

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

February, 2018

DARWIN DAY DINNER/GALA FEB 9 WITH SUSAN JACOBY - Page 7

Yes, Trump and more Trump – but we consider, too, humanist activism, Q&A for atheists, and right-wing Bible study. We take another slice of gay wedding cake and answer some questions: Did slaves fight for Dixie? Did Noah have a cell phone? Is Norway embarrassed? Are you the president? But first we consider the humanity and the relevance of perhaps our greatest president ever. —JR

COULD LINCOLN BRING US TOGETHER AGAIN?

David Brooks

(Excerpted from “America: The Redeemer Nation”, The New York Times Op-Ed, 11/23/2017)

We need a new national narrative. One way to identify one is to go back to one of the odd features of our history. We are good to our enemies after wartime. After the revolution, we quickly became allies with Britain. After World War I, Woodrow Wilson was humane to our European enemies. After World War II, America generously rebuilt Germany and Japan.

Elsewhere, enmities last for centuries. But not here. Why? Because we have a national predilection for fresh starts. Coming to this country is for many people a new beginning. We turn every new presidential administration, every new sports season, every graduation ceremony into a new beginning. It’s said Americans don’t settle arguments, we just leave them behind.

The story of America, then, can be interpreted as a series of redemptions, of injury, suffering and healing fresh starts. Look at the mottos on our Great Seal: “A New Order for the Ages” and “Out of Many, One”. In the 18th century divisions between the colonists were partially healed. In the 19th century divisions between the free and enslaved were partially healed. In the 20th, America partially healed the divisions between democracy and totalitarianism. In the 21st, we have healing fresh starts still to come.

The great sermon of redemption and reconciliation is Lincoln’s Second Inaugural. This is a speech of tremendous intellectual humility. None of us anticipated this conflict, or its magnitude. All of us “looked for an easier triumph”. None of us are fully in control. “Let us judge not that we be not judged.”

This is a speech of great moral humility. Slavery, Lincoln says, was not a Southern institution, it was

an American institution, weaving through our common history for 250 years. The scourge of war, which purges this sin, falls on both sides. Lincoln fought any sense of self-righteous superiority the Northerners might harbor. He rejected any thought that God is a tribal God. He put us all into the same category of ambiguity and fallenness.

The speech is a great reconciling speech. The words recurring through it are “we” and “all”. “All thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it, all sought to avert it ... Both parties deprecated war.” Lincoln sets the course for mutual forgiveness, not the cheap forgiveness that carries no weight but the kind that contains all the stages of proper rigorous forgiveness: mercy, judgment, confession, penitence, reconciliation and re-trust.

He sets the course for political flexibility and pragmatism. We cannot really understand the course of events or God’s will. Therefore, we can’t be certain of our notion of what’s right, or rigid in clinging to abstract principle or dogmatic ideology. Everything should be open to experiment, flexibility and maneuvering.

The final prayer heralds a new beginning: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds ... to achieve lasting peace among all nations.”

In his speech, Lincoln realistically acknowledges the divisions and disappointments that plague the nation. But he does not accept the inevitability of a house divided. He combines Christian redemption with the multiculturalist’s love of diversity. In one brilliant stroke, Lincoln deprives Christian politics of the chauvinism and white identitarianism that we see now on the evangelical right.

He fills the vacuum of moral vision that we see now on the relativist left. He shows how American particularism always points to universalism — how the specific features

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

Articles published in PIQUE are archived at www.shsny.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).

of our settler's history and culture point to a vision of communion for all mankind. This is a story we can join and live into.

SOUNDING THE ALARM **Jonathan Engel**

The danger to our republic is real. It is time for a 21st century Paul Revere to sound the alarm. This isn't just about policy, although on that score Trump and his Republican allies have been a disaster. No, this is about the subversion of our Constitutional norms, and far too many Americans don't even know this is happening, because they are ignorant of basic Constitutional principles, and we live in an upside-down world where ignorance is not only bliss, but is also seen as some kind of perverse virtue.

When Barack Obama (a thoughtful, prudent man who is also a Constitutional scholar) was president, the public's lack of knowledge and concern about Constitutional principles and norms wasn't such a threat, because he was a trustworthy steward of our democracy. But with Donald Trump as president, the ignorance of the populace puts our future as a constitutional democracy in grave peril.

Several days ago I woke up to a headline on the front page of *The New York Times* which read "President Says Inquiry Makes U.S. Look Bad". In that article Trump is quoted as saying, "I have absolute right to do what I want to do with the Justice Department." This statement should strike terror into the hearts of every patriotic American. Let's take a moment to parse this so we can see why.

What would be the implications of this statement if it were true? Most people would focus on the current Trump/Russia investigation, which, given its prominence in the news, is understandable. If Trump's "I can do what I want with the Justice Department" were true, he could fire Independent Counsel Robert Mueller and derail the entire investigation, putting himself above the law. But there is so much more. If Trump's statement were true, he could put anyone he wanted above federal law. If his kids, associates, and/or cronies broke the law, King Donald could just direct the Justice Department not to prosecute. Simple as that.

And as for Trump's enemies, who are legion and growing more numerous by the day? Trump could direct the Justice Department to arrest anyone he wants (*Lock her up!*). If they're acquitted, just keep charging them until they run out of the strength and resources needed to challenge him. Does that sound like America to you? To me it sounds more like modern day Russia, which I don't think is a coincidence. And lest anyone suggest that all presidents think this way, let's look again at President Obama. This is from Joyce White Vance, a University of Alabama law professor who served as a federal prosecutor for 25 years: "The first time President Obama met with U.S. Attorneys, he told us 'I appointed you, but you don't serve me. You serve the American people. And I expect you to act with independence and integrity.' None of us ever forgot that."

Trump's beliefs are the road to totalitarianism. Can't happen here? Why not? Because we have a constitution?

