

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

December, 2017

“Christmas is at our throats again.” – Noel Coward

Busy, busy holiday season ahead, even for us holy-day deniers (see pages 6-7). But herein we'll name Jesus, fudge his birthday, envy Canada and New Zealand, then consider free speech, censorship, real fake news, worldwide corruption (you know, “the system”), guilt by association with Trumps, and so much stupidity in our government that we're exporting it to the world. – JR

**THANK YOU!
YOU (ALMOST) MAXED OUT THE SHSNY
MATCHING-GRANTS KITTY FOR
HURRICANE RELIEF**

Donna Marxer, Treasurer, SHSNY

Through our Facebook platform and our website – with PayPal and old-fashioned pen-on-paper checks – SHSNY members and friends contributed a total of \$980.00 for humane relief for the victims of hurricanes Harvey and Irma – especially those who have suffered the horrific devastation of Puerto Rico.

As promised, SHSNY will match your contributions dollar for dollar, and send the total – \$1960.00 – to Foundation Beyond Belief, the humanist charity that “promotes secular volunteering and responsible charitable giving guided by the principles of secular humanism”, and whose mission is “to unite the humanist community in volunteer and charitable efforts, and to advocate for compassionate action throughout the world”.

Meanwhile, to all of you who opened your hearts and your wallets, a very heartfelt Thank You!

And ...

**FOR YOUR YEAR-END
TAX-DEDUCTIBLE CHARITABLE GIVING,
REMEMBER SHSNY!**

Any contribution you make to SHSNY – beyond your membership dues – at any time of the year, is fully tax-deductible.

But there is a special satisfaction in giving at the holidays, isn't there – even for bah-humbugging secular humanists? So, please, think of SHSNY when you're planning your giving this year-end.

Make your tax-deductible contribution via credit card or PayPal at the website, www.shsn.org, or by check to the address on the third line in the box directly below.

A couple of Xmas thoughts ...

HAPPY BIRTHDAY (not really), JESUS

(Transcribed from jesusandmo.net, 11/15/2017)

Jesus: Look, I know Christmas has its origins in paganism. But the church at the time had good reasons to adopt the festival as its own. There was a lot of gnostic bullshit going around in those days – the notion that I was a mere “symbol” or “spiritual presence”. Changing the winter solstice festival to Christmas – my birthday – was a way for the church to emphasize the factuality of my life.

Mohammed: So they emphasized your factuality by promoting a fiction.

Jesus: You've got to fight bullshit with bullshit.

Mo: That's true.



BOARD OF DIRECTORS: John Rafferty, *Pres./Editor*; Claire Miller, *V.P.*; Brian Lemaire, *Secty.*; Donna Marxer, *Treas.*; Kiwi Callahan; Matt Callahan; Jonathan Engel; Maria Graber; Dorothy Kahn; Carl Marxer; Carlos Mora; Bob Murtha; John Wagner
SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, F.D.R. Station, New York, NY 10150-7661 / www.shsn.org / 646-922-7389

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

Articles published in PIQUE are archived at www.shsn.org. Original-to-PIQUE articles may be reprinted, in full or in part. SHSNY is a Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association (AHA), an Affiliate Member of Atheist Alliance International (AAI), an Affiliated Local Group of the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH) program of the Center for Inquiry (CFI), and an Endorsing Group in the Secular Coalition for New York (SCNY).

FREE SPEECH AND TOLERANCE: A REPORT FROM THE (SANE) RIGHT WING

Emily Ekins

(Excerpted from "The State of Free Speech and Tolerance in America: Attitudes about Free Speech, Campus Speech, Religious Liberty, and Tolerance of Political Expression", 10/31/2017.)

(Editor: Following are the opening paragraphs of a new report by the conservative Cato Institute. The full illustrated report is available at https://www.cato.org/survey-reports/state-free-speech-tolerance-america?ex_cid=SigDig#_ftn40 ... and is well worth your time to read. – JR)

Americans say political correctness has silenced discussions society needs to have; most have views they're afraid to share. Nearly three-fourths (71%) of Americans believe that political correctness has done more to silence important discussions our society needs to have. A little more than a quarter (28%) instead believe that political correctness has done more to help people avoid offending others.

The consequences are personal – 58% of Americans believe the political climate today prevents them from saying things they believe. Democrats are unique, however, in that a slim majority (53%) do not feel the need to self-censor. Conversely, strong majorities of Republicans (73%) and independents (58%) say they keep some political beliefs to themselves.

Americans oppose bans on hate speech but say hate speech is morally unacceptable. Most Americans (59%) think people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions in public, even those deeply offensive to other people. Forty percent (40%) think government should prevent hate speech in public. Nonetheless, an overwhelming majority (79%) agree that it is "morally unacceptable" to engage in hate speech against racial or religious groups. Thus, the public appears to distinguish between allowing offensive speech and endorsing it.

Despite this, the survey also found Americans willing to censor, regulate, or punish a wide variety of speech and expression they personally find offensive:

- 51% of strong liberals say it's "morally acceptable" to punch Nazis.
- 53% of Republicans favor stripping U.S. citizenship from people who burn the American flag.
- 51% of Democrats support a law that requires Americans to use transgender people's preferred gender pronouns.
- 47% of Republicans favor bans on building new mosques.
- 58% of Democrats say employers should punish employees for offensive Facebook posts.
- 65% of Republicans say NFL players should be fired if they refuse to stand for the national anthem.

An overwhelming majority (82%) of Americans agree that it would be difficult to ban hate speech because people can't agree what speech is hateful and offensive. Indeed, when presented with specific statements and ideas, Americans can't agree on what speech is hateful, offensive, or simply a political opinion:

- 59% of liberals say it's hate speech to say transgender people have a mental disorder, only 17% of conservatives agree.
 - 39% of conservatives believe it's hate speech to say the police are racist, only 17% of liberals agree.
 - 80% of liberals say it's hateful or offensive to say illegal immigrants should be deported, only 36% of conservatives agree.
 - 87% of liberals say it's hateful or offensive to say women shouldn't fight in military combat roles; 47% of conservatives agree.
 - 90% of liberals say it's hateful or offensive to say homosexuality is a sin; 47% of conservatives agree.
- More and more at the website. Go! – JR*

21ST CENTURY CENSORSHIP: DON'T BAN THE TRUTH, DROWN IT.

