

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

October, 2016

Freethought Day Brunch October 16 with Susan Jacoby - See page 7!

Herein we continue our election-year focus, with more emphasis this month on the “minor” parties, along with advice from Stephen Hawking and 374 friends, and an interesting idea from a stage magician. We celebrate Yom Kippur, Star Trek and our baffling universe, while we dis Christian practices, a spurious anthem, a new “saint”, and a newly-late, truly awful woman. – JR

HOW DID YOUR REP VOTE ON FREETHOUGHT ISSUES?

The Center for Freethought Equality has released its scorecard of the members of the U.S. House of Representatives of the 114th Congress. You can see how your member of Congress voted at: www.cfequality.org/issues/congressionalcorecard/house-114.

In the 114th Congress, members of the U.S. House of Representatives participated in seven votes which were of great importance to secular and nontheistic Americans. In addition, Representatives had the opportunity to co-sponsor three other pieces of legislation, two of which supported the goals of nontheistic Americans, and one which conflicted with those goals.

Clicking on a state on the map will take you to that state’s House congressional delegation, from which you can see how your Representative voted and her/his overall letter grade, “A” to “F”. A summary of the bills and amendments included in the scorecard is provided.

Of all House members, 19 Democrats were rated as A+ (including mine, hooray, Carolyn Maloney! – JR), demonstrating their unyielding support for church/state separation, LGBTQ equality and reproductive rights. 133 Democratic representatives received “A” ratings, also demonstrating strong support for church/state separation. 31 Democrats were given B’s and 2 were given C’s, indicating a moderate support for church/state separation. Two Democrats and 7 Republicans were given D’s, while 2 Democrats and 240 Republicans were given F’s, indicating weak support for church/state separation.

Reminding us that “No religion” – that’s us – is now America’s biggest “religious” voting bloc (PIQUE, September), Roy Speckhardt, executive director of the Center for Freethought Equality, says, “It’s time for our U.S. Representatives to listen to the concerns of the nonreligious

community. This scorecard will hold legislators accountable to all of their constituents and ensure that voters know where they stand on key issues such as church/state separation, LGBTQ rights and reproductive choice.”

COMPULSORY VOTING?

Sean Illing

(Excerpted from *salon.com*, 8/11/2016)

It won’t happen, but compulsory voting might be the only solution to political ignorance in America. Forcing people to vote might be against our values – but it could be our only defense against demagogues like Trump

The success of Donald Trump reveals a number of troubling truths about our country, but voter ignorance is the most glaring. If more Americans were involved, if more were informed and discerning citizens, Trump’s political existence would not be possible.

Love him or hate him, Trump is a reflection of the country. He sports his idiocy like a badge of honor, knowing his supporters do the same. He knows nothing of the world he wants to lead. He doesn’t understand the issues and makes no effort to pretend otherwise. Virtually everything he’s said about policy or geopolitics is false.

None of that matters.

Trump knows his audience. “I love the poorly educated,” he famously said. They love him back, too. Recall that Trump earned the most primary votes in the history of the Republican party, and he did it with overwhelming support from less-educated voters. That’s hardly surprising. You have to be blinkered by rage or woefully benighted to regard a man who speaks “just below a 6th grade level” as fit for the presidency. And yet millions of Americans found him refreshing, a welcomed blast of anti-elitism.

Trump’s rise says much more about us than him. It’s clear we have an ignorance problem in America. There’s

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nothing we can do to stop demagogues from preying on illiterate voters, but it turns out there are ways to reduce voter ignorance. We know that people who vote regularly tend to know more than those who don't. The issue is that not enough people vote.

Among major democracies, U.S. voter turnout is uniquely low. In 2014, for example, a paltry 36 percent of eligible voters made it to the polls. Even in presidential election years, voter turnout peaks around 60 percent. This is a national embarrassment. ...

Other countries—like Australia and Belgium—have responded to similar problems with a simple measure: compulsory voting. Jill Sheppard, a political scientist at the Australian National University, analyzed the results of these efforts and found an interesting link between voter turnout and political awareness. It's not shocking to learn that compulsory voting leads to higher turnout, but it's significant that, when enforced properly, it incentivizes self-education and civic engagement. ...

Despite all the benefits of compulsory voting, the idea itself remains problematic. There's something (regrettably) un-American about forcing people to vote. The freedom to not give a shit is every bit as valid as any other in this country. And in any case this is a policy with almost zero traction. Congress can't agree on the time of day – something this contentious would die in the talking points phase.

Compulsory voting isn't the only ways to boost turnout, however. If we want more people to vote, simply holding elections on the weekend would be a seismic shift. But Republicans are opposed to inclusion efforts, as their support of Voter ID laws suggests. The GOP is an increasingly old and white party, and old, white people disproportionately vote. The demographics least likely to vote—low income Americans, young people, minority groups—are also the ones most likely to support Democrats. Consequently, Republicans will block any effort to systematically increase turnout.

Whatever the solution, something has to be done. Our process has produced a government with interests separate and apart from those it serves. Money in politics has a lot to do with that, but so does low turnout. ... A more active and informed citizenry would be transformative. President Obama has praised Australia's compulsory voting scheme, claiming we could reach 70-80 percent voting rates if we adopted similar measures. Perhaps that's too optimistic.

At any rate, Sheppard's research—and Trump's ascendance—ought to compel us to think about these problems from a policy perspective. We're paying a high price for voter ignorance. An incurious, unaware populace will produce more Donald Trumps if we don't cultivate smarter citizens. If that doesn't inspire action, what will?

WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?

Former Congresswoman and still lunatic Michele Bachmann announced August 21 that she is now advising Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump on foreign policy.

FROM THE GREEN PARTY PLATFORM

Excerpted from Ten Key Values (2016)

at <http://www.gp.org/platform>

1 *Grassroots Democracy:* We work to improve public participation in every aspect of government and seek to ensure that our public representatives are fully accountable to the people who elect them. We also work to create new types of political organizations that expand the process of participatory democracy by directly including citizens in decision-making.

2. *Social Justice and Equal Opportunity:* We must consciously confront in ourselves, our organizations, and society at large, any discrimination by race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, nationality, religion, or physical or mental ability that denies fair treatment and equal justice under law.