That document is not worth the paper it's written on if people don't honor it. Whereas John Adams said "We are a nation of laws, not men", King Louis XIV of France said "L'etat c'est moi", or "I am the state". What King Louis said was exactly what John Adams and his fellow revolutionaries were fighting against. The idea that one man, above the law, could do what he wants with the apparatus of government to enrich himself and insulate himself from the rule of law.

We have to remain vigilant and aware of all of this or we are doomed. That the United States will remain a constitutional democracy is no sure thing in the age of Trump. The things he says and believes about the nature of our government and the role of the president are not normal, and must never be allowed to be thought of as normal. Otherwise, we are lost.

JANUARY 16 WAS RELIGIOUS FREEDOM DAY. **HOW DID THE TRUMPSTERS CELEBRATE?**

Michael Stone

(Excerpted from "Trump Administration Promotes Christianity On Religious Freedom Day", 1/17/2018, and "Trump Administration Creates New Religious Freedom Gestapo", 1/18/2018, both by Mr. Stone, and both posted on Progressive Secular Humanist on patheos.com)

Theocracy alert: With a cross of light and a nod to "faith", President Trump promotes Christianity [with a] Religious Freedom Day proclamation that is a troubling document that promotes conservative Christian values while suggesting that religious belief should supersede the rule of law.

In his proclamation Trump praises "faith":

"Unfortunately, not all have recognized the importance of religious freedom, whether by threatening tax consequences for particular forms of religious speech, or forcing people to comply with laws that violate their core religious beliefs without sufficient justification. These incursions, little by little, can destroy the fundamental freedom underlying our democracy. Therefore, soon after taking office, I addressed these issues in an Executive Order that helps ensure Americans are able to follow their consciences without undue Government interference and the Department of Justice has issued guidance to Federal agencies regarding their compliance with laws that protect religious freedom. No American – whether a nun, nurse, baker, or business owner – should be forced to choose between the tenants [sic] of faith or adherence to the law." ...

In essence, Trump is making the dangerous and patently unAmerican assertion "that no American should have to obey the law if it conflicts with their religion".

Trump's assertion is contrary to the U.S. Constitution and the secular values upon which this nation was founded. In that troubling paragraph Trump is not only suggesting that religious superstition should supersede the rule of law, he is also attacking, as he has on many others occasions, the Johnson Amendment, which is the only thing that prevents

dark money from being secretly funneled through religious organizations into political campaigns. In fact, without the Johnson Amendment, every church would be a potential Super PAC, and a potential political weapon. ...

Trump's Religious Freedom Day proclamation is not an isolated incident, but part of a well established pattern where Trump and other leading Republicans use the phrase "religious freedom" when talking about and promoting what is in reality Christian privilege.

Indeed, last May Trump signed an executive order on religious freedom that gives individuals and organizations a license to discriminate against women and LGBT Americans.

As one might expect, in his proclamation Trump did not even acknowledge the non-religious, ignoring and ultimately disrespecting a large minority of Americans.

Adding insult to injury, the promotional photo used to promote Trump's Religious Freedom Day proclamation features the U.S. flag being pierced by a cross of light. The Christian symbolism could not be more clear, or more offensive, to the millions of Americans who are not Christian.

Bottom line: Rather than truly endorsing religious freedom for all, Trump's Religious Freedom Day proclamation is yet another tacit endorsement of Christian privilege, and ultimately, Christian theocracy.

But wait, wait - there's more! - JR

The Trump administration has created a new office to protect conservative Christian bigots at the Department of Health and Human Services. The new division will be devoted to "conscience and religious freedom".

Translation: the new Religious Freedom Gestapo will protect conservative Christians in the medical profession who refuse to do their job for religious reasons. The new office will protect those who choose to discriminate against women, LGBT people, and any others who offend their religious sensibilities.

Politico reports that the "overhaul of the HHS civil rights office" is "part of a broader plan to protect health workers who don't want to perform abortions, treat transgender patients seeking to transition or provide other services for which they have religious or moral objections."

These changes fly in the face of established law and court precedent. This new office and the proposed rule don't protect religious freedom. They merely elevate one particular set of religious views—namely that LGBTQ people are sinful and that abortion is immoral—above all others, and weaponize it against vulnerable people.

The Office for Civil Rights should try focusing on protecting civil rights instead of wasting time and money to undermine them.

Bottom line: The Trump administration will protect Christian bigots who refuse to treat LGBT people, women, or anybody else they find offensive. This right to discriminate will empower religious conservatives to abuse and damage real people, while putting the health and welfare of patients in jeopardy.

And our slow march towards a Christian theocracy continues.

Actually, throughout my life, my two greatest assets have been mental stability and being, like, really smart. ... I went from VERY successful businessman, to top T.V. Star to President of the United States (on my first try). I think that would qualify as not smart, but genius ... and a very stable genius at that. - Donald J. Trump

I think the problem with people like this is that they are so stupid that they have no idea how stupid they are. You see, if you're very, very stupid, how can you possibly realize that you're very, very stupid? You'd have to be relatively intelligent to realize how stupid you are.

There's a wonderful bit of research buy a guy called David Dunning of Cornell, who's a friend of mine, I'm proud to say, who's pointed out that in order to know how good you are at something requires exactly the same skills as it does to be good at that thing in the first place.

Which means - this is terribly funny - that if you're absolutely no good at something at all, then you lack exactly the skills that you need to know that you're absolutely no good at it. And this explains not just Hollywood, but almost the entirety of Fox News. - John Cleese

IT SEEMS "THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA" ISN'T A THRILLER - IT'S A FARSE

No one I know has foreseen an America like the one we live in today. No one (except perhaps the acidic H.L. Mencken, who famously described American democracy as "the worship of jackals by jackasses") could have imagined that the 21st-century catastrophe to befall the U.S.A., the most debasing of disasters, would appear not, say, in the terrifying guise of an Orwellian Big Brother but in the ominously ridiculous commedia dell'arte figure of the boastful buffoon. - Philip Roth, in an interview in The New York Times Book Review, 1/21/2018

Breaking news:

NORWAY RENAMES ITSELF SHITHOLE

(Oslo, Shithole) After being singled out by President Trump as a preferable source of immigration compared to "shithole" nations like Haiti and many countries in Africa, Norway has taken the drastic step of renaming itself to show it does not approve of such behavior.