Tim Wu

(Excerpted from "How Twitter Killed the First Amendment", The New York Times OpEd, 10/27/2017)

You need not be a media historian to notice that we live in a golden age of press harassment, domestic propaganda and coercive efforts to control political debate. The Trump White House repeatedly seeks to discredit the press, threatens to strip broadcasters of their licenses and calls for the firing of journalists and football players for speaking their minds. A foreign government tries to hack our elections, and journalists and public speakers are regularly attacked by vicious, online troll armies whose aim is to silence opponents.

In this age of "new" censorship and blunt manipulation of political speech, where is the First Amendment? Americans like to think of it as the great protector of the press and of public debate. Yet it seems to have become a bit player, confined to a narrow and often irrelevant role. It is time to ask: Is the First Amendment obsolete? If so, what can be done?

These questions arise because the jurisprudence of the First Amendment was written for a different set of problems in a very different world. The First Amendment was ignored for much of American history, coming to life only in the 1920s thanks to the courage of judges like Learned Hand, Louis Brandeis and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Courts and civil libertarians used the amendment to protect speakers from government prosecution and censorship as it was practiced in the 20th century, such as the arrest of pamphleteers and the seizure of anarchist newspapers by the Postal Service.

But in the 21st century, censorship works differently, as the writer and academic Zeynep Tufekci has illustrated. The complete suppression of dissenting speech isn't feasible in our "cheap speech" era. Instead, the world's most sophisticated censors, including Russia and China, have spent a decade pioneering tools and techniques that are better suited to the internet age. Unfortunately, those new censorship tools have become unwelcome imports in the United States, with catastrophic results for our democracy.

The Russian government was among the first to recognize that speech itself could be used as a tool of suppression and control. The agents of its “web brigade”, often called the “troll army”, disseminate pro-government news, generate false stories and coordinate swarm attacks on critics of the government. The Chinese government has perfected “reverse censorship”, whereby disfavored speech is drowned out by “floods” of distraction or pro-government sentiment. As the journalist Peter Pomerantsev writes, these techniques employ information “in weaponized terms, as a tool to confuse, blackmail, demoralize, subvert and paralyze”.

Our distressing state of public discourse stems from the widespread use of these new tools of censorship and speech control, including by the White House. The administration habitually crosses the line between fact and propaganda. Instead of taking action itself, it demands that others punish its supposed enemies. To add to the mess, it is apparent that the Russian government and possibly others hope to manipulate American political debate, as its exploitation of Facebook and Twitter in the last election shows.

What can be done? It is time to recognize that the American political process and marketplace for ideas are under attack, and that reinvigorating the First Amendment is vital. First, it is an imperative that law enforcement and lawmakers do more to protect journalists and other public speakers from harassment and threats. Cyberstalking is a crime. And as the Supreme Court has made clear, threats of violence are not protected speech. A country where speaking one’s mind always results in death threats is not a country that can be said to be truly free.

Second, too little is being done to protect American politics from foreign attack. The Russian efforts to use Facebook, YouTube and other social media to influence American politics should compel Congress to act. Social media has as much impact as broadcasting on elections, yet unlike broadcasting it is unregulated and has proved easy to manipulate. At a minimum, new rules should bar social media companies from accepting money for political advertising by foreign governments or their agents. And more aggressive anti-bot laws are needed to fight impersonation of humans for propaganda purposes.

Finally, the White House needs to be held accountable when it tries to use private parties to circumvent First Amendment protections. When it encourages others to punish its critics — as when it demanded that the N.F.L., on pain of tax penalties, censor players — it is wielding state power to punish disfavored speech. There is precedent for such abuses to be challenged in court.

Some might argue, based on the sophomoric premise that “more speech is always better,” that the current state of chaos is what the First Amendment intended. But no defensible free-speech tradition accepts harassment and threats as speech, treats foreign propaganda campaigns as legitimate debate or thinks that social-media bots ought to enjoy constitutional protection. A robust and unfiltered debate is one thing; corruption of debate itself is another.

We have entered a far more dangerous place for the republic; its defense requires stronger protections for what we once called the public sphere.

HOW – AND WHY – FAKE NEWS WORKS David Masciotra

(Excerpted from “How Fake News Works: Tens of Millions of Americans Would Flunk Any Basic Civics Class” on salon.com, 11/5/2017)

It happens every semester. I’m sitting at home, tempted to jump head first out the window as I grade papers from my college freshmen writing course. One student has cited a Facebook meme as evidence to present the case for the criminalization of abortion. Another has referred to the expertise of an unidentified Reddit user as the conversation closer on issues of war and peace. ...

As everyone scrambles to correctly assign blame for the degradation of American democracy in 2016 through fake news Russian disinformation campaigns, commentators act as if they are attempting to determine who is responsible for letting a toddler jump into the pool. Was it the social media CEOs for having no standards regulating content? Was it Vladimir Putin, whose interference some have called an “act of war”? Or was it the DNC for their failure to adequately guard against hacking?

The conversation would remain important, but it would not rise to the level of urgency if the American people were not susceptible to the spread of information transparently false to anyone who has read a substantive book, or even a newspaper, in the past year.

Gore Vidal once remarked, “Half of the U.S. population reads a newspaper. Half of the U.S. population votes. Let’s hope it is the same half.”

Now, fewer than half of Americans read the newspaper, and an increasingly alarming amount report that they rely on social media for news, but many of them are still participating in the democratic process. I often see bumper stickers that announce, “I’m Catholic and I vote” or “I’m NRA and I vote.” It seems that a lucrative merchandising opportunity exists for someone who invents the sticker, “I don’t read and I vote.”

The documentation of Americans’ ignorance on fundamental issues of history and governance is by now so thorough that it hardly bears repeating. For example, only 26 percent of Americans can name all three branches of government. These are people commonly referred to as “elitists”.

The problem is not just that Americans don’t know. It is that they don’t know what they don’t know, and they don’t know how to figure it out. Like my students who attempt to meet their research requirement on Twitter, American voters are misinforming themselves with lies and inaccuracies from unreliable sources. ...