3. *Ecological Wisdom:* We support a sustainable society that utilizes resources in such a way that future generations will benefit and not suffer from the practices of our generation.

4. *Non-Violence:* It is essential that we develop effective alternatives to society's current patterns of violence. We will work to demilitarize and eliminate weapons of mass destruction, without being naive about the intentions of other governments. ... We promote non-violent methods to oppose practices and policies with which we disagree, and will guide our actions toward lasting personal, community and global peace.

5. *Decentralization:* We seek a restructuring of social, political and economic institutions away from a system controlled by and mostly benefiting the powerful few, to a democratic, less bureaucratic system.

6. *Community Based Economics:* We support redesigning our work structures to encourage employee ownership and workplace democracy. We support developing new economic activities and institutions that allow us to use technology in ways that are humane, freeing, ecological, and responsive and accountable to communities.

7. *Feminism and Gender Equity:* We call for the replacement of the cultural ethics of [male] domination and control with cooperative ways of interacting that respect differences of opinion and gender.

8. *Respect for Diversity:* We believe that the many diverse elements of society should be reflected in our ... decision-making bodies, and we support the leadership of people who have been traditionally closed out of leadership roles.

9. *Personal and Global Responsibility:* We encourage individuals to act to improve their personal wellbeing and ... to enhance ecological balance and social harmony. We seek to join with people and organizations around the world to foster peace, economic justice, and the health of the planet.

10. *Future Focus and Sustainability.* Our actions and policies should be motivated by long-term goals. We seek to protect valuable natural resources, safely disposing of or "unmaking" all waste we create, while developing a sustainable economics that does not depend on continual expansion for survival. We must make the quality of all lives, rather than open-ended economic growth, the focus of future thinking and policy.

FROM THE LIBERTARIAN PARTY PLATFORM

Statement of Principles

We, the members of the Libertarian Party, challenge the cult of the omnipotent state and defend the rights of the individual. We hold that all individuals have the right to exercise sole dominion over their own lives, and have the right to live in whatever manner they choose, so long as they do not forcibly interfere with the equal right of others to live in whatever manner they choose.

Governments throughout history have regularly operated on the opposite principle, that the State has the right to dispose of the lives of individuals and the fruits of their labor. Even within the United States, all political parties other than our own grant to government the right to regulate the lives of individuals and seize the fruits of their labor without their consent.

We, on the contrary, deny the right of any government to do these things, and hold that where governments exist, they must not violate the rights of any individual: namely, (1) the right to life—accordingly we support the prohibition of the initiation of physical force against others; (2) the right to liberty of speech and action—accordingly we oppose all attempts by government to abridge the freedom of speech and press, as well as government censorship in any form; and (3) the right to property—accordingly we oppose all government interference with private property, such as confiscation, nationalization, and eminent domain, and support the prohibition of robbery, trespass, fraud, and misrepresentation.

Since governments, when instituted, must not violate individual rights, we oppose all interference by government in the areas of voluntary and contractual relations among individuals. People should not be forced to sacrifice their lives and property for the benefit of others. They should be left free ... to deal with one another as free traders; and the resultant economic system, the only one compatible with the protection of individual rights, is the free market."

Excerpted from <https://www.lp.org/platform>

Personal Relationships: "Sexual orientation, preference, gender, or gender identity should have no impact on the government's treatment of individuals ... Consenting adults should be free to choose their own sexual practices and personal relationships."

Abortion: "... we believe that government should be kept out of the matter, leaving the question to each person for their conscientious consideration."

Crime & Justice: "... we favor the repeal of all laws creating 'crimes' without victims, such as the use of drugs for medicinal or recreational purposes.

Self-Defense: "We affirm the individual right recognized by the Second Amendment to keep and bear arms, and oppose the prosecution of individuals for exercising their rights of self-defense."

Environment: "Competitive free markets and property rights stimulate the technological innovations and behavioral changes required to protect our environment and ecosystems."

VOTE YOUR HEART'S CHOICE

Bob Murtha

Q: I can't stand Hillary Clinton, but I fear Donald Trump. Is a vote for Gary Johnson (Libertarian) or Jill Stein (Green) effectively a vote for Donald Trump?

A: Not at all. This is a stupid cliché. A vote for Gary Johnson is a vote for Gary Johnson, not a vote for Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump. This does not obviate the virtues of a strategic vote for a palatable candidate rather than for your heart's choice in the hope of holding off the barbarians at the gates for another four years. A strategic vote for a lesser evil need be considered in "swing" states where the two leading candidates are even in the polls. In states where the outcome is a foregone conclusion, you can cast your vote for your heart's choice.

In a year of exceptionally unpalatable major party candidates, Johnson and Stein are each running between 5 percent and 8 percent in the polls and are pressing hard to get in on the televised debates. Unlike other third party candidates, both will be on the ballot in the majority of States and enjoy considerable name recognition.

Although the [Libertarian party] platform lacks detail [see preceding], Gary Johnson does not. Johnson supports balancing the federal budget immediately and would "slash federal spending" including Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security. This would involve cutting Medicare and Medicaid by 43 percent and turning them into "bloc grant" programs. He advocates a law allowing state bankruptcy and would sign legislation to eliminate the Federal Reserve. He opposes foreign wars and has pledged to reduce the military budget by 43 percent during the first term of his presidency. He would reduce the military, oversea bases, military personal, research & development, intelligence and nuclear weapons programs. He opposes our involvement in Afghanistan and Libya. He has stated that he does not consider Iran a military threat, would use his presidential power to prevent Israel from attacking Iran, and would not follow Israel into a war that it had started

Johnson is a strong supporter of civil liberties and was awarded the highest score of any candidate from the ALCU.

He says he does not seek "the counsel of God" when determining his political agenda.

HERE'S A GREAT DEBATE CONVERSATION IDEA

Penn Jillette

(Excerpted from <http://bigthink.com/videos/penn-jillette-on-libertarianism-for-beginners>)

Here's the debate I want to see. It's not even a debate, a conversation, a public conversation in front of as much of America as wants to watch it. Bernie Sanders, Gary Johnson. Both paragons, both virtuous, both honest, both smart, both concerned about other people, both with experience in government. And I want to hear Bernie Sanders say, you know, a lot of people in this country have trouble taking care of themselves. ... We need a government where more qualified people can take care of those that

aren't and where we can keep corporations at bay and where we can keep some money out of politics. ... Here's some of my ideas. But I want Gary Johnson to say, you know, all those things are problems. But I think that maybe a little more freedom as opposed to a little more control from the government might give us a lot of that. ...