Though acknowledging Norway was probably only singled out due to her being the last leader of a majority white country that Trump met with, Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg said it is important to make a statement that will be heard.

"We Norwegians are a pragmatic people who don't much care what the country is called. If renaming it Shithole sends a progressive message of goodwill then that's what being Norwegian is all about."

After passing quickly through parliament and being approved by King Harald V, Norway will be known as Shithole as of noon CET (officially the Kingdom of Shithole), or *Dritthull* in Norwegian.

HANGING BY THE SLENDEREST OF THREADS

John Wagner

Perhaps it was because President Kennedy was so respected, but, regardless, I can still quote the first words spoken slowly and with gravitas by many high school debaters in 1964: "Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness."¹ The speaker would then go on to provide illustrations of scenarios that could lead to nuclear war and its horrific consequences and argue that "nuclear weapons should be controlled by an international organization".² The other side would try to minimize those chances and point out the failures of international organizations. The outcome of the debate would hinge on the persuasiveness of the speakers and their evidence, giving both sides an equal chance to win.

By the end of the year, all that had changed. China got the bomb. The affirmative cases had transitioned to a new tactic that, if presented well, was almost unbeatable by a standard rebuttal. The affirmative would argue that nuclear war was inevitable because of the proliferation of nuclear weapons to more and more countries. China came first, but the list included Israel, India, Pakistan, South Africa, Indonesia, and others. I do not remember that North Korea made the list, but the prediction of those debaters has proven uncomfortably true. Those countries and others (Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan) did learn how to make nuclear weapons. Some gave up their nuclear arsenal under international pressure or decided not to proceed with a nuclear program, limiting the number of countries that have nuclear weapons, but North Korea has proven that almost any country can develop a nuclear arsenal. Iran was on the brink, but was pushed back, at least for now.

Recently, the 45th president of the U.S. actually encouraged Japan to create nuclear weapons, apparently reversing years of efforts to limit proliferation. Meanwhile, he threatened that military action might be used to destroy North Korea and its nascent arsenal, illustrating the possibility of miscalculation or madness or both. Rather than cutting back on the abundant supply of nuclear bombs deployed by the U.S., he has argued that we should enhance and increase our supply of these destructive weapons.

Today, there are over 17,000 nuclear weapons controlled by nine countries, but what does the future hold? Will the number of weapons or countries with weapons increase? Will we be able to halt proliferation and the increase in the destructive power of these weapons? Will they ever be used again? None of us know, and it has been eerie to see the predictions of those high school debaters come true. Yet it is somewhat encouraging to have seen that proliferation has been slowed and reversed by the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons³ and by diplomacy. Nevertheless, the trend is unsettling, and countries like North Korea can simply withdraw from the treaty and start a weapons program at any time.

Are we moving inexorably towards a nuclear catastrophe? The Doomsday clock, which is maintained by the members of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, has moved back and forth to represent the probability of a nuclear disaster. Most recently it moved the clock closer to midnight (now 2.5 minutes before midnight) to signify the danger of Trump's reckless comments on North Korea and Russia.

What can you do to lessen this threat? First, support your country's participation in the United Nations, a key player in preventing wars and encouraging non-proliferation and disarmament. Yes, the UN is a mess, but it is the best mess we have. Second, consider joining a group like The Union of Concerned Scientists⁴ or The Federation of American Scientists⁵, groups that focus on global threats to our planet using scientifically based arguments. Supporting them supports the scientific enterprise, an effort that has been under attack by the current GOP administration. We humanists know that our best hopes to avoid a nuclear holocaust are science-based policies and rational discussion. We can only hope that those slender threads are sufficient.

1. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8352>

2. <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/>

3. <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/>

4. <https://www.ucsusa.org/>

5. <https://fas.org/>

HOW WOULD GOD FEEL THEN?

Robert Ingersoll

In the sixth chapter [of Matthew] I find the following, and it comes directly after the prayer known as the Lord's Prayer:

"For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your father forgive your trespasses."

I accept the condition. There is an offer; I accept it. If you will forgive men that trespass against you, God will forgive your trespasses against Him.

I accept the terms, and I never will ask any God to treat me better than I treat my fellow-men. There is a square promise. There is a contract. If you will forgive others God will forgive you.

And it does not say you must believe in the Old Testament, or be baptized, or join the church, or keep Sunday; that you must count beads, or pray, or become a nun, or a priest; that you must preach sermons or hear them, build churches or fill them.

Not one word is said about eating or fasting, denying or believing.

It simply says, if you forgive others God will forgive you; and it must of necessity be true. No god could afford to damn a forgiving man.

Suppose God should damn to everlasting fire a man so great and good, that he, looking from the abyss of hell, would forgive God ...

... how would God feel then?

CHANGING MY MIND (A LITTLE) ABOUT POT (It's called "growing up")

John Rafferty

Around the turn of the New Year I was following the thread on Facebook of a discussion between Spiros Condos of New York Skeptics, arguing for the nationwide legalization of recreational marijuana, and Massimo Pigliucci (of too many movements and organizations, including SHSNY, to mention), who thinks the whole legalize-pot question is, at best, a distraction from more important issues for skeptics and humanists.

I side with Spiros. The laws against marijuana possession, in some cases as Draconian as those against heroin, are arbitrary and, as applied, tools of racist discrimination. The "science" behind those laws (many written by the liquor industry in the 1930s) is ridiculous.

But a Commenter on the Facebook thread (whose name I have lost) wrote something that stopped me cold. "I'm all for legalization, too," he wrote, as best I can remember, "but we need field tests for highway stops."

Wow. Never thought of that. While a pot smoker in my misspent youth (my 40s, not my teens), I did/committed/enjoyed a great many things while blissed. But no matter how herbally happy, I never thought I was capable of expertly piloting a 4,000-pound steel projectile at more than mile-a-minute speeds.