If the overwhelming majority of Americans cannot even identify the three branches of their own government, it should strike no one as a surprise that they are unaware of refugee policies in Europe. One of the fake news stories

I saw circulate on Facebook in the months leading up to the presidential election described “millions” of refugees arriving in Germany, or sometimes Italy, and essentially “taking over” the country. The post often produced as photographic evidence, doctored images from the early 20th century. Apocalyptic updates on the refugee invasion of European nations served as warning against what would happen in America if Hillary Clinton became president.

The most consequential offenders in the dissemination, and success, of fake news are not the Russians or social media company executives, but the American education system, and the parents who are content with raising children who know little about their country, much less about the rest of the world.

Only nine states require civics as part of the high school curriculum, and many colleges have reduced or eliminated requirements in history and political science. As unimaginable as it seems, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni published a report last year that only seven of the nation’s top 25 liberal arts colleges require their history majors – this is not a joke – to take a course in U.S. history.

The notion that the only knowledge that matters is that which can enable students to acquire high-paying employment has also contributed to the intellectual failures of Americans.

What the scandal of 2016’s hacks, Russian meddling and disinformation proves, is that a significant portion of Americans are ungovernable and unfit for the task of citizenship in a free country. It certainly does not have to stay that way, but reversal would demand an entirely new approach to education, popular political discussion and the preparation of children for the adult world.

As long as the focus remains solely on easily identifiable villains – foreign dictators, greedy tech magnates – American democracy will remain an easy target for illusionists and conmen.

FYI: WIKIPEDIA HAS A LIST OF FAKE NEWS SITES

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fake_news_websites

AN IMMODEST PROPOSAL: PUT “CIVICS 101” BACK IN HIGH SCHOOL

Timothy Egan

(Excerpted from “We’re With Stupid”, on The New York Times OpEd page, 11/17/2017)

It would be much easier to sleep at night if you could believe that we’re in such a mess of misinformation simply because Russian agents disseminated inflammatory posts that reached 126 million people on Facebook. ...

But the problem is not the Russians – it’s us. We’re getting played because too many Americans are ill equipped to perform the basic functions of citizenship. If the point of the Russian campaign, aided domestically by right-wing media, was to get people to think there is no such thing as knowable truth, the bad guys have won. ...

We have a White House of lies because a huge

percentage of the population can’t tell fact from fiction. But a huge percentage is also clueless about the basic laws of the land. In a democracy, we the people are supposed to understand our role in this power-sharing thing.

Nearly one in three Americans cannot name a single branch of government. When NPR tweeted out sections of the Declaration of Independence last year, many people were outraged. They mistook Thomas Jefferson’s words for anti-Trump propaganda. ... For that you have to blame all of us: we have allowed the educational system to become negligent in teaching the owner’s manual of citizenship. ...

Suppose we treated citizenship like getting a driver’s license. People would have to pass a simple test on American values, history and geography before they were allowed to have a say in the system. We do that for immigrants, and 97 percent of them pass, according to one study.

Yet one in three Americans fail the immigrant citizenship test. This is not an elitist barrier. The test includes questions like, “What major event happened on 9/11?” and “What ocean is on the West Coast of the United States?”

One reason that public schools were established across the land was to produce an informed citizenry. And up until the 1960s, it was common for students to take three separate courses in civics and government before they got out of high school. Now only a handful of states require proficiency in civics as a condition of high school graduation. Students are hungry, in this turbulent era, for discussion of politics and government. But the educators are failing them. Civics has fallen to the side, in part because of the standardized test mania.

A related concern is historical ignorance. By a 48 percent to 38 percent margin Americans think states’ rights, rather than slavery, caused the Civil War. So Trump’s chief of staff, John F. Kelly, can say something false about the war, because most people are just as clueless as he is.

There’s hope – and there are many ways – to shed light on the cave of American democracy. More than a dozen states now require high school students to pass the immigrant citizenship test. We should also teach kids how to tell fake news from real, as schools in Europe are doing.

Comment: I have been saying this since I taught Junior High Social Studies a lifetime ago and found that the Civics course I took in 9th grade was no longer in the curriculum. – JR

SOME MORNINGS, OPENING THE INBOX IS THE BEST EVENT OF THE DAY

Dear John:

Glad to let you know that the U.S. government has granted me and my family political asylum on religious (or irreligious?) grounds.

You are the one who introduced me to Robert Murtha* who helped me get it granted.

Thanks so much for your support.

Gratefully,
Minhaz Parvez

*(*Immigration lawyer Bob Murtha is a Board member, former SHSNY V.P., and all-around good guy. – JR)*

“SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE ISN'T IN THE CONSTITUTION”

... AND OTHER AMERICAN MYTHS

Part 2 – Conclusion

Jonathan Engel

(Editor: This is the conclusion of Jon's boil-down of his outstanding presentation to a full house at our Freethought Day celebration in October. In the November excerpt he exposed the triviality of the argument that “separation” isn't in the Constitution, and refuted the claim that “the Ten Commandments are the basis for our laws”. – JR)

The final myth we're going to take a look at is one that holds that, “While the government may not favor one religion over another, it may promote religion over non-religion.” This was a favorite belief of the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. The idea is that government favoring religion is somehow okay so long as all religions are included. But I believe that logic dictates that it is impossible to promote religion in general without playing favorites.

First of all, government advancement of religion in general discriminates against atheists, and atheists have rights too! But that's not all. Also, when politicians end their speeches by saying “May God bless the United States of America,” they claim to be speaking in a non-sectarian manner, but they are only talking about one god, and my guess is that it's their own. After all, you never hear a politician end a speech with, “May all of the gods bless the United States of America.” Furthermore, would anyone, even the late Scalia, think that a law that mandated religious observance but left the particular religion to the choice of each citizen would pass Constitutional muster? I think not, and yet such a law would promote religion in general without favoring one religion, which Scalia said was okay.