Why not two people who are actually having a discussion about what direction our country should go in. And by the way we're never going to go all the way, Bernie. We're never going to go all the way, Gary. But that's the discussion we have and let that go. ...

Yeah, maybe someday in the future we should go to anarcho-capitalism. Maybe someday in the future we should go to full out socialism. But for right now can we just do what every fucking American believes, which is stop giving so much money to the corporations, let the people have more control, let them smoke dope, let them put what they want into their bodies, let them have sex with whoever they want as long as there's consent. ... Let them love who they want and enjoy life the way they want. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Is that a nut position?

NEVER HILLARY. UNLESS ...

Flash Light

The anger of Berners is not because of the advantage super delegates gave Hillary. It's that the legal advantage thus obtained was not enough, and what was done to give HRC an extra advantage was actual election fraud. It's there in the released emails, and why Debbie Wasserman Schultz had to resign as DNC head. This is the biggest primary scandal since Watergate. Here's a report which estimates Bernie would have won without that fraud: <https://www.facebook.com/WTFUmedia/videos/vb.215512448818356/276540419382225/?type=2&theater>.

But that's not the worst of it. Just as when Watergate broke Nixon denied all knowledge, Hillary denied all knowledge. The striking difference is that while Nixon had the sense to shun the burglars, HRC hired Debbie Wasserman Schultz, the engineer behind the fraud, as honorary chairperson of Hillary's Election Committee.

Parse out the semiotics: Hillary is announcing her administration will be so corrupt, she will openly reward criminals who commit felony election fraud on her behalf. That's where the rage comes from. Yes, she might be less evil, but she's not less evil enough,

FBI Director James Comey bent over backwards to let Hillary off on using an unsecured server. However, even he has to investigate the evidence in those emails that Hillary was trading favors at State Department for donations to the Clinton Foundation, which was already under suspicion because only 10 percent of donations go to charity work. If Hillary wasn't using a private server to avoid Freedom Of Information Act detection of crime, she should at least have avoided that appearance.

Another in her long history of terrible decisions, beginning with support for the Iraq war. Then, learning nothing from the problems caused by deposing Saddam,

she favored deposing Gaddafi, creating a disaster which Obama admitted was his worst failure. She's so dedicated to nation wrecking she still wants to depose Assad and go to war with Iran, which will put her in direct conflict with Putin. Yes, she might be less dangerous than Trump, but she's not less dangerous enough,

Some Berners support Jill, who appears, unlike Hillary and Trump, to be a decent human being. Jill wants to stop spending trillions on endless wars that only create more terrorists. Jill also said, "Of course I support vaccination, I'm a doctor, but I also see the danger of big pharma." That's the nuance I'm looking for, not like Hillary, who has a former Monsanto lobbyist on her election team, takes millions from bankers, and seems unlikely to reign in big pharma, big banks, fracking, GMOs, or the military-industrial complex.

But there's the threat of Trump. So this is my proposal: Admit the validity of Jill's campaign, and give her a chance, with one proviso: if Jill isn't beating Trump in the polls by November, then we all agree to vote for the lesser evil. Better a candidate who's just a crook than a crook who's a bigoted, racist, infantile, egomaniac. If Jill is beating Trump, then we all agree to vote for the least evil, and most progressive candidate, Jill. Thus you're free to answer the next poll taker that you're voting Green, because you're free to change your mind if Jill doesn't lead in polls.

I still support Bernie. Doesn't matter that Hillary stole the primary from him; he was able to force the Democratic Platform left. Doesn't matter that Hillary will totally ignore Bernie's platform when elected. What matters is that by 2020, there will be even more young voters, and Bernie's revolution will keep moving the Dems farther to the left, until finally, maybe by 2024, they can put an actual liberal in the White House. Until then, I'm a Green.

WORKING FAMILIES PARTY

ENDORSES CLINTON

John Rafferty

Still bothered that Hillary "isn't progressive enough" for you? Is the Working Families Party progressive enough? WFP, which endorsed Bernie Sanders during the Democratic primary, endorsed Clinton on August 15.

"The change we need next year starts with electing Secretary Clinton, but it doesn't end there," WFP National Director Dan Cantor said. "We know we won't always agree, [but the party] is ready to work hard to press her to deliver on the economic, environmental and racial justice promises she made during the campaign."

GREEN AL GORE IS VOTING FOR CLINTON

Talking about disappointed Sanders supporters switching their allegiance—and votes—to Jill Stein and the Green Party, Gore told Think Progress in July:

"I urge them to look carefully as I know they have, at the consequences of going in another direction for the third or fourth alternative," said the man who lost Florida and the presidency to votes for third-party candidate Ralph Nader.

STEPHEN HAWKING + 374 MORE

SCIENTISTS: "DON'T VOTE FOR TRUMP"

(Excerpted from "Hundreds of Scientists Sign Letter Opposing Trump", by Michael Stone, *Progressive Secular Humanist* 9/22/2016)

On September 20, hundreds of the world's leading scientists, including Stephen Hawking, published an open letter warning about the dangers that a Donald Trump presidency presents to the environment. The letter, published on ResponsibleScientists.org, and signed by 375 members of the National Academy of Scientists, declares:

Human-caused climate change is not a belief, a hoax, or a conspiracy. It is a physical reality. ... It is of great concern that the Republican nominee for President has advocated U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Accord.

Trump has said he would "cancel" the Paris Accord reached by 195 countries last year at the U.N. Climate Change Conference. If you really needed another reason to vote against Trump, here it is: Science.

WHAT DO ALL THE CANDIDATES KNOW ABOUT SCIENCE?

Go to <http://sciencedebate.org/20answers> to see how Clinton, Trump and Stein (Johnson didn't respond) answer 20 top questions about science posed by organizations representing more than 10 million scientists and engineers after a crowd-sourcing effort led by ScienceDebate.org and *Scientific American* magazine.