I never, ever drove a car while stoned. And neither should anyone else.

As the penultimate paragraphs of a January 2 *New York Times* article on the first day of legalized pot sales in California noted:

"Opponents of legalization warn that California could see an increase in traffic deaths, as appears to have happened in Colorado since stores in that state began selling recreational cannabis four years ago.

"Traffic deaths in Colorado involving drivers who tested positive for marijuana more than doubled from 2013 to 2016, according to a study published by a federal agency in October. The report also noted a 35 percent increase in emergency room visits related to marijuana."

Okay, I still believe in decriminalizing/legalizing pot any and everywhere in America – *it's about time, Andrew Cuomo!* – but I now add a caveat. We need reliable devices and procedures to test for DUIC (Driving Under the Influence of Cannabis) in the field, just as we have for alcohol detection during highway and traffic stops.

The setting of national standards for cannabis intoxication and the development of easily-administered and reliable field tests should be a major new priority of the National Institute of Health (NIH) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC).

But if you think that Attorney General Jeff ("*Good people don't smoke marijuana*") Sessions or any of the trapped-in-the-1950s robots of the Trump administration will actually do anything positive about "the killer weed", you're smoking something far weirder than MaryJane.

20K DAY Rich Sander

It occurred to me a few years back that we Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists, Freethinkers, Brights, and Secularists do not have enough things to celebrate. One day, wondering how many days I have been alive vs how many years, I saw that I was coming up to 20,000 days. Wow.

Why not, just for the fun of it, celebrate that I have lasted 20,000 days with a party. Anyone who knows me knows that I love the simplest of reasons to have a party – just as 14 or 15 years ago Friday night was a good enough reason to have a get-together. And so Drinking With Atheists was born. See how easy that was!

So, I was wondering what to do on this 20K Day of my life and think this is a good opportunity to ask others what they think of the idea. February 9, 2018, will be my 20,000th day. And what an accomplishment that is; 200 years ago almost no one lasted that long. I will be with friends somewhere eating, drinking, and extolling the good luck that modern science has worked on my body to keep me alive this long. At 54 years, 9 months and some odd days I will hit that 20K day. But what to call it or what rituals I will do have yet to be decided.

I thought of calling it Monument Day. Because it is a Monumental Accomplishment: *I made it this far!* Looking for ideas from all those creative people who are my fellow atheists. I'd love to hear what they think.

Going a step further (as I always like to do) I thought of other monuments in life. So 5K days would celebrate what, puberty? 10K days could commemorate college? marriage? family? 15K days could celebrate career success. 20K Day is the the old-fashioned Midlife Crises Day – time to buy that Corvette! Or quit my job, buy an RV and travel around the U.S. for two years. (OK, I'm doing that one.) Next will be 25K Day and, hopefully, enjoying retirement. Then 30K. Not sure what to say then – "Um, great job lasting so long"?

As Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists, Freethinkers, Brights, and Secularists, we do not have enough holidays. We have Darwin Day in February, and the solstice in December, but Summer solstice and the two Equinoxes have yet to catch on. Nor have Saturnalia or Perihelion.

Carl Sagan Day should be a national holiday for us too; we need an Alternate Side of the Street Parking Holiday in early November!

I hope that we can fill more of these celebrations in our lives. The once-a-year birthday party has lost some luster. In Europe you make and bring your own birthday cake to work to remind everyone it's your birthday. Then everyone has to go out for beer after work and to buy you a round of drinks. So I hope the K Day or Monument Day or whatever it gets called becomes another reason for people to get together and have fun. – *Richie on the Road*

A man is a success if he gets up in the morning and gets to bed at night, and in between he does what he wants to do. – *Bob Dylan – (Enjoy your road, Richie – JR)*

SHSNY CALENDAR: FEBRUARY - APRIL 2018

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

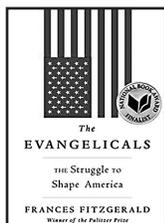
THURS, FEB 1, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

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

THE EVANGELICALS:

The Struggle to Shape America
Frances FitzGerald

This National Book Award finalist from Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Frances FitzGerald is the first to tell the dramatic story of the Evangelical movement in America – from the Puritan era to the 2016 election.



The evangelical movement began in the revivals known as the Great Awakenings. A populist rebellion against the established churches, it became the dominant religious force in the country.

Evangelicals have shaped our culture and our politics. Frances FitzGerald's narrative of this distinctively American movement is a major work of history, piecing together the centuries-long story for the first time.

"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.

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SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, MARCH 1, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
THE ECONOMIC
SINGULARITY:

Artificial Intelligence and the Death of Capitalism
Calum Chance

This new book from best-selling A.I. writer Calum Chance argues that within a few decades, most humans will not be able to work for money. Self-driving cars will probably be the canary in the coal mine, providing a wake-up call for everyone who isn't yet paying attention. All jobs will be affected, from fast food McJobs to lawyers and journalists.

This is the single most important development facing humanity in the first half of the 21st century.

– Paperback and Kindle available.

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, APRIL 5, 7-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
COLLUSION:

Secret Meetings, Dirty Money, and How Russia Helped Donald Trump Win
Luke Harding

Elaine Heller will lead the discussion of this explosive exposé by the *Guardian* reporter and former Moscow bureau chief that lays out the Trump administration's ties to Moscow, and Russia's decades-in-the-making political game to upend American democracy.

"*Collusion* is invaluable in collating the overwhelming evidence of a web of relationships between the Kremlin, Trump and members of Trump's circle." – Michelle Goldberg, *The New York Times*

– Paperback and Kindle available.

LET'S HAVE A DISCUSSION!

WED, FEB 14, 7 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)
VALENTINE'S DAY 2018:

Are "Dating",
"Romance" & "Seduction"
So-20th-Century Ideas?

A "date" or a "hookup"? Do three, four, or five dates become a "romance" or a "relationship"? And is even the most sophisticated French-film-farce "seduction" just a clever coverup for male sexual aggression?