Lastly, let's look at Scalia the “textualist”. A textualist believes that a statute should be interpreted only according to a plain reading of its text; context such as legislative history or the contemporaneous writings of its authors should be ignored. The First Amendment's Establishment clause says “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion” It could have said “Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of any one particular religion,” and if Scalia was right that government can favor religion in general, that's what it would say. But it doesn't, and a clear reading of the text shows that government cannot establish religion in general, and not just any one particular religion.

In 1782 Thomas Jefferson wrote, “The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no god at all. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

And that should be government's relationship to religion. Government should not care whether anyone worships one god, or 20 gods, or no god at all. There is no freedom of religion unless there is freedom of religion for everyone. And the only way to guarantee freedom of religion for everyone is to maintain the wall of separation between church and state.

DAVID MADISON DELIGHTS

John Rafferty

“The fast track to atheism is reading the Bible.”

So says David Madison, Biblical scholar, former Methodist minister-turned-atheist, author, blogger and, as he proved November 13 to a delighted audience at an SHSNY special evening at the Community Church of New York, a gifted and witty raconteur.



Promoting his new book, *Ten Tough Problems in Christian Thought and Belief*, which is an important corrective, in this reader/reporter's opinion, to those “liberal” exegetes who criticize the horrors of Christian history while glossing over the lunatic “Bad Jesus” who denied one follower time to bury his father, and advised all his followers to “hate” everyone but him. Christianity falls apart, David says— not originally, but with new force—over the problem of human suffering and the existence of evil in the world, both easily preventable if there was, indeed, a caring and loving god.

David actually read the Bible for fun as a self-described teenage “nerd”, but serious, scholarly study of it destroyed his belief – first in Christianity, then in God Him/Itself. Evaluating the fourteen volumes written by Karl Barth, the leading Christian theologian of the 20th century, one of David's professors offered the witticism that “No one knows eight thousand pages about God.”

“I wanted one page,” David thought, “just one page of reliable, verifiable data about God.”

And, of course, there is no such page – only the self-referential arguments that offer the Bible as “proof” that the Bible is true. The gospels, for instance, are “the products of storytelling”, not history. In fact, of all the stories of all the “events” in the New Testament, we do not have reliable, verifiable proof of a single one. Not one.

So, what advice does David give other doubters taking their first, hesitant steps toward reality? Don't ask the “experts” for advice! “Do not go to your priest, your minister, rabbi, imam – they are paid propagandists.”

The Q&A portion of the evening was lively and interesting. In it we learned that in addition to his every-Friday contributions to John Loftus' “Debunking Christianity” blog, David is working on a *Bad Bible Theology* series of books. I'm looking forward to it.

And, I learned over chicken salad a little later in the evening, David is in the planning stages of creating an Atheist Writers Group at which a few serious writers can offer short submissions (25 pages max, double spaced, per month) for group critiques – “not to teach each other how to write, but rather to benefit from other writers' suggestions, with a balance of candor and kindness.

“And to help each other navigate the ‘jungle out there’, i.e., the publishing world, with advice on how to get noticed by agents and publishers.”

Interested? To apply to join the group, here's the link: <http://www.tentoughproblems.com/writersgroup/>

SHSNY CALENDAR: DECEMBER - FEBRUARY

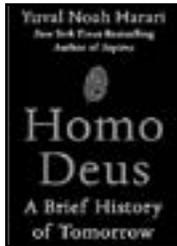
SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, DEC 7, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

28 East 35 St. (front lounge)
We'll discuss

**HOMO DEUS: A Brief
History of Tomorrow**
Yuval Noah Harari

War is obsolete;
you are more
likely to commit sui-
cide than be killed
in conflict. *Famine is
disappearing*; you are
more at risk of obe-
sity than starvation.



Death is just a technical problem;
equality is out – but immortality is
in. *What does our future hold?*

Harari, best-selling author of
the international phenomenon
Sapiens, returns with an equally
original, compelling, and provoca-
tive book, turning his focus toward
humanity's future, and our quest
to upgrade humans into gods.

The *Evening Standard* (UK) calls
Homo Deus "a brilliantly original,
thought-provoking and impor-
tant study of where mankind is
heading." *Homo Deus* explores the
projects, dreams and nightmares
that will shape our century – from
overcoming death to creating
artificial life. It asks the question:
Where do we go from here?

– Paperback and Kindle available.

*Join us even if you haven't
finished reading.*

*The SHSNY Book Club
is open to all ... and free!*

LIKE SHSNY ON FACEBOOK

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

MEET US ON MEETUP

www.meetup.com/shsny-org/

TEXT US ON TWITTER

@SHS_NewYork

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, JAN 4, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
**THE EVANGELICALS:
The Struggle to Shape America**
Frances FitzGerald

A page turner: . . . Anyone curi-
ous about the state of conser-
vative American Protestantism will
have a trusted guide in this Ban-
croft and Pulitzer Prize winner . . .

"We have long needed a fair-
minded overview of this vitally
important religious sensibility, and
FitzGerald has now provided it."
(*The New York Times Book Review*)

– Paperback and Kindle available.

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, FEB 1, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
Book selection to be announced.

Another Xmas thought ...



SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

MON, DEC 11, 6:30 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

THE HORSE'S MOUTH

Alec Guinness wrote the script
for this Oscar-nominated com-
edy based on

Joyce Cary's
novel, and
plays Gul-
ley Jimson, a
boorish aging
artist recently
released
from prison.



He hunkers
down in the
penthouse of vacationing patrons,
paints a (magnificent) mural on
their wall, pawns their valuables
and destroys their apartment.

Some call this his greatest film.

After-Film Discussion:

How much slack do we cut art?

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.

(But put something on the bar besides your elbow.)

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, DEC 17, 11:30 am

And we're on the move again, to ...

Gemini Diner

2nd Avenue & 35th Street

"No, the room is not exclusively
yours," said the officious manager
at The Gem, while seating others
in the middle of our November
brunch. So we chcked out Gemini,
where manager Gus assures us
we have a large back rooms all to
ourselves.

Check out GeminiDiner.com,
and come join 20 or more fellow
freethinkers for food, fun and con-
vivial conversation, including the
Dorothy Kahn-led ...