Don't expect any surprises, but one cannot help but be impressed with how one major-party candidate offers specific answers to questions about climate change, clean water, environmental protection, etc., while another either evades or simply promises to "do better".

WHO'S TO BLAME FOR HARD TIMES?

JACK HERSCHLAG SETS *THE TIMES* STRAIGHT

To the Editor, 9/15/2016: In the midst of a report about the economic problems in Kentucky coal country, Roger Cohen comes up with the incredible remark that Donald Trump can win the election "in part because of the liberal intellectual arrogance that dismisses the economic, social and cultural problems his rise has underscored".

As a liberal, I consider this remark offensive and totally disconnected from reality. It is the Obama administration that has been pushing for infrastructure spending for years against Republican resistance in Congress. It is the Obama administration that rescued the auto industry and saved millions of jobs, also against Republican opposition.

It is Republicans who have undercut and threaten to destroy Obamacare, the program that low-income and unemployed people, like Kentucky coal miners, can turn to when employer-sponsored healthcare disappears. It is what is known as the political left that is pushing for alternate energy industries that could provide new jobs to replace lost coal jobs. And so on, and on.

- Jack Herschlag, Woodland Park, N.J.

FEAR

Jonathan Engel

The quote of the day in the August 18 edition of *The New York Times* came courtesy of Stephen K. Bannon, Donald Trump's new campaign chief, who said, "Fear is a good thing. Fear is going to lead you to take action." As a humanist and a proud member of SHSNY, I couldn't help thinking how contrary such a statement is to humanist values. SHSNY's own brochure states:

"If you believe in democracy and the use of reason in all aspects of life ... if you are a concerned citizen, contribute to society, and take responsibility for your own moral obligations ... if you reject superstition and dogma ... if you oppose those who oppose freedom and democracy... then you probably are a secular humanist."

Notice that there's nothing in there about being afraid because fear is antithetical to humanist principles. You don't make rational decisions when you're scared. You shun democracy when you're scared. You recoil from innovation when you're scared. You denounce pluralism when you're scared. And as for "taking action", there's a reason for the phrase "paralyzed by fear". Fear prevents you from taking action, at least in any meaningful way. Any action taken out of fear is likely to be of the "chicken with its head cut off" variety; running about wild-eyed with no rational direction just so you can take comfort that you're doing something, even if that something is disastrously counterproductive.

In his first inaugural address in 1933, which was delivered as the worst effects of the Great Depression were being felt and terror was beginning to grip Europe, Franklin D. Roosevelt famously counseled the country that,

"The only thing we have to fear is ... fear itself - nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."

This statement was meant to calm the country during perilous times, but it was also a warning against surrendering to "fear itself". FDR knew that fear will close your mind and lead you to make bad decisions. Ironically, even FDR himself was not immune to having fear poison his decision-making process, as with the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, which turned out to be a blot on the great man's legacy and is an enduring shame for all decent Americans.

So, no, Mr. Bannon, fear is not a good thing. But I am pleased that you made this statement on your first day of taking the reins of the Trump campaign and I am grateful to the *Times* for highlighting your words. Because if the American people had any doubts before regarding the true nature of the coming election, they should now be laid to rest: this contest gives us a clear choice between surrendering to our fears or using our votes to aspire to humanist values such as democracy, equal rights, and the use of reason in our personal and national decision-making processes.

We will choose fear at our own peril, for Trump can only be elected if people allow their fears to short-circuit their ability to utilize rational thought.

SHSNY CALENDAR: OCTOBER-DECEMBER, 2016

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, OCT 6, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

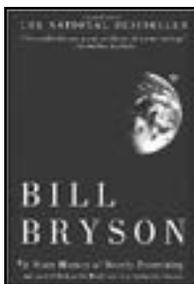
28 East 35 St. (front lounge)

We'll discuss

A SHORT HISTORY OF
NEARLY EVERYTHING

Bill Bryson

Taking as territory everything from the Big Bang to the rise of civilization, Bryson seeks to understand how we got from there being nothing at all to there being us.



To that end, he has attached himself to a host of the world's most advanced archaeologists, anthropologists, and mathematicians, travelling to their offices, laboratories, and field camps.

This is the record of his quest, and it is a sometimes profound, sometimes funny, and always supremely clear and entertaining adventure in the realms of human knowledge, as only Bill Bryson can render it. Science has never been more involving or entertaining.

"An always supremely clear and entertaining adventure in the realms of human knowledge. Science has never been more involving or entertaining."

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Join us even if you haven't finished reading. The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!

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MEET US ON MEETUP

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SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, NOV 3, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME

(1998 edition)

Stephen Hawking

A landmark volume in science writing by one of the great minds of our time: How did the universe begin – and what made its start possible? Does time always flow forward? Is the universe unending? Are there other dimensions in space? What will happen when it all ends?

Told in language we all can understand, *A Brief History of Time* plunges into the exotic realms of black holes and quarks, of antimatter and "arrows of time", of the big bang and a bigger God – where the possibilities are wondrous and unexpected.

– Paperback & Kindle available

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, DEC 1, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
THE FUTURE OF THE BRAIN:

Essays by the World's
Leading Neuroscientists,

Gary Marcus and, Jeremy
Freeman, Editors

Original essays by leading researchers describe the spectacular technological advances that will enable us to map the more than eighty-five billion neurons in the brain, as well as the challenges that lie ahead in understanding the anticipated deluge of data and the prospects for building working simulations of the human brain.

A must-read to understand the breathtaking implications of brain science for medicine, psychiatry, even human consciousness itself.

– Paperback & Kindle available

SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
MON, OCT 17, 6:30 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

GAME CHANGE

Eight years ago, we came close to electing the supremely unqualified Sarah Palin Vice President of the United States.

"Game Change", the HBO award-winning film starring Julianne Moore, Ed Harris and Woody Harrelson, is a fascinating back-room look at how it all unfolded. *Terrific!*

After-Film Discussion:

VPs we have known and loved.

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.
(But put something on the bar besides your elbow.)



BRUNCH & CONVERSATION
SUN, OCT 9, 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

has been enhanced with an \$11 breakfast special, the Bloody Marys are hot,

the beer is cold, and conversation sparkles.