What are the rules, the norms, and the no-nos in the age of #MeToo? How should we/must we behave while we're having the (usually) most fun of our lives?

That's the topic of our first *Let's Have a Discussion* evening, our new monthly social/food-and-drink/get-together.

Come, join in, discuss, argue, laugh, have fun, and vote on next month's topic. – JR

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, FEB 18, 11:30 am
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

We gather in the saloon's back room, where the pub-grub menu includes a \$13 breakfast special, the Bloody Marys are hot, the beer is cold, and conversation sparkles.

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

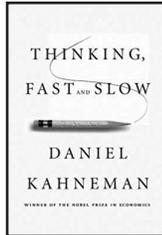
After-Brunch Discussion:
"Does #MeToo include UsToo?"



SHSNY CALENDAR: FEBRUARY - APRIL 2018

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD
WED, FEB 28, 7 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves
THINKING, FAST AND SLOW
Daniel Kahneman

The ideas of Daniel Kahneman, recipient of the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for his seminal work that challenged the rational model of judgment and decision making, have had a profound and widely regarded impact on psychology, economics, business, law and philosophy.



In *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Kahneman introduces the “machinery of the mind”. Two systems drive the way we think and make choices: System One is fast, intuitive, and emotional; System Two is slower, more deliberative, and more logical. Kahneman shows where we can trust our intuitions and how we can tap into the benefits of slow thinking. He will change the way you think about thinking.

STUDYING HUMANISM
MON, FEB 26, 6:30-8:30 pm
Community Church of New York
28 East 35 St. (Gallery)

WHITHER

STUDYING HUMANISM?

Midway through our fifth year of *Studying Humanism*, it's time to re-evaluate the program.

- What do we want to study/discuss this Spring? In 2018-19?
- Who (*besides me!*) wants to lead one or more of those evenings?

All humanist scholars, old-timers and newbies: Please come to the Feb 26 session, and help plan our studies and our future. – JR

Book Now:

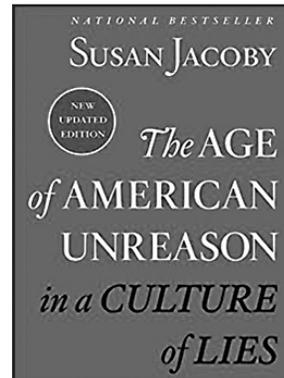
The SHSNY 10th Annual Darwin Day Celebration
Friday, February 9, 6:30 – 9:30 pm

The Storehouse Restaurant, 69 West 23 Street
Distinguished Guest Speaker:

SUSAN JACOBY

... who will introduce and read from the just-published

New Edition of her NYTimes Best-Seller
The Age of American Unreason in a Culture of Lies



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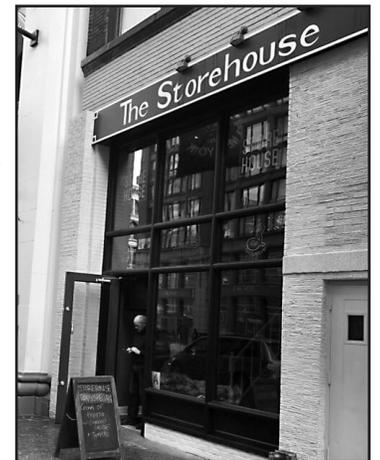
The highlight of the evening will be a talk and reading by nationally-acclaimed freethought author and speaker – and SHSNY Honorary Member – Susan Jacoby, on her *The Age of American Unreason in a Culture of Lies*, “a prescient and now-classic analysis of the forces

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10 TOUGH QUESTIONS FOR THE ATHEIST TO ANSWER

Part 1

Bob Seidensticker

(Excerpted from *patheos.com*, 4/22/2017)

No one can demand a proof that God does (or doesn't) exist, but where does the evidence point? Following the evidence without bias is the best we can hope to do. A number of apologists defend Christianity with the thinking of a courtroom lawyer or detective. One of these is J. Warner Wallace. In his essay, "The Christian Worldview is the Best Explanation", he gives ten tough questions to which he claims Christianity has the better answer. Let's take a look.

1. How Did the Universe Come into Being?

Our universe had a beginning, but what caused it? Why is there something instead of nothing?

I don't know what caused the universe. I don't even know if asking about a cause (which implies an action through time) even makes sense before time existed. (And I say "I don't know" simply because I'm parroting the consensus view of physics. If that changes, so will my opinion.)

But there's nothing embarrassing about pointing out where we don't know things. Science has plenty of unanswered questions, and highlighting them shows where work needs to be done. It's not like we've ever learned anything new about nature through holy books or divine revelation.

That science doesn't know something doesn't mean that Christians do. They still must deliver evidence for the claim "God did it." Believing by faith won't do.

Note also that quantum events may not have causes, and the Big Bang was a quantum event. There's no reason to demand a Big Banger, some supernatural First Cause.

"Why is there something instead of nothing?" Show us why nothing is the default. Show us that no-thing is what a godless universe would contain. In fact, physicist Lawrence Krauss argues the opposite: that nothing is unstable and would spontaneously produce something.

More could be said on this and the other questions here, but I'll keep it short for space reasons. Apologies in advance when I shortchange one or both sides of the argument.

2. Why Does There Appear to Be Design (Fine Tuning) in the Universe?

The constants that govern our universe appear to be remarkably fine-tuned to allow life. What explains that if not a supernatural intelligence?

The quick answer to this question is the multiverse—an almost infinite number of other universes defined by different constants. Most of them might be sterile, but there are enough to make one or more life giving.

The Christian might imagine frustrated atheists lamenting how the appearance of deliberate fine tuning makes a deity unavoidable and then hitting on the crazy idea of bazillions of universes so that by sheer luck at least one of them will be tuned to allow life. But that's not how it

happened. A multiverse is predicted by well-established physics—both string theory and inflation.