After-Brunch Discussion:

*Post Thanksgiving: Should the
world be thankful for the U.S.?*

SHSNY CALENDAR: DECEMBER - FEBRUARY

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
WED, DEC 27, 7 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
HOW ARE WE DOING?
NOT GREAT.

**An All-Star Panel Discusses
the Disconnect between
Science and Public Policy**



This presentation of the Science Review is a panel discussion of Science and Social policy from the Science and Society Conference at Arizona State University.

A. C. Grayling, Lawrence Krauss, Richard Dawkins, Stephen Pinker, and Brian Green address the question: "How are we doing?" The answer is "Not great"; we, as a society, have suffered because science has not been used to inform public policy.

STUDYING HUMANISM

We do not meet in December.

PLANNING AHEAD

The *usual* SHSNY schedule (barring holidays and weather calamities) is ...

Book Club: First Thursday

at the Community Church of NY

Movie Night: Second Monday

at Stone Creek Lounge.

Brunch: Third Sunday

at The Gem Saloon

Great Lectures on DVD:

4th Wednesday

at Stone Creek Lounge.

Studying Humanism: Last Monday

at the Community Church of NY

More info: www.shsny.org

and/or 646-922-7389

THURS, DEC 14, 5-8:00 pm
FIRST ANNUAL SECULAR
COALITION COCKTAIL
PARTY AND BENEFIT BASH
at (Historic) Stonewall Inn
53 Christopher Street

Celebrate Freedom, Fairness and Festivus ... with the Secular Coalition for America. Open Bar, Light Hors

D'Ouevres, and New Friends.
(You must be at least 21 to attend.)

Tickets

\$50 - Secular Supporter
\$250 - Secular Republic Hero
Space is limited, so get your tickets now! Contact
John Levin, 646-221-9134 or
JLEVIN6@ZOHO.COM

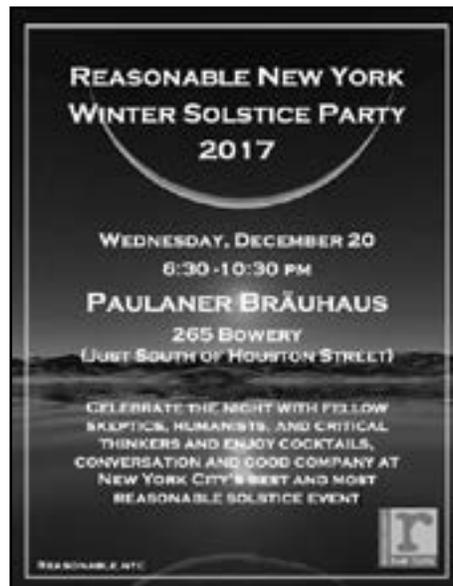


WED, DEC 20 6:30-10:30
REASONABLE NEW YORK
WINTER SOLSTICE PARTY
2017

Paulaner Brauhaus
265 Bowery

(Just South of E. Houston St.)

FRI, DEC 15, 6-9:00 pm



THE SHSNY 2017 WARM COAT DRIVE

Hosted by the
Community Church of New York
in the church basement at
40 East 35 Street

That bulky winter coat you haven't worn in three years that's just taking up (much-needed) space in your front closet? It could warm one of New York's needy this winter, when SHSNY bundles and passes it on to New York Cares.



For the last 29 years, New York Cares has organized the city's largest winter coat drive, gathering over 1.8 million winter coats. Just last year New York Cares collected and distributed 109,000 winter coats to families who'd otherwise have faced a long cold winter without one.

Your coat can make two people happy - the grateful recipient, and you, knowing that you have given an important, a meaningful gift of caring this holiday season.

So come to the church basement Friday evening, December 15, with your clean, gently-used old coats, have a glass of wine and interesting conversation with some fellow freethinkers, and do some good.

More info? cemantix@gmail.com

**YOUR YEAR-END GIFT
TO SHSNY IS
100% TAX-DEDUCTIBLE**
www.shsny.org

“BOTH SIDES OF THE SCIENCE”, OR, BETTER YET IN TRUMPWORLD, NO SCIENCE

John Rafferty

(Based on, and excerpted from posts by Michael Stone on ProgressiveSecularHumanist, on patheos.com, 10/23 and 10/26/2017)



Kelly Knight Craft, a Republican fundraiser and Donald Trump's new U.S. ambassador to Canada, said she appreciates and respects “both sides of the science” when it comes to climate change.

In an interview with CBC's Rosemary Barton, Craft tried to explain her dazed and confused position:

“I believe there are sciences on both sides that are accurate. I think that both sides have their own results, from their studies, and I appreciate and I respect both sides of the science.”

Of course, that should surprise exactly no one, since the Trump administration has been waging an all-out war on science, and recently blocked leading scientists at the EPA from speaking at a climate change conference earlier this week, engaging in what has been characterized as “scientific censorship”.

Trump himself is on record rejecting the well established science concerning climate change, even going so far as to claim that “nobody really knows” if climate change is real in a 2016 interview.

Then there's Kathleen Hartnett White, Trump's pick to be the White House senior adviser on environmental policy, in which position she will head the Council on Environmental Quality, overseeing environmental and energy policies all across the government. She believes that environmental leaders are using climate policy “to undermine the system of economic growth and industrialization”, while claiming that belief in global warming is a “kind of paganism” for “secular elites”:



“There's a real dark side of the kind of paganism – the secular elites' religion now being, evidently, global warming.”

In addition, *The New York Times* reports Hartnett White has argued that “carbon dioxide is a harmless gas that should not be regulated”, and that “labeling carbon dioxide emissions as a pollutant is ‘absurd’ and asserted that it should be considered the ‘gas of life’.”

She has also called renewable energy “unreliable and parasitic”, described global warming as “a creed, a faith, a dogma that has little to do with science”, and asserted that science does not dictate policy in democracies.

HONESTY IN 2017 REPUBLICAN POLITICS

“My donors told me to pass the tax bill or don't ever call me again.” – Rep. Chris Collins, R-NY, 11/07/2017

MEANWHILE, IN THE REAL WORLD OF, YOU KNOW, SCIENCE AND, WELL, REALITY

John Rafferty

(Based on two posts by Michael Stone, on ProgressiveSecularHumanist, patheos.com, 10/27 and 11/3/2017)



One wonders what the first meeting will be like between Canada's Governor General, Julie Payette, and the new U.S. Ambassador to Canada (see preceding).