Come join 20 or more freethinkers for food, fun and great, convivial conversation, including the Dorothy Kahn-led ...

After-Brunch Discussion:

"Media bias": Is it real, and how does it affect humanism?



SHSNY CALENDAR: OCTOBER-DECEMBER, 2016

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
TUE, NOV 1*, 7 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

THE BRAIN

Dr. David Eagleman

Take an extraordinary journey that explores how the brain, locked in silence and darkness without direct access to the world, conjures up the rich and beautiful world we all take for granted.

Begin with the astonishing fact that this Technicolor multi-sensory experience we are having is a convincing illusion conjured up by our brains. In the outside world there is no color, no sound, and no smell. These are all the constructions of the brain, our experience of reality is an electrochemical rendition of the world outside.

Each of our brains is different, and so is the reality it produces.

What is reality? It's whatever your brain tells you it is.

**Because of Stone Creek schedule conflict.*

Great Lectures on DVD is FREE
(But put something on the bar besides your elbow.)

STUDYING HUMANISM
MON, OCT 31, 6:30 – 8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
28 East 35 St (Gallery)

2016-17 Meeting/Discussion #2
"Humanists and the Presidential Election"

Since presidential politics is unavoidable (see pages 1-5), let's spend our last session before the election considering:

- What do humanists *want* from a Clinton administration?
- What should humanists *do* during a Trump administration? *(No specific reading is assigned, but do please come prepared to discuss what humanists can/should do during the next four years.)*

**SHSNY's 8TH ANNUAL
FREETHOUGHT DAY BRUNCH**
Sunday, October 16 at 12 Noon, at
PETE'S TAVERN,
129 East 18 Street (Irving Place)
with guest speaker
SUSAN JACOBY

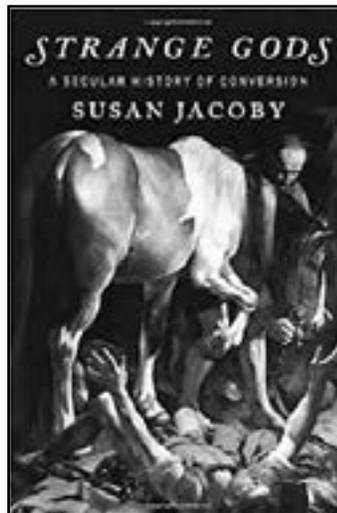
This year we celebrate Freethought Day by hosting distinguished freethinker/author Susan Jacoby (*The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll; American Freethought; The Age of American Unreason*), who will read from her latest (twelfth!) book: *Strange Gods: A Secular History of Conversion* – "a groundbreaking historical work that addresses religious conversion in the West from an uncompromisingly secular perspective. ... Nothing has been more important in the struggle for reason than the right to believe in the God of one's choice or to reject belief in God altogether."



"The modern wave of secularist books has seen no author more historically erudite than Susan Jacoby ... immensely learned yet with a witty style."
– Richard Dawkins

Join us! Brunch is \$25

... for the best brunch bargain in New York, with your choice of 11 excellent entrees, one drink (Bloody Mary, Mimosa, etc.) and coffee or tea, and including all taxes and tips.



"Her combination of intellectual rigor, vigor, erudition, and integrity makes Strange Gods wonderfully lively and enlightening. ... Feisty brilliance!"
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THE YOM KIPPUR BALL Sidney Finehirsh

On September 26, 1898, four Jewish soldiers in full uniform exiting a restaurant on the Lower East Side of Manhattan were assaulted by an angry mob. One of the soldiers fired his revolver in the air, which summoned the police leading to a confrontation between the cops and rioters. The final toll was several missing teeth and at least one broken nose among the assailants. The attack on the servicemen was the culmination of an entire day of riots that began early in the morning when, as reported by *The New York Times*, “a riotous mob of several thousand” gathered outside the restaurant located at 141 Division Street, owned by two Jewish brothers named Herricks. The mob set upon the Jewish patrons of the restaurant “every hour during the day”, according to the *Times* reporter, leading to multiple fist fights including the assault on the soldiers.

The attack that day was not, however, an anti-Jewish pogrom, as some of the newly-immigrated residents of that neighborhood might have experienced during their previous life in Czarist Russia, since the attackers were Jewish, too. Their anger was sparked by the insistence of the Herricks brothers, who besides being Jewish were militant atheists, on serving their customers – also Jewish atheists – on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the religious calendar during which the Torah itself (Leviticus 16.20) calls for fasting.

The events of that day in 1897 were not all that unusual, as atheist Jews of that epoch had developed a tradition of celebrating the “Sabbath of Sabbaths” with an annual Yom Kippur Ball that included, as the Yiddish newspaper *Free Voice of Labor* put it in 1893, “A pleasant... and tasteful buffet”. The poster for that event was even more expansive: “Speeches, Singing, Poetry Reading, Music and Delicious Food will render the fast inconspicuous and the day will be spent in joy and usefulness.”

The Jewish atheist tradition of Yom Kippur Balls got its start in London in 1888 where another Yiddish labor newspaper, *Worker's Friend*, called for a festive celebration on that holy occasion. The British teacher and historian Maureen Kendler described the environment of the period: “A sizeable minority of the newly emboldened immigrant community chose to acknowledge Yom Kippur as the holiest and most solemn day in the calendar by rebelling against it. They flaunted their challenges to it openly. Atheists, political agitators and freethinkers combined under the anarchist umbrella and held public meetings on Kol Nidre night [the prayer sung at the opening service on the eve of the holiday], wrote parodies of the liturgy and, most provocatively of all, held Yom Kippur Balls where pork was served.” From London the tradition spread to New York, Chicago, Montreal, and Warsaw, where thousands gathered every year for anti-religious Yom Kippur festivities into the 1920s.

At that first Yom Kippur Ball an editor of the sponsoring newspaper, Benjamin Feigenbaum, gave an oration that dared God to strike him dead within two minutes to prove the divine existence. After two minutes of silence, a

very much alive Feigenbaum resumed his speech and the assembled crowd broke into lusty cheers.