Note also that events and objects aren't unique in physics. There's more than one photon, more than one electron, more than one star, more than one object influenced by gravity, and so on. Why must we be limited to one Big Bang?

Wallace says that explaining the appearance of design "is a problem for philosophical naturalists only because they are precluded from considering the possibility of a designer". If someone is closed-minded to the evidence, I agree that that's a problem. However, I'm happy to follow the evidence where it leads. Science has studied supernatural claims but found only natural causes.

And how designed does the universe look? The vast majority of the universe is hostile to any kind of life that we're familiar with. Does creating hundreds of billions of galaxies sound like what a cosmic designer would do if life on a single lonely planet was the goal?

Wallace says, "The Christian worldview is founded on the existence and creative activity of a Master Designer, and for this reason, it does not have to struggle with the appearance of design." Show us that this is grounded with evidence and it'll be more than just an ancient myth. Until then, not so much.

3. How Did Life Originate?

"Philosophical naturalists are still unable to explain how life began, and more importantly, their work in this area simply reveals how difficult the problem is to explain. . . . This scientifically inexplicable event can be described as nothing short of miraculous; the Christian worldview explains how the long odds against the emergence of life were overcome."

No, the Christian worldview explains nothing. Christians can show how their theology is compatible with the question, but this isn't evidence.

The origin of life is called abiogenesis. Though science has lots of ideas, it doesn't have a good theory. Nevertheless, science not having an answer gives nothing to the Christian side of the question.

And Wallace's "inexplicable" is a very bold claim. I'm sure biologists will be eager to hear his proof that abiogenesis is impossible by natural means.

Do Christians think that this or any of the scientific questions are fundamental parts of their argument? I doubt it. When science reaches a consensus on any puzzle—and science's track record for finding answers to nature's questions is remarkable—the Christians will just drop that question and pick up something new and hope that no one notices the switch.

Their argument then becomes "Science has unanswered questions; therefore God."

(*Note: Parts 2 and 3 of this longish essay will appear in subsequent issues of PIQUE. - JR*)

There are 350,000 churches in America. So why are there 200,000 people sleeping in the streets?

THERE ARE JUST TOO MANY GODS Emily Perl Kingsley and Sharon Lerner

(To be sung to the tune of Richard Rodgers' "There Is Nothing Like a Dame" from "South Pacific")

We got Jesus and Jehovah,
We got Allah and Ganesh.
We got Buddha and Athena,
(You won't find them in a crèche).
We got Bacchus and Minerva,
We got Loki, we got Thor.
What don't we need?
We don't need more!

We got Cupid, Aphrodite,
We got Eros, we got Zeus.
There are just so many of them
They must love to reproduce.
We got Isis, god of magic,
We got Ra, the god of sun.
Hades's a god
But he's no fun!

*How are we going to decide which god to ... follow?
Should it be Osiris, Krishna or ... Apollo ?*

There are just too many gods,
How are we to choose?
You can never beat the odds
Finding one among all those gods!

We got Shiva and Poseidon,
We got Artemis and Mars,
We got people always saying
Their god's mightier than ours.
Everyone believes his deity's
The one worth dying for!
What do we get?
Religious war!

*People nowadays laugh at ancient Romans who believed
in ... Jupiter
But thinking your particular god is superior in every way,
shape or form is even ... stupider*

There are just too many gods,
How are we to choose?
You can never beat the odds
Finding one among all those gods!

But make sure when you decide
On which one to pounce
Out of all those many gods
Pray to one that you can pronounce.

*Aztecs when they girded up for battle ...
Prayed to Queztocatl!*

Long ago when man was terrified
By lightning from the sky
He felt small and insignificant
And he was scared to die.
He got promises of Heaven,
He got threats he'd go to Hell.
What happened next?
You know darn well!

There are just too many gods,
How are we to choose?
You can never beat the odds
Finding one among all those gods!

No one is feared like a god,
None revered like a god.
If folks believe in a god,
They can't conceive there's no god.
No one's as aloof as a god,
And there's no proof there's a god.

There ain't a thing that's truer than true today,
They need no proof but people still pray
To one of those millions of, billions of, too many gods!

ZEUS IS VERY SORRY Steve Green

Back in the Good Old Days, the Olympian gods could indulge their appetites with radiant indecency. But everything changes; that's evolution for you.

Before #MeToo and Time's Up, Zeus could appear as a swan to rape Leda, as a White Bull to abduct Europa, as golden rain to impregnate Danae, and turn his rape-victim Io into a cow to hide her from his jealous wife, Hera.

Infidelities with Mnemosyne did give us the beautiful Muses to inspire our creativity. The guy did not rat out his brother, Hades, in regard to Persephone, and he revealed some diversity with Ganymede, a beautiful Trojan prince.

But even Zeus has now been driven to re-examine his archaic behavior. In the January 18 issue of *The New York Review of Books*, via Prudence Crowther, the Olympian offers an apology and, with the help of Athena, devised a checklist to offer an accounting. That's nice.

But what about the offspring from these illicit unions? Where would we have been without Helen of Troy, Hercules, Perseus, Apollo, Artemis, and those lovely Muses who were the product of some of those piggish outrages?

(Sigh)

We'd have to assume responsibility for our own lives with no credit to or blame upon the gods.

Men rarely (if ever) managed to dream up a god superior to themselves.

Most gods have the manners and morals of a spoiled child. – Robert A. Heinlein

NO GAY SEGREGATION

Flash Light

Suggesting, as Editor John Rafferty does (“Let’s Talk About the Gay Wedding Cake”, January PIQUE) that the baker who refused to make a wedding cake for a gay couple should just be ignored, implies a willingness to bring back segregation, albeit this time for gays.

There’s a Muslim deli in my neighborhood that sells ham sandwiches. The owners might believe eating pork is a sin, but they are not so prejudiced against non-Muslims that they’d refuse to make sandwiches non-Muslims want to eat.