Last month Ms. Payette, a computer engineer who later became an astronaut, in 1999 the first Canadian to board the International Space Station—you know, someone who has actually accomplished something—delivered the keynote speech at the Canadian Science Policy Conference in Ottawa. In her speech Payette made it clear “that she has a very low opinion of the validity of horoscopes, people who believe in creationism or those who don't believe in climate change”.

“Can you believe that still today in learned society, in houses of government, unfortunately, we're still debating and still questioning whether humans have a role in the Earth warming up or whether even the Earth is warming up, period.”

Wait, wait, it gets better. Addressing religious superstition, and the idea of divine intervention and creationism, an incredulous Payette declared:

“And we are still debating and still questioning whether life was a divine intervention or whether it was coming out of a natural process let alone, oh my goodness, a random process.”

So what happened when the religious troglodytes (yes, Canada has them, too) roared their disapproval? Her boss, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, backed her up.

Comment: Can't we please borrow them?

Meanwhile, halfway around the world, from the farthest north nation to the farthest south, the Prime Minister of New Zealand – an agnostic – was sworn into office without a Bible and without reference to God.

Jacinda Arden, New Zealand's 40th prime minister, is, at 37, the nation's youngest leader in more than 150 years. She is also the nation's third female prime minister, and the youngest woman to lead the country.



Arden is a self-described agnostic who left the Mormon church after she realized she could not support justice and equality for LGBT people and remain a Mormon. She officially left the church in her early 20s.

Arden told the *New Zealand Herald*:

“For a lot of years, I put it to the back of my mind. It was too unsettling. If something like religion is part of your foundation, and then suddenly you start questioning that – it's quite a confronting thing to deal with.”

Comment: Can we have her, too? Please?

THREE SIDES OF CONGRESS

Michael Stone

(Excerpted, edited and re-arranged from three of Mr. Stone's Progressive Secular Humanist posts on patheos.com, 11/7 and 11/9/2017 - JR)



1. "Prayer works."

After the Texas church massacre that left 26 people dead, Republican Speaker of the House Paul Ryan tweeted: "Reports out of Texas are devastating. The people of Sutherland Springs need our prayers right now."

That empty and facile gesture—meant to satisfy the gullible—was met with widespread criticism. When asked about the criticism by Fox News's Laura Ingraham on her show, Ryan said:

"It's disappointing, it's sad, and this is what you'll get from the far secular left. People who do not have faith don't understand faith, I guess I'd have to say. And it is the right thing to do is to pray in moments like this, because you know what? Prayer works."

No, it doesn't. Prayers are spiritual masturbation: they may make the person doing the praying feel a little better, but prayers do nothing to effect change in the real world.

2. "I can't do this again."

In striking - and heroic - contrast, Congressman Ted Lieu of California walked out when Congress held "a moment of silence" for the 26 victims. Instead, he released a video via Facebook live from the hallway outside the chamber:

"I'm heartbroken about the children and the adults that were killed. ... My colleagues right now are doing a moment of silence. I respect their right to do that and I myself have participated in many of them. But I can't do this again."

"I've been to too many moments of silences. Just in my short career in Congress, three of the worst mass shootings in US history have occurred. I will not be silent. What we need is we need action, we need to pass gun safety legislation now. We cannot be silent. We need to act now."



3. "I don't believe in God."



Even more gutsy, another California Democrat, Congressman Jared Huffman, in an interview with *The Washington Post*, argued that there is "too much religion in politics". Calling himself "a non-believer and a skeptic", he went on to say he identifies as (*drum roll, please*) a "humanist".

"I suppose you could say I don't believe in God."
The skies did not fall.

Comment: Subsequently, Rep. Huffman has said he knows of several colleagues in Congress who believe as he does, but feel they cannot come all the way out of the closet. - JR

TRUMP RELIGIOUS ADVISER ROBERT JEFFRESS HAS QUESTIONS. WE'VE GOT ANSWERS.

Rob Boston

(Transcribed from Wall of Separation www.au.org as reprinted in Atlanta Freethought News, November, 2017)

There are many bad things about Donald Trump's presidency, but one of the worst is that it has thrust people like Pastor Robert Jeffress into the national spotlight.

Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, was one of any number of far-right theocrats with a smidgen of regional notoriety at best until he hitched himself to Trump's campaign. Now, as one of Trump's inner circle of religious advisers, Jeffress is much loved by the Fox News Channel and appears there regularly.

The fame seems to be going to Jeffress' head. During a recent speech, he boasted about his media appearances and mocked those who oppose him.

"You know," he remarked, "every time I am debating one of these pinhead lawyers from the ACLU or the Freedom From Religion Foundation on Fox News, I always ask them about this. I said, 'Can you explain to me why, in the 1860s, it was constitutional to teach the Bible, or to pray, or to put Nativity scenes in the public school, but in 1980 - 120 years later - you can't even post the copies of the Ten Commandments? Can you explain to me what changed? Did the Constitution change and nobody told us about it? And do the judges today have greater insight into what our Founders meant than those who lived closest to the Founders?'" (Thanks to Hemant Mehta of the "Friendly Atheist" blog for first reporting this.)

The idea that Jeffress thinks he can best expert civil liberties lawyers is amusing on its own. The situation becomes downright hysterical once one realizes that Jeffress is abysmally ignorant of the history of religion in public schools. With that in mind, I'd like to answer his questions.

"Can you explain to me why, in the 1860s, it was constitutional to teach the Bible, or to pray, or to put Nativity scenes in the public school, but in 1980 - 120 years later - you can't even post the copies of the Ten Commandments?"

Actually, several courts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries said it wasn't permissible to do those things.

Let's step back a bit. The fact is, there were not a lot of public schools in America in 1860. That concept didn't start catching on until after the Civil War. As states began to build public schools and pass mandatory attendance laws, religion immediately became a flashpoint for controversy.