The noted Jewish American literary and social critic Irving Howe attributed the demise of the Jewish anarchist-atheist movement to the insult that the Yom Kippur Balls posed to the majority of the Jewish community who, even if they didn't celebrate the holiday religiously or even ate a hearty lunch on that day, took offence at the desecration of their religious sensibilities. I think Howe was wrong and it is more likely the ensuing Americanization and subsequent entry of the immigrant communities into the middle class led to the demise of their radical politics and free thinking. But I do think, however, that Howe has a point.

In my view, the whole episode of Yom Kippur Balls brings to mind the atheist billboards that tell Christians at Christmas that they are just plain stupid if they accept the Gospel story – an elitist message that may feel good to some atheists but will never convince anyone who isn't already a non-believer. Besides ignoring the myriad ways the Gospels are interpreted by myriads of Christians, you just can't put Bertrand Russell's finely tuned argument “*Why I am not a Christian*” on a billboard. I don't believe in evangelical atheism: free thinking has to be argued, not marketed.

“GOD BLESS AMERICA” – Y'ER OUT!

Gersh Kuntman

(Excerpted (and lightly edited) from “Major League Baseball must permanently retire ‘God Bless America’, a song that offends everyone”, in *The New York Daily News*, 6/30/16)

It's time for God to stop blessing America during the seventh-inning stretch. [In the upcoming World Series], once again, baseball fans will be assaulted by the saccharine-sweet non-anthem “God Bless America” at stadia all over this great land. But no matter which home team you root, root, root for, “God Bless America” should be sent permanently to the bench.

Now, don't get me wrong: When Major League Baseball ordered all teams to play the patriotic jingle after 9/11, I didn't immediately object. Standing with my fellow fans, as one, and singing a paean to our country provided catharsis, comfort and shared heartache.

But it wasn't long before heartache became headache. The Yankees still play it at every game, but most teams, like my beloved Mets, play “God Bless America” only on Sundays or holidays. But even that's too much. ...

Even Irving Berlin, who wrote “God Bless America” in 1918, considered it so maudlin and depressing that he stuck it in a drawer. Twenty years later, as the world prepared for war, Kate Smith asked Berlin for a patriotic song for her radio show. He pulled out “God Bless America” and changed one lame line – “the gold fields up in Nome” – to an even lamer line – “oceans white with foam.” You know the rest: Smith's version became as much a symbol of post-war patriotism as the flag, the space program and all the white people moving to the suburbs.

The song still embodies great things about America, but also our worst things: self-righteousness, forced piety,

earnest self-reverence, foam. ...

"God Bless America" is as divisive as American politics: Kaskowitz's research found that 83.8 percent of people who described themselves as "very liberal" dislike the song, while only 20.5 percent of people who called themselves "very conservative" have a problem with it. And more than 88 percent of atheists dislike the song. Like:

- *Woody Guthrie*: In response to "God Bless America," the great folk singer wrote "This Land Is Your Land," which offers the flip side of Berlin's blind optimism: "By the relief office, I saw my people/ As they stood there hungry, I stood there wondering/ If God blessed America for me."

- *Fans of the actual other National Anthem*: Unlike "God Bless America," the better seventh-inning song, "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," captures the essential joy of American life: You go to a baseball game and you don't care if you ever get back. And, sure, you root for the home team, but who cares if it wins or loses? You're at a *ballgame!* With peanuts and Crackerjacks!

So, join me at the Church of Baseball by not rising and not doffing your cap for a song that is not the national anthem of a nation that is not uniquely blessed by some deity that doesn't exist anyway.

If you want to thank God for blessing America, you can do it on Sunday in the other church.

HOW RELIGIONS EVOLVED OVER TIME

Walter Balcerak

Does history have a direction? "The answer is yes," says historian Yuval Noah Harari, author of the bestseller *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*.

"Over the millennia," he explains, "small, simple cultures gradually coalesce into bigger and more complex civilizations." One of the strongest forces driving this trend, he asserts, is religion.

Like humanity, religion has evolved, but much more quickly. Before the Agricultural Revolution, which began some 12,000 years ago, we were hunters and gatherers whose religion was animism. Harari defines animism as "the belief that almost every place, every animal, every plant and natural phenomenon has awareness and feelings, and can communicate directly with humans. ... There are also immaterial entities – the spirits of the dead, and friendly and malevolent beings, the kind we today call demons, fairies and angels."

Animism differs from later religions in that it lacks a strict hierarchy among the spirits, and they are not all-powerful gods. Since religion reflects the needs of human societies, it is no coincidence that hunter-and-gatherer bands also lacked strict hierarchies.

The advent of agriculture led to ownership of the land by upper classes and the creation of cities, nations and empires that required rulers. Accordingly, animism evolved into theism. According to Harari, "Theism ... is the view that the universal order is based on a hierarchical

relationship between humans and a small group of ethereal entities called gods.

"Gods such as the fertility goddess, the sky god and the god of medicine took center stage when plants and animals lost their ability to speak," Harari writes, "and the gods' main role was to mediate between humans and the mute plants and animals."

He adds: "For thousands of years after the agricultural revolution, religious liturgy consisted mainly of humans sacrificing lambs, wines and cakes to divine powers, who in exchange promised abundant harvests and fecund flocks."

A key benefit of polytheism, Harari notes, is that conquerors did not seek to convert their subjects. As long as the conqueror's gods remained paramount, subjected people were not required to give up their local gods. Monotheism, on the other hand, has led to millions of deaths as "Christians slaughtered Christians to defend slightly different interpretations of the religion of love and compassion." Today, a similar dynamic in the Middle East compels Shiites and Sunnis to bomb marketplaces and level cities.

The many gods of polytheists were often hierarchical. For example, Zeus reined as the chief god in the ancient Greek pantheon. Likewise, as growing societies fell under the rule of kings and emperors, monotheism arose, as humans began to believe in a single supreme being who created and ruled the universe. Again, it is probably no coincidence that the first universal religion, Christianity, began when the Holy Land was ruled by Roman emperors who often were thought to be divine.

