day.

**It’s an English folk-rock band, Geezers.*

IT’S A FAKE, BUT WHAT THE HELL, LET’S SELL IT ANYWAY, NOW ON TV AND TWITTER

John Rafferty

Not only is the Turin Shroud a medieval fake, but it’s just one of an astonishing 40 so-called burial cloths of Jesus that were circulating among the credulous in the 14th century, according to new scholarship.

And that’s not news. Back in 1390 Bishop Pierre d’Arcis examined the linen, questioned the well-known forger who faked it and passed it off, got a confession (of course he did – we’re talking 14th Century interrogation techniques), and sent a report to Pope (or Antipope, depending on your politics) Clement VII, concluding that it was all bushwa.

Since then, carbon dating by three independent labs in 1988 proved that the linen was woven at least a thousand years after Jesus’ crucifixion, and that the “bloody image” isn’t blood at all.

Doesn’t matter. The “miraculous” Shroud of Turin is now available on modern media platforms, blessed by the brand-new Pope Francis, even though he—and the whole body of Church historians—still don’t believe in it.

On Holy Saturday last month, he recorded a message to accompany the shroud’s (very brief) showing on Italian TV. And on Good Friday a Piedmont, Italy, company introduced a new app, *Shroud 2.0* (\$3.95), which features images of the cloth along with “scientific and theological interpretations” prepared by the Diocese of Turin and the International Center of Sindonology. (Sindonology? “The scientific study of the shroud”, of course.)

So, a Question: If no one with any brains believes in it, why are the Pope and the Turing diocese promoting it?

Answer: Quick, name a tourist attraction in tourist-rich Turin that’s *not* the Shroud. No?

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK

#117, 118, 119, 120

In Texas, a school superintendent declared that sex education classes were unnecessary in his district because most of the area’s school kids live on farms, and “They get a pretty good sex education from their animals.” (It’s that kind of thinking that makes Texas so special.)

And in the state senate, Ken Paxton, a right-wing Republican from a Dallas suburb, proposes to ban Planned Parenthood from providing sex education materials to any Texas school. Why? Because, Paxton says, the organization favors sexual freedom for women and girls.

In Nevada, the ACLU has filed a class action lawsuit against the state over its “infamous crimes against nature” (*sic*) statute. In Nevada the age of consent is 16, and if a 17-year-old engages in sexual activity with someone of a different gender under the age of consent, he or she did nothing wrong in the eyes of the law. But if a 17-year-old engages in sexual activity with someone of the same gender under the age of consent, he or she has committed an “infamous crime against nature” and faces prison. For life.

In North Carolina the legislature is considering dropping the First Amendment. The state’s House Joint Resolution 494, introduced by nine legislators, including House Majority Leader Edgar Starnes, asserts that “each state is sovereign and may independently determine how the state may make laws respecting an establishment of religion”.

It declares that “the North Carolina General Assembly does not recognize federal court rulings which prohibit and otherwise regulate the State of North Carolina, its public schools, or any political subdivisions of the State from making laws respecting an establishment of religion.”

In Tennessee several state legislators raised a public fuss over the placement of a utility sink in the state capitol’s men’s room. Why, they (even including Republican Congressman Judd Matheny) wanted to know, was the sink moved from the wall to the floor during a building makeover? Is it for Muslims to wash their feet before praying? Is this some Obama-inspired stealth sharia-law intrusion?

No, guys. Thanks for your super-patriotic, anti-sharia vigilance, but it’s just a mop sink. And if you had ever done any housecleaning in your lives, you’d have known that.

SAUDI WOMEN CAN RIDE BIKES! (sort of)

Katie McDonough

(Excerpted from “Saudi Arabia lifts ban on women riding bicycles”, on salon.com, 4/1/2013)

Saudi Arabia’s *Al-Yawm* daily on April 1 cited an unnamed official from the powerful religious police as saying women can now ride bikes in parks and recreational areas, but they have to be accompanied by a male relative and dressed in the full Islamic head-to-toe *abaya*.

A Saudi official told *Al-Yawm* that the new policy stipulates that women may not use the bikes for transportation but “only for entertainment”, and that they must not ride near men – “to avoid harassment”.