There was a time in the South when a Black man, who wanted to buy a wedding cake, had to search for a bakery willing to sell to Blacks. We’ve finally ended such racial discrimination, but it wasn’t easy. The ruling against segregation had to be enforced, and it took, among other efforts, JFK sending troops forcing Alabama Governor George Wallace to comply with federal court orders, to prove we were serious.

Today gays shouldn’t have to search for a bakery willing to sell wedding cakes to gays. It’s time we end such religiously motivated discrimination. We already have the law against it; now we need to enforce that law to prove we’re serious, even if the battleground today is a bakery.

It’s clear this issue is not about religious freedom; it’s about religious discrimination against people who don’t share your religious prejudices. Religious freedom means that baker is free to not attend gay weddings, He’s free to join a church which condemns gays (as odious as that church’s beliefs might be). However, religious freedom doesn’t mean he’s free to discriminate against gays in his workplace.

The gay couple did the right thing by calling out the baker for his prejudice. You don’t win a battle against prejudice by ignoring it, and letting bigots have their way. If this were truly a matter of religious belief based on the Bible, I want to know why the altar of the baker’s church isn’t covered in blood?

There are two passages in Leviticus (18: 22, and 20:13) which condemn gays. There are over ten times as many passages stating that Jehovah wants the blood of sacrificial animals poured, rubbed, or sprinkled over His altar (Leviticus 1:5, 1:11, 1:16, 3:2, 3:8, 3:13 4:5-7, 4:16-18, 4:25, 4:30, 4:34, 5:9, 7:2, 7:14, 8:15, 8:19, 8:23-24, 9:9, 9:18, 16:14, 16:18, 17:6, 17:11). Apparently the rabbis who wrote Leviticus believed it’s ten times more important to cover the altar in blood than to condemn gays. If the baker truly believes in the Bible, why does he ignore the more important advice to worship at an altar covered in blood, but instead focuses on the less important, but equally primitive passages condemning gays? The baker might claim it’s because Jesus doesn’t insist the altar be covered in blood, but neither does Jesus insist gays shouldn’t be sold wedding cakes. Seems clear this issue is about belief in bigotry, not belief in the Bible.

There are many Biblical passages condemning “sodomy”, but it’s not clear what that word meant. Common law defines it as anal or oral sex, even between heterosexual partners, but there’s no evidence that’s what the word in the

Bible means. The story of Lot describes the men of Sodom wanting to gang rape the two strangers visiting Lot. Some Biblical scholars argue that “sodomy” refers to the practice of gang raping strangers to dominate and humiliate them; that was the terrible sin of the Sodomites. The scholars argue there is no evidence the term was ever intended to apply to consensual sex.

Nor can the church leaders point to the numerous passages condemning fornication, because that refers to sex outside of wedlock, and these gays wanted to get married. It’s the church leaders who want to deny gays the right to marriage, and keep them living in sin.

I don’t know if we can really blame the baker for his prejudice; he has probably never even read all of Leviticus. I blame the church leaders who taught him such bigotry. They presumably choose to ignore the blood sacrifice passages, just as they ignore the passage saying it’s okay to hold people as slaves (Leviticus 25:44), but they preach that gays should be condemned, and not allowed to marry, because it fits their own bigoted homophobia. ...

If you believe Jehovah created man, believers have to ask: Why would He create men with a predisposition to being gay, if He hated gays? ...

Reminds me of the situation before the Civil War, when you still had Southern churches insisting slavery was Jehovah’s will and citing the Biblical passages supporting slavery. Today no Christian church supports slavery, so one can hope that someday no Christian church will oppose gay marriage, but until then we need the law to insure gays have equal rights, and we need to see that law enforced, thereby forcing those opposed to gay rights, such as that baker, and his church, to reexamine their homophobia, and their insistence that LGBT segregation is a religious right. The politicians who once supported racial segregation had to reexamine their prejudices, and the result was even George Wallace backed down, and eventually renounced segregation. Enforcing LGBT desegregation, even at a bakery, is how to get those homophobic bigots to back down and accept gay rights.

We finally elected a Black President. I would argue that only became possible after desegregation allowed Blacks to be seen as equals. We might someday elect an (openly) gay president, but that seems only possible after LGBT desegregation insures gays are seen as equals.

Comment: Flash misses my point: the baker did not close his doors to the men, he just would not participate in a gay wedding. – JR

TURKISH “SCIENTIST” POSITS ANTEDILUVIAN CELL PHONES

Hemant Mehta

(Excerpted from “Turkish Scientist: Noah Called His Son on a Cell Phone Before Boarding the Ark” on the Friendly Atheist post, 1/11/2018)

Yavuz Örnek is a lecturer at Istanbul University, and he recently told TRT 1 (a state-run channel) that Noah was able to warn his son about the Great Flood

before it hit by calling him up on a cell phone.

“There were huge 300- to 400-meter high waves and his [the Prophet Noah’s] son was many kilometers away. The Quran says Noah spoke with his son. But how did they manage to communicate? Was it a miracle? It could be. But we believe he communicated with his son via cell phone.”

Örnek went on to say that the Ark was built, not of wood, but of steel plates. Oh. And it was powered by nuclear energy. And it wasn’t full of animals; Noah brought along sperm and eggs from all the species (to conserve space). *And don’t you dare doubt his expertise.*

“I am a scientist, I speak for science,” Örnek added.

Örnek may claim to “speak for science”, but he didn’t provide any evidence of his claims. He just let the religious text serve as proof of its own claims.

That’s too bad. Given how many 60-year-olds can’t work a smartphone, I would love to know how a 600-year-old builds a dumbphone.

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #188

John Rafferty

The West Virginia Senate has proposed a bill that will require all schools to offer an elective course on Hebrew Scriptures and the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. Senate Bill 252—which is strongly opposed by the Freedom From Religion Foundation—says the purpose of the bill is to “teach students knowledge of biblical content, characters, poetry and narratives that are prerequisites to understanding contemporary society and culture, including, literature, art, music, mores, oratory and public policy”.