Judaism, which gave rise to Christianity, never became a universal religion for the simple reason that its god, Yahweh, focused attention almost exclusively on the Hebrew tribe. Polytheism led not just to monotheism, but to dualistic religions, which "espouse the existence of two opposing powers: good and evil." Zoroastrianism is an example. Dualism answers the perennial question of why a loving God permits the existence of diseases, earthquakes, murder, and bloody wars. In effect, a benevolent force in the universe is opposed by a malevolent one.

A belief that Harari doesn't mention is pantheism, a creed explained in a recent article in *The New Yorker* about a history book titled *The Dream of Enlightenment*. Pantheism's central concept is that God and nature are "different names for the same thing". Harari also passes over Deism, a belief shared by many of America's revolutionary founders. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines Deism as "The belief, based solely on reason, in a God who created the universe and then abandoned it, assuming no control over life, exerting no influence on natural phenomena, and giving no supernatural revelation."

The final step in the evolution of religion, Harari contends, is the development, in recent centuries, of "natural law" religions. He includes among them liberalism, Communism, capitalism, nationalism, and Nazism. "These creeds do not like to be called religions," he points out, "and refer to themselves as ideologies." He disagrees: "If a religion is a system of human norms and values that is founded on a

belief in a superhuman order, then Soviet Communism was no less a religion than Islam.”

Even more controversial than the idea of godless “natural religions” is the fact that Harari places humanism in that category. I will cover that contention next issue in my final article on this brilliant, fascinating, and extremely well-written book.

Although I’ve focused on religion, that subject plays a minor role in the book’s wide-ranging overview of human history, from prehistoric times to the modern day.

SUPER-CHRISTIAN KEN HAM CALLS JESUS A LIAR

Ken Ham, president of Answers in Genesis, Noah’s-ark-replica-builder, and Bill Nye’s favorite debate punching bag, says that any coherent understanding of Christianity depends upon a literal interpretation of the Bible, including belief in the story of Noah and the Book of Genesis creation story as true and historically accurate.

Posting on Facebook August 22, Ham wrote:

“A Lutheran-ELCA pastor (very liberal) says the account of Noah is not history, but if that’s true then Jesus, Peter, and the author of Hebrews lied.”

Um, okay, what’s your point?

REINCARNATION FOR FUN AND PROFIT Scott Adams

(Transcribed from the Dilbert comic strip, 8/28/2016)

Dogbert: I’m starting a new business selling clothes to ghosts. My garments are made of the finest ectoplasm.

Dilbert: Ghosts don’t have money.

Dogbert: They don’t need money. I use a life insurance business model. If you pay me until you die, I’ll keep your ghosts well-dressed for eternity. I also offer reincarnation services. Leave all of your stuff to me when you die and I’ll give it back to you when I find the baby that got your soul.

Dilbert: You’ll be in trouble if your customers realize you’re running a scam.

Dogbert: If dead people start complaining, we’ve both got bigger problems than my scams.

MUZZLING ON-CAMPUS FREE SPEECH: THE TIDE IS TURNING

From a welcoming letter by John Ellison, Dean of Students, to arriving freshman members of the University of Chicago class of 2020:

“Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called trigger warnings, we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual ‘safe spaces’ where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own.”

Comment: Hip, hip, hoo-goddamn-ray! – JR

PHYLLIS SCHLAFFLY, 1924-2016 Good.

MOTHER TERESA A “SAINT”? HELL, NO! Michael Stone

(Embellished by John Rafferty)

(I have herein excerpted, edited and added my own comments to “Sadistic Religious Fanatic: Mother Teresa Was No Saint” on ProgressiveSecularHumanist.com, Michael Stone, 9/2/2016-JR.)

Tomorrow, Sunday, Pope Francis will canonize Mother Teresa as a saint. Tens of thousands of people will fill St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican to honor a woman who supposedly lived her life dedicated to the poorest of the poor. But in fact, Mother Teresa was a moral monster, a sadistic religious fanatic guilty of medical malpractice and financial fraud.

Yet the Vatican propaganda machine, eager for good publicity and the opportunity to hustle the gullible, continues to promote the soon to be saint while ignoring evidence of her moral incompetence.

Why? Perhaps because for all her life she was the Church’s loudest voice against a woman’s right to choose, and perhaps because she gave nearly all of the hundreds of million dollars she raised for her Missionaries of Charity hospices not to the poor, but to the Vatican. She may have been generous with her prayers, but she was miserly when it came to alleviating the suffering of the sick and the poor.

The celebrated nun had 517 missions in 100 countries at the time of her death. Yet despite plenty of funds, the majority of patients were not cared for properly, many being left to suffer and die without appropriate medical care or pain medication.

In fact, Teresa refused to introduce the most basic methods of hygiene, even going so far as to reuse needles without sterilization. She believed that suffering was a gift from God.

“I think it is very beautiful for the poor to accept their lot, to share it with the passion of Christ. I think the world is being much helped by the suffering of the poor people.”

The late, great Christopher Hitchens was one of the first to raise questions about her, in *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*.

“Mother Teresa was not a friend of the poor. She was a friend of poverty. She said that suffering was a gift from God. She spent her life opposing the only known cure for poverty, which is the empowerment of women and the emancipation of them from a livestock version of compulsory reproduction. ... Many more people are poor and sick because of the life of Mother Teresa; even more will be poor and sick if her example is followed. She was a fanatic, a fundamentalist, and a fraud, and a church that officially protects those who violate the innocent has given us another clear sign of where it truly stands on moral and ethical questions.”

Despite the facts, despite the hypocrisy, despite the cruelty, and despite the sadism, Mother Teresa will be made a saint, demonstrating once again that the Roman Catholic Church is a morally bankrupt institution bereft of both intellectual and ethical authority.

CHRISTIAN LOVE AND CHARITY IN THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER IN THESE UNITED STATES

John Rafferty

The following were all gleaned from a single day, September 15, on ProgressiveSecularHumanist.com:

Brian Mitchell, a 31-year-old North Olmsted, Ohio, youth pastor, pleaded guilty to four counts of sexual battery and will spend a decade in prison for raping a 16-year-old girl who was also a member of his church.

But when Mitchell was arrested, officials at the Columbia Road Baptist Church blamed and shamed the young victim, and forbade the family of the teenager from attending services until she apologized to Mitchell's wife.

The family did not, and moved to another church.