ANOTHER SICK CHILD, AND ANOTHER RELIGIOUS CRIMINAL WALKS FREE

John Rafferty

(Based on reports on HuffingtonPost.com, 4/5/2013, and in the Baltimore Jewish Times, 4/7/2013.)

Here is what we know. 1) Another New York City infant was infected with herpes in March as a result of an Orthodox Jewish procedure known as *metzitzah b'peh* (MBP) that involves orally sucking the blood off a newborn's penis after circumcision. 2) This is the 13th such case in New York City since 2000 (and the second in the last three months). Two of those infants died (including one last year), and two others have suffered brain damage as a result. 3) The old men in black hats who rule New York's ultraconservative Jewish communities have adamantly and absolutely refused to make any change in their supposedly 5,000-year-old circumcision ritual, even though the Rabbinical Council of America supports the use of a sterile pipette to remove the blood from the newborn's wound instead. 4) As of January 1 of this year, NYC Board of Health regulations have required parents to sign a consent form before a *mohel* (circumciser) can perform MBP, but these parents did not. 5) The black hats' very own Assemblyman, Dov Hikind of Brooklyn, ignoring the fact of yet another sick child, called the new regulations (including one requiring *mohels* to wash their hands before wielding their scalpels - *really, they have to be told to wash their hands!*) "... a deliberate insult to the intelligence and dignity of Orthodox Jews who live in this city".

Here's what we don't know. 1) The name of the *mohel* who performed the MBP without the parents' written authorization, who is therefore guilty of child endangerment, even of felony assault if he knew he had herpes. 2) Why no police investigation has been launched to identify, arrest, and convict and imprison the son of a bitch.

AND YET ANOTHER CASE OF RELIGION BEFORE CHILDREN

Dennis Middlebrooks

(Based on and excerpted from "Sex Ed Banned in Public School Bldgs. Owned by Catholic Church", in the New York Daily News, Sunday, 4/7/2013, with additional editorial from Mr. Middlebrooks.)

As a result of a long-standing but little known agreement between the church and city officials, dozens of city schools that lease church-owned buildings must take students off-site for sex education.

The city has been leasing space from the New York Archdiocese and the Brooklyn Diocese since 2005, and this year will pay \$27 million in rent for 40 public schools housed in former parochial school buildings. This provides badly needed funds for the Catholic Church, given the decline in parochial school enrollment.

The children in the church-owned school buildings must trek to the nearest non-church-owned public school to receive required sex-ed lessons on HIV and AIDS. Some

walk for up to 15 minutes in traffic. Will it take one of them getting hit by a truck to wake up the public to this outrage?

NYC Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott stated, "We have dozens and dozens of sites with the diocese and archdiocese, and that's predicated on being responsible and following the tenets of the church." Church officials claim that it is within their rights to banish the city's sex ed and HIV/AIDS instruction from their buildings, and they have no plans to change.

However, parents of children in these schools are outraged. "It's crazy", said one. Another claimed "I can't see how a church is going to tell you about what to teach."

The *News* article did not indicate whether crucifixes and religious statues have been removed from these public schools, or whether that was prohibited by the Church as well. It is also not clear why the city agreed to this arrangement in the first place and why it continues to support it, as the city, and not the cash-strapped Catholic Church, has the leverage in this arrangement. And I for one would not be surprised, given the political power of the two dioceses, that the city is paying well above market rents for these buildings, at a time when Mayor Michael Bloomberg is closing public schools and public school parents are being told to chip in for school maintenance supplies.

This appears to be a scandal of huge proportions. Moral and intellectual bankruptcy of the highest order!

WELCOME GAYS? SURE, WE WILL ...

(Excerpted from a New York Times story by Vivian Yee, 4/1/2013)

Dolan Says Catholic Church Should Be More Welcoming to Gay People

In interviews with George Stephanopoulos on "This Week" and Bob Schieffer on "Face the Nation", Cardinal Dolan, the archbishop of New York and one of the leading voices of the Catholic Church in the United States ... [said] "we've got to do better to see that our defense of marriage is not reduced to an attack on gay people. ...