State Senator Mike Azinger, R-Wood, sponsors the bill, and says he is working to bring moral clarity to students.

“A good time in our country to bring the Bible back into our schools when there’s not a lot of moral clarity right now in our culture and I think what we need more than anything is moral clarity.”

Senator Azinger is a strong supporter of serial adulterer Donald Trump and was an even more fervent supporter of child molester Roy Moore in the recent Alabama senatorial election.

WHO’S GOING TO BIBLE STUDY?

Katherine Stewart

(Excerpted from “The Museum of the Bible Is a Safe Space for Christian Nationalists”, in The New York Times Sunday Review, 1/7/2018)

Ralph Drollinger [is] the founder and president of Capitol Ministries and one of the most politically influential pastors in America. ... He believes that social welfare programs “have no basis in scripture”, that Christians in government have an obligation to hire only Christians; and that women should not be allowed to teach grown men. ...

Mr. Drollinger was an early, passionate supporter of Donald Trump’s presidential candidacy. The “institution

of the state” is “an avenger of wrath”, he explains, and its “God-given responsibility” is “to moralize a fallen world through the use of force”. Apparently, President Trump excels in these biblical criteria for leadership.

Mr. Drollinger is dedicated to communicating those views in weekly Bible study groups. The participants in his groups, however, aren’t just anybody.

They include Mike Pompeo, the director of this C.I.A.; Attorney General Jeff Sessions; Vice President Mike Pence; Betsy DeVos, the secretary of education; and other senior officials in the Trump administration.

FOX NEWS REWRITES HISTORY AGAIN, AND SCREWS IT UP AGAIN

John Rafferty

(Based on salon.com/2018/01/07)

Ever since the Charlottesville riots last summer, Fox News and Fox News Radio hosts and contributors have been twisting themselves into ideological pretzels to try to sell the idea that Donald Trump’s Alt-Right, Swastika-flying, White Supremacist followers (let’s just call them the All-White Alt-Right) are defending Confederate monuments out of respect for history and patriotism.

They hit a new low in either idiocy or dishonesty in January when Fox News Radio reported on a proposal by two Republican South Carolina lawmakers to erect a monument in honor of black soldiers who fought in the Confederate ranks – *See, we’re not racists!*

But Fox neglected to mention what was widely reported in local newspapers, that “records show the state never accepted or recognized armed African-American soldiers during the Civil War”. And, in fact, enforced laws that prohibited Civil War-era African-Americans—you know, *slaves*, who just conceivably might hold a grudge against Ol’ Massa—from carrying guns.

CHIC SCHISSEL RESPONDS TO JANUARY PIQUE

To the Editor: Re: “The Glory of Democracy”, David Brooks says: “Unlike other animals, humans are morally responsible.” He goes on to say that humans “seek justice, freedom, and truth”. But I think we seek these “moral” behaviors as long as they don’t interfere with our own well-being.

Our morality is essentially a system of rules that enable society to better function and survive. And these rules historically can greatly vary with the group generating them, e.g., be nice to folks like us, but destroy infidels who compete for our resources.

Animals have also evolved a “morality”, a system of behavior that promotes their group survival. And, indeed, we are also animals.

Re: “Secular Comforts”, by Alex Kasman, none of us is without “sin”. We all have done something we are ashamed of. So how can a religious person find “comfort” when wracked by the anxiety of possibly having to spend eternity in Hell’s Fire because of his “sins”. – *Chic Schissel*

ARE YOU THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES?

(Adapted from *thedailymash.co.uk*, 1/9/2018)

With so many distractions around, it is surprisingly easy to forget whether you are the leader of the free world, perhaps especially if you *are* the leader of the free world. Take our test to find out.

Where do you live?

A. In a standard house or apartment, possibly with a garage containing a car.

B. In a massive house that is notable for its whiteness, with 30 or 40 burly, smartly-dressed men with single names like "Davis" or "Price" who keep talking into radios.

How does your average day begin?

A. Wake up around 7am, eat some cereal, go to office job.

B. Stay up all night eating cheeseburgers and watching *Paranormal Witness* and *Ice Road Truckers*, until "Price" enters your bedroom, turns on "Fox & Friends" on all three TV screens, and hands you a large paper cup full of pills. If you question the pills he explains they're for your digestion, sir.

What's your daily beauty regime?

A. There isn't one as such. I have a shower and a shave.

B. Pin remaining tobacco-colored hairs across scalp. Attach stomach hoists and lift belly to chest area. Check continued existence of withered genitals.

Do you know any Russians?

A. There's a guy at work called Sergei. Actually he might be

from Ukraine. I don't know him well but he's always polite. B. Of course, they have that control room in the basement and their own taxpayer-funded vodka budget. Great people and some very lovely, elegant ladies. *Wait*. No. I meant no. I don't know any Russians at all. Who are you?

If you answered mostly As - Sorry, you are not the most powerful man in the world. Don't threaten anyone today or you might go to prison.

Mostly Bs - You are the president of America, a country on Earth. Congratulations! Don't press any buttons.

HE GIVES MENTAL ILLNESS A BAD NAME

Jeffrey A. Lieberman

(Excerpted from "Maybe He's Just a Jerk" in *The New York Times*, 1/15/2018)

There is another problem with the current debate over Mr. Trump's mental condition: It assumes his behavior isn't voluntary, and that his shocking or "unpresidential" conduct is a symptom of mental illness. This kind of thinking contributes to the stigmatization of mental illness. It's entirely possible that he simply has certain personal qualities we don't find ideal in a leader, like being a narcissistic bully who lacks basic civility and common courtesies. That he is, in a word, a jerk.

Note: Mr. Liebermann is chairman of psychiatry at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, and a past president of the American Psychiatric Association.

Darwin Day Dinner Gala with
Susan Jacoby, Feb 9
Page 7

Lincoln: His relevance
in the age of Trump
Page 1

Did Black Men fight
for the Confederacy?
Page 11
(Hint: No)

Take the "Are You the
President?" Quiz
Page 12

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