While announcing a McKenzie High School football game in Butler County, Alabama, Pastor Allen Joyner of Sweet Home Baptist Church called for the execution of those who refuse to stand for the national anthem.

"If you don't want to stand for the national anthem, you can line up over there by the fence and let our military personnel take a few shots at you since they're taking shots for you."

Joyner's church expressed approval.

A former mayor of Hubbard, Ohio, Richard Keenan, who "dedicated his life to Christ", was indicted last month on eight counts of rape and 12 counts of attempted rape and gross sexual imposition. He admits the multiple rapes, but claims his victim initiated sexual contact and was a willing participant over a three-year period.

Starting when she was four years old.

Speaking about Donald Trump's new child care plan, Iowa congressman Steve King responded to a question about whether the bogus plan would cover LGBT families, by saying that so-called "natural families" were the only families that deserve child care tax credits.

"I want to respect all people, but I want to promote the natural family, Chris, and I think that's the most wholesome thing we can do. The natural family is a man and a woman joined together in – hopefully – holy matrimony, blessed by God with children."

And in Florida, loathsome little pricklet Marco Rubio said there would be no exception to his no-abortion-ever-no-matter-what position for Zika-malformed fetuses, i.e., let the brain-shrunken kids live out decades semi-comatose in hospitals, while the families spend their lives working to pay the bills.

Rubio is something I would scrape off the bottom of my shoe while holding my nose and gagging. As I write this I'm getting furious. – JR

Iam struck by how the Christian conception of heaven is so much like North Korea: eternal rule by the great leader, his son and cronies; and the masses endlessly singing his choreographed praises. Heaven, at least, has solved the problems of food shortages and disease.

– Jonathan Williams, in *The Guardian* (UK)

From our October Book Club choice (see page 6) ...

SO, FROM NOTHING, OUR UNIVERSE BEGINS

Bill Bryson

No matter how hard you try you will never be able to grasp just how tiny, how spatially unassuming, is a proton. It is just way too small. A proton is an infinitesimal part of an atom, which is itself of course an insubstantial thing. Protons are so small that a little dib of ink like the dot on this i can hold something in the region of 500,000,000,000 of them, rather more than the number of seconds contained in half a million years. So protons are exceedingly microscopic, to say the very least.

Now imagine if you can (and of course you can't) shrinking one of those protons down to a billionth of its normal size into a space so small that it would make a proton look enormous. Now pack into that tiny, tiny space about an ounce of matter. Excellent. You are ready to start a universe. I'm assuming of course that you wish to build an inflationary universe. If you'd prefer instead to build a more old-fashioned, standard Big Bang universe, you'll need additional materials. In fact, you will need to gather up everything there is—every last mote and particle of matter between here and the edge of creation—and squeeze it into a spot so infinitesimally compact that it has no dimensions at all. It is known as a singularity.

In either case, get ready for a really big bang. Naturally, you will wish to retire to a safe place to observe the spectacle. Unfortunately, there is nowhere to retire to because outside the singularity there is no where. When the universe begins to expand, it won't be spreading out to fill a larger emptiness. The only space that exists is the space it creates as it goes.

It is natural but wrong to visualize the singularity as a kind of pregnant dot hanging in a dark, boundless void. But there is no space, no darkness. The singularity has no "around" around it. There is no space for it to occupy, no place for it to be. We can't even ask how long it has been there – whether it has just lately popped into being, like a good idea, or whether it has been there forever, quietly awaiting the right moment. Time doesn't exist. There is no past for it to emerge from.

And so, from nothing, our universe begins. In a single blinding pulse, a moment of glory much too swift and expansive for any form of words, the singularity assumes heavenly dimensions, space beyond conception. In the first lively second (a second that many cosmologists will devote careers to shaving into ever-finer wafers) is produced gravity and the other forces that govern physics. In less than a minute the universe is a million billion miles across and growing fast. There is a lot of heat now, ten billion degrees of it, enough to begin the nuclear reactions that create the lighter elements – principally hydrogen and helium, with a dash (about one atom in a hundred million) of lithium. In three minutes, 98 percent of all the matter there is or will ever be has been produced. We have a universe. It is a place of the most wondrous and gratifying possibility, and beautiful, too. And it was all done in about the time it takes to make a sandwich.

THE HUMANISM OF STAR TREK

Andrew Copson

(Excerpted from "The Humanist Values of Star Trek",
NewStatesman.com, Feb, 2007)

(Editor: Last month marked the 50th anniversary of the debut of the original Star Trek TV series, occasioning worldwide tributes, including this from the UK, forwarded by John Wagner.)

The society Gene Roddenberry created in *Star Trek* is a very humanist one – at least in the original series and *Next Generation*. Later series, after the death of Roddenberry, become a little too new age for my liking.

Roddenberry had a hopeful vision of the future: one in which mankind has united around shared human values, joined in a common endeavour to reach the stars, and happily left religion behind on the way. It's a counsellor, not a chaplain that the Enterprise crew turn to when in need of guidance. Starship crews explore a cosmos that is full of beauty and wonder and they respond with awe and appreciation. This wonder does not overawe them, because ultimately the universe, and its billions of stars and planets, is a natural thing which the curious can know and understand. All the phenomena encountered within it are investigated rationally and, though they may at first seem inexplicable, are understood in the end as susceptible to naturalistic explanations.

Like any utopia, the *Star Trek* universe reflects the values of its creator, and this is just as true on the level of human values and relationships as it is on the larger levels. A Starfleet crew values cooperation and liberality. They value the equality of persons and the dignity of life. Although rank is respected, the views of all are given fair airing.

When the crew encounter new peoples there is an assumption of peace, but they defend themselves robustly when attacked (no bellicosity, but no turning of the other cheek here either), and although the men and women of this future cultivate an internal life through meditation or the arts, they accept reason and science as the means by which they can know the universe they explore.

Moral certainty is always a sign of cultural inferiority. The more uncivilized the man, the surer he is that he knows precisely what is right and what is wrong. All human progress, even in morals, has been the work of men who have doubted the current moral values, not of men who have whooped them up and tried to enforce them.

The truly civilized man is always skeptical and tolerant, in this field as in all others. His culture is based on "I am not too sure." – *H.L. Mencken*

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