"Well, the first thing I'd say to them is, 'I love you, too. And God loves you. And you are made in God's image and likeness. And - and we - we want your happiness.'"

... LIKE HELL WE WILL!

(Excerpted from Salon.com by Katie McDonough 4/5/13)

Openly Gay Man Banned From Parish Duties by Catholic Church

A 47-year-old retired construction worker and openly gay parishioner at St. Anthony's Roman Catholic Church, in Oceanside, NY, has been suspended from Church-affiliated volunteer work because of his sexuality.

Nicholas Coppola has been teaching religious education classes and visiting with home-bound members of his church for close to a decade, but was banned from continuing to serve his church community after St. Anthony's received an anonymous letter complaining about his sexuality.

Coppola appealed the decision to his pastor and bishop, but was told by both that their "hands were tied".

READERS RESPOND TO “WHO DO YOU THINK WE ARE?”

Editor's Note: In the April issue of PIQUE, I suggested this as a “mission statement” for SHSNY ...

The Secular Humanist Society of New York is the leading freethought organization in the NYC area, promoting the principles of reason and science, and an ethical lifestance centered upon the supreme value of the individual human.

... and asked for comments and/or suggestions. – JR

Your statement of identity is excellent and I really have nothing more to add to it. Keywords of import make the one sentence succinct, descriptive and complete. I'm ready to adopt it for my own identity, which is the highest compliment I can give you. Bravo! – *Stan Friedland*

Excellent, but as I read the paragraph what jumped out was “supreme value”. Unless you intended this usage as a play on “supreme being”, “supreme value” doesn't quite do it. I can make some suggestions.

“... and an ethical life stance centered upon the value of the individual human.”

“... and an ethical life stance centered upon the individual freedom and well-being of all humankind.”

“... and an ethical life stance centered upon the individual freedom and well-being of all humanity” (or “mankind”, if that's still being used).

No matter what you decide I am renewing my membership.

I look forward to every issue. – *Harvey Offenhartz*

WHO'S YOUR FAVORITE PRESIDENT?

In response to the above question posed in April PIQUE, we had surprisingly few responses.

Brian Lemaire: Franklin Roosevelt

Franklin Roosevelt's policies began an era from the 1930s through the 1960s that allowed a thriving middle class in the U.S. He made possible the best years of the labor unions, which in turn reduced wealth disparity and the imbalance between a CEO's and a line-worker's pay.

Progressive tax policy did not allow hedge-fund managers to get away with just 15 percent.

FDR provided a safety net. And Paul Krugman approves of the economic stimulus provided by the WPA and the CCC. Finally, Roosevelt instituted regulation of the financial sector, requiring a separation between banks and investment houses.

John Rafferty: Harry Truman

Like everyone alive in 1945, even this 11-year-old wondered, How can anyone replace Roosevelt, who'd been president my entire lifetime, and the closest thing to a king America had had since George III?

But “Harry Who?” turned out to be tough-as-nails, Give-'em-Hell Harry who called people he didn't like “sons of bitches”, concluded WWII (Yes, including Hiroshima – get over it, it saved a possible 100,000 American lives), integrated the armed services, beat back a union-busting

Congress, stopped Stalin cold in Greece and Berlin and the original Kim in Korea, used America's postwar prosperity to advance FDR's New Deal into his own progressive Fair Deal, and savored the sweetest come-from-behind U.S. election victory ever.

And when his term was over, drove with his beloved Bess back to their modest home in Missouri in his own car.

Call for Entries: Come on, readers – who is your pick?

ON HUMANISTIC MORMONS

Bill Chapman

Last month there was an article in PIQUE: “Humanistic Mormons'- You're Kidding Me, Right?” It was in the April Fool part of the newsletter, but Google verified that Humanistic Mormons do exist.

The article ridiculed the whole concept of “Humanistic Mormonism” as a hopeless oxymoron, but I say, “Not so fast!” This is potentially a very positive development.