Parents were soon in state courts, fighting the compulsory worship that was being imposed on their children. Ohio's Supreme Court ruled in 1869 that public schools were not required to sponsor daily Bible readings. Wisconsin's supreme court struck down mandatory school prayer in 1890. Nebraska's high court followed suit in 1903, and the Illinois Supreme Court did the same in 1910.

The issue flared up in other states as well. The claim that mandatory prayer, Bible reading and other religious exercises were common in public schools and widely accepted until

the U.S. Supreme Court's school prayer rulings of 1962 and '63 is a Religious Right myth. Such practices were always controversial and were often invalidated at the state level.

"Did the Constitution change and nobody told us about it?"

Yes, the Constitution did change – as anyone who has read legal history knows. In July of 1868, the 14th Amendment was ratified, designed, in part, to make it clear that states could not violate citizens' fundamental rights.

The history is a bit complicated, but the passage of that amendment began a process legal scholars call "incorporation" whereby many of the protections found in the Bill of Rights – originally rights only the federal government was bound to respect – were imposed on state governments as well, opening up opportunities for people to bring civil liberties cases, including ones dealing with church-state separation, in the federal courts. I'm surprised Jeffress hasn't heard about this; it was in all the papers.

"And do the judges today have greater insight into what our Founders meant than those who lived closest to the Founders?"

This is a classic false dichotomy. Judges today don't have to guess what the Founders might have thought about these issues. They can read the Founders' actual words. More importantly, we have a historical record of their deeds, including the Constitution they wrote. From these words and actions, judges can ascertain that these men strongly opposed force and compulsion in matters of religion. From here it's a short step to the realization that no American – especially a young child in a taxpayer-supported institution – should be compelled to take part in a religious exercise against his or her will.

I recently published a paper about the history of religion in public schools. It's a fascinating topic, and I'd urge Jeffress to read my article. He might learn a few things. That's good because when he's arguing with a "pinhead lawyer", I'm sure Jeffress doesn't want to come off as someone who has absolutely no idea what he's talking about.

Note: Rob Boston is Director of Communications for Americans United for Separation of Church and State and Editor of Church & State magazine.

SONNET WRITTEN IN DISGUST OF VULGAR SUPERSTITION

John Keats

The church bells toll a melancholy round,
Calling the people to some other prayers,
Some other gloominess, more dreadful cares,
More hearkening to the sermon's horrid sound.

Surely the mind of man is closely bound
In some black spell; seeing that each one tears
Himself from fireside joys, and Lydian airs,
And converse high of these with glory crown'd.
Still, still they toll, and I should feel a damp, –

A chill as from a tomb, did I not know
That they are dying like an outburnt lamp;
That 'tis their sighing, wailing ere they go
Into oblivion; – that fresh flowers will grow,
And many glories of immortal stamp.

GUILT BY ASSOCIATION IS TERRIBLE, AWFUL, NEVER-TO-BE-CONDONED ... UNLESS PERHAPS, MAYBE, POSSIBLY, THE "ASSOCIATE" IS YOUKNOWWHO

John Rafferty

The guy on the left is conservative Christian and former Oklahoma state senator Ralph Shortey, who was caught in a hotel room with an underage boy. He will enter a plea of guilty to child sex trafficking charges on November 30 in hopes of receiving a 10-year sentence rather than as long as life in prison for child pornography.



Before being arrested Shortey was prominently known as a birther and an anti-abortion Trump supporter, and was the OK state chair of Donald Trump's campaign last year.

The guy on the right is Donald Trump, Jr.

And now hear this: *the picture was taken the day after Shortey was arrested.*

So is Donald Trump, Jr. – and by association Donald Trump, Sr. – guilty of associating with a confessed child trafficker and pornographer, or just colossally stupid?

How about both?

Contemporary Headline:

MARRIED CHRISTIAN LAWMAKER RESIGNS AFTER SAME-SEX OFFICE AFFAIR

(Excerpted from Progressive Secular Humanist on patheos.com, 11/17/2017)

Ohio state Representative Wes Goodman, a married, anti-gay, anti-abortion, conservative Christian lawmaker who promoted "natural marriage" has announced his resignation from the Ohio House of Representatives over allegations of an "inappropriate" sexual affair with a man in his state-provided office.

Decades-Old Prediction:

Whenever I hear some big mouth in Washington or the Christian heartland banging on about the evils of sodomy or whatever, I mentally enter his name in my notebook and contentedly set my watch. Sooner rather than later, he will be discovered down on his weary and well-worn old knees in some dreary motel or latrine with an expired Visa card, having tried to pay well over the odds to be peed upon by some Apache transvestite.

– Christopher Hitchens

READERS RESPOND TO NOVEMBER PIQUE

To the Editor: Re: "Sacred Naturalism" by Alice Andrews and my introductory note ("On 'Sacred' Life") in the November issue, thank you for clarifying the possible meaning of sacred in the context of how I use it, as well of the original author.

Strictly speaking Lawrence Kraus ("Lawrence Krauss on 'Sacred'", November) is correct that sacred is "religious rather than secular". Still, in everyday speech, we refer to

“sacred acts”, or “sacred spaces” and not necessarily mean holy or religious or godly. Perhaps another adjective would be less offensive to atheists. I agree with you, it would be interesting to hear from other PIQUE readers on whether sacred must mean “divine”. – *Remo Cosentino*

To the Editor: Sacred means religious. Sacred means a system of thought based on faith, not on evidence. Many people are unable to confront what they (and humanity) do not know and give this a label, a label that somehow exalts this lack of knowledge, a label that appeases their “real human need to feel a part of something greater than the self”. Alice Andrews labels this “Sacred Naturalism” and claims it excludes the supernatural. But I feel it doesn’t; it’s exactly supernatural.

I recall a conversation some 70 years ago dealing with the unknown and spawned by early claims of flying saucers. After knocking our heads about related unknowable subjects, my friend sighed, shrugged, and said, “You gotta figure, What the Hell.”

Sacred Naturalism? I go with “What the Hell.”

– *Chic Schissel*

IF YOU THINK THAT “THE WHOLE SYSTEM, WORLDWIDE, IS CORRUPT”, IS JUST LOONY CONSPIRACY THEORY FROM THE BRIE-AND-BIRKENSTOCK CROWD, READ THIS ...