Ethical Culture was started by a bunch of secular Jews, and I see modern Unitarianism as a form of secular Protestantism. I think most of us in SHSNY see both of those organizations as constructive regarding most of the things we believe and want to promote, and I don't see any reason to exclude ethnic Mormons from joining our club.

The Mormon Church provides a very rich social calendar for its members, and Mormons have a history that they're proud of, and various customs that some may want to preserve. Not insignificantly, they have a fairly convincing victim narrative. A Mormon once told me that in their early days, before they went to Utah, they were heavily persecuted by their neighbors, so much so that most of their males died in the fighting, leaving a surplus of females, which is why they adopted polygamy.*¹

A victim narrative is an indispensable thing to have in these times. To hear many liberals talk, the terms “civil liberties” and “rights” don't apply to you unless you can claim membership in some group that has “victim” status.*²

Imagine yourself to be a Mormon in Salt Lake City, and you're having trouble believing that the Garden of Eden was in Missouri. What's more, you keep hearing about the genetic evidence that American Indians are descended from Siberians and not Middle-Eastern Jews. Do you have to abandon your thriving social network and prized victim identity to embrace rationality, or do you band together with some like-minded souls and form a Humanist Mormon community?

In addition, I would imagine many marriageable-aged Mormons are encouraged by their parents to marry “in the tribe”. It would be helpful to be able to tell a prospective mate, “I'm still a Mormon. Sort of.”

Whatever works.

Response: (*1) *The Church of Latter-Day Saints founder (and convicted con man) Joseph Smith had 33 wives – most collected long before any persecution of the sect. (*2) The Mormons were not always the victims, but often the aggressors, as in the Meadow Mountain Massacre.*

Continued –

Bill: Try Under the Banner of Heaven, by John Krakauer, for an eye-opening history of Mormon. – JR

IN THE TRENCHES OF THE “WAR ON SCIENCE”

Giddian Beer

In April PIQUE, an article under the title “The Progressive War on Science”, asks, “Who are more anti-scientific, conservatives or progressives?” Then it provides a number of good examples to show that progressives are just as likely as conservatives to “misinterpret, misrepresent and abuse” science and are waging “an undeclared war on scientific excellence itself”.

However, there is a huge difference (and the examples show this) between the conservative and the progressive wars. Conservatives reject the most important knowledge and understandings provided by science. Progressives do not; instead they reject *what we do* with that knowledge and understanding. So theirs is a war on technology, on the applications of science, rather than on science itself.

Liberal rejection of technology is enabled by consternation, misinformation and defective reasoning; it inhibits or prevents us from realizing many of the benefits of technology. Conservative rejection of the findings of science is enabled by *willful ignorance*; it slides us, more and more rapidly, towards extinction.

The most erroneous stories are those we think we know best – and therefore never scrutinize or question.

– Stephen Jay Gould

A HUMANIST HERO IN NORTH YORKSHIRE

(SHSNY is now in correspondence with the North Yorkshire Humanists of the UK – a boon for PIQUE if we keep getting stories like this, received April 2.)

Many thanks for the latest edition of PIQUE. You may be amused by this little tale.

I was ‘phoned up by the local radio station the other week to be asked what I thought about the actions of a chap in a local village. Since I had no idea what he was talking about I struggled to have a view, but I was told that in the village of Brearton, just a few miles from here, the local vicar had set up a cross on the village green to celebrate Lent. A resident, Alan Pickard, has a house that looks on to the green. He is an atheist. He objected and so dug up the cross and threw it in the village pond.

Mr. Pickard is 82.

He is my new hero.

The cross was retrieved and erected in the churchyard – why didn’t they do that in the first place?

A very small victory ... but a victory just the same.

Regards, John Adams, North Yorkshire Humanists

FILM CRITIC (AND RATIONALIST) ROGER EBERT PREVIEWED HIS OWN DEATH

I know it is coming, and I do not fear it, because I believe there is nothing on the other side of death to fear. I hope to be spared as much pain as possible on the approach path. I was perfectly content before I was born, and I think of death as the same state.

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The Shroud is real,
I saw it on TV!

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Liberalism = Naivete?

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Equality = Secularism?

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Day of Reason Brunch,
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