Joe Kloc

(Reprinted from Harper’s Weekly Review, 11/7/2017)

Millions of confidential files stolen from a Bermuda-based law firm detailed the offshore holdings and transactions of more than 120 politicians around the world, revealing that the Queen of England invested millions in a corporation in the Cayman Islands whose portfolio includes a retail company that has been accused of using hard-sell tactics on poor customers; that a former president of the UN General Assembly was the owner of a trust that held shares in a company in the Seychelles that he said he thought he could use to “avoid” but not evade taxes; that a former chancellor of Austria was a director of a company registered in Malta that held shares in another Maltese company whose shareholders included his campaign advisor, who was once arrested on charges of money laundering; that a former member of the Ukrainian parliament was the sole shareholder of a company registered in Malta that paid no taxes on assets valued at \$6.6 million in 2014; that a former minister of energy and finance in Kazakhstan, who fled the country in 2009 after \$10 billion was discovered missing from the bank he chaired, opened a trust in the Cayman Islands in 2007; that a former president of Costa Rica sat with an advisor to former US president Bill Clinton on the board of a renewable energy company incorporated in Bermuda that was bought by an Italian company for \$73 million; that a former US commerce secretary transferred her shares in two Bermuda-based firms to a Delaware company owned by trusts for her children and then wrote on a federal ethics form that the shares had been sold; that the current

US commerce secretary Wilbur Ross holds a stake in an offshore shipping company that is partnered with the son-in-law of Russian president Vladimir Putin; that a former prime minister of Canada served with a foreign policy advisor to former UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher as directors of a Bermuda-based company which helped the United Kingdom trade arms to Saudi Arabia in exchange for oil; that another former prime minister of Canada owned shares in an oil-drilling company registered in Bermuda that went public in 2010 with a valuation of \$284 million; and that a third former prime minister of Canada owned a Bermuda-registered business which held shares in two shipping companies based in Barbados, a country he had exempted from offshore tax reform while serving as finance minister. “We’ll take every appropriate action,” said current Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau, who campaigned on doing a “better job” going after “tax avoiders”, and whose chief fundraiser was shown to own an offshore trust in the Cayman Islands that he may have used to avoid taxes in Canada, Israel, and the United States.

AND RIGHT HERE AT HOME ...

Joe Kloc

(Excerpted from Harper’s Weekly Review 11/16/2017)

... a Pennsylvania state representative voted to place video gambling machines in truck stops and then resigned his seat in advance of being sentenced by a judge for his participation in an illegal gambling ring, a former mayor in New Jersey wept as he was sentenced to five years in prison for conspiring to have city employees renovate a wholesale liquor-distribution facility owned by his nephew and daughter, a judge in New Jersey declared a mistrial in the case of a US senator who was charged with accepting private-jet flights and \$750,000 in campaign contributions from a Florida eye doctor in exchange for helping the doctor secure visas for three of his girlfriends, a state representative in Florida resigned her office and pleaded guilty to perjury for lying about the district in which she lived on her voter-registration form, the budget chairman of Florida’s state senate was accused of groping and sexually harassing six capitol employees, a former state representative in Florida was ordered to forfeit the \$63,000 in campaign contributions he was convicted of using to pay for his wedding and meals at McDonald’s, a Florida judge delayed the sentencing of a US congresswoman convicted of soliciting hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations from her supporters to a fake charity in Virginia ...

No comment:



One more Xmas thing ...

HE SHALL BE CALLED
Emily Perl Kingsley

TIME: EARLY 1ST CENTURY C.E.

PLACE: A CARPENTER'S HOUSE IN NAZARETH

MARY: Dinner's almost ready. Would you call him?

JOSEPH: What should I call him?

MARY: Don't start, Joseph.

JOSEPH: I can't call him if he doesn't have a name, Mary. I know, I know, the angel and the shepherds and the wise men from the East – they made a brand-new little baby seem so important, so we choked when it came to a name. But it's years now, Mary.

MARY: I know, I know. But ...

JOSEPH: Honey, we can't keep calling him "Hey, you" and "C'mere boychick" for the rest of his life. What's wrong with just naming him Joseph, after me?

MARY: We're Jewish, Joseph, we're supposed to name him after someone dead. And no, we're not naming him Ham, like something from the supermarket, and traif, at that. And not Shem, or Nebuchadnezzar or any of your other farkoktah-named ancestors, either.

JOSEPH: How about the other idea we had, "Messiah"?

MARY: Yeah, great name, but do we really want to lay that much responsibility on him? He's just a kid, for Christ's sake.

JOSEPH: Well, Jesus Christ, it's about time we came up with something! What do we need, a signal from G-d? A miracle? *DOORBELL DING-DONGS. JOSEPH OPENS DOOR. A GENTLEMAN ENTERS IN ELABORATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SATIN COSTUME, WITH LAVISH FULL CURLY WIG. HE CARRIES A SMALL BATON AND SPEAKS WITH A GERMAN ACCENT.*

HANDEL: Good evening. My name is George Frideric Handel, and I am here through the miracle of time travel.

HANDEL TURNS AROUND, HOLDS UP HIS BATON AND, THROUGH THE OPEN DOOR, CONDUCTS A FULL ORCHESTRA AND A CHORUS OF 300 VOICES.

CHORUS:

"And his name shall be call-ed
Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God,
The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace
The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."

HANDEL BOWS GOOD-EVENING TO JOSEPH AND MARY, TUCKS HIS BATON UNDER HIS ARM, AND EXITS. MARY SMILES AT JOSEPH, GOES TO THE STAIRS, AND CALLS UP.

MARY: Hey, Wonderful ... Counselor ... Mighty God ... Everlasting Father ... Prince of Peace ... *dinner!*

*And one last Xmas/Hanukkah/Solstice thing ...
Happy Holidays!*

Your year-end gift to SHSNY
is fully tax-deductible

Pages 8-9
and 3 Views of Congress
"Both Sides" of Science

Pages 2-4
and Really Fake News
21st Century Censorship,
Free Speech,

Page 1
SHSNY Hurricane Relief
Thank you for supporting

