

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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March, 2019

Winter's almost done, and herein we celebrate our celebration of Darwin Day, confess to socialism, compare religion to heroin and consider a veggie-based new one. We play a political "lightning round" with AOC, wonder why God created atheists, and ponder Her mysterious ways. We introduce new awards no one wants to win, consult Martin Buber, Conan O'Brien, both Andys (Cuomo and Borowitz), and even sneak in a couple of lines of Hitchens. But first, I'm almost done. —JR

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## IT'S TIME John Rafferty

It's time for me to step down as President of the Secular Humanist Society of New York. And from my official but no less taxing positions as one-man Membership Committee, Events Planner, Organization Spokesperson, and Chief Cook & Bottle Washer.

In part because the SHSNY bylaws do not assign specific Board-member responsibility for membership, events, etc., those duties tend to accrete around one person, as they did to Warren Allen Smith in the earliest years, to my SHSNY mentor, John Arents, who held the organization together while Secretary through the faction-riven years of the late 1990s, and to me after my election in 2007 by the then six other members of the Board who didn't want the job.

No aw-shucks false modesty, I am proud of my accomplishments as president. From a late-1990s sleepy coterie of old men with dwindling membership and only occasional organized events (Paul Kurtz in the 1990s once referred to us as "moribund"), I have helped SHSNY become the leadership organization in New York's freethought community.

We have more than doubled dues-paying memberships (including tripling Family Memberships) and quadrupled the number of paid subscriptions to PIQUE, which is read in at least 30 states, the UK, Ireland, Norway, Finland, Germany, Lichtenstein, and Thor-only-knows how many other places to which it gets forwarded electronically.

We have social and educational meetings every week of the month, and produce special events featuring such luminaries as ACLU Past President Norman Dorsen, Columbia University John Dewey Professor of Philosophy

Philip Kitcher, AHA Executive Director Roy Speckhardt, CSH Executive Director Tom Flynn, and our own Michael De Dora, Jennifer Michael Hecht, Susan Jacoby, Richard Milner and Massimo Pigliucci.

We have extended our reach—and influence—past our original association with the Council for Secular Humanism to become a Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association, an Affiliate Member of Atheist Alliance International (which we represent on various committees at the U.N.), and an Endorsing Group in the Secular Coalition for New York.

What's more, we're solvent, without ever having to hold a fundraiser.

It's all been satisfying and (sometimes) great fun, but it is stressful, I'm an out-of-shape octogenarian with a coronary history, and it's time for a change. I want this organization that I love to continue and to grow without me, so I

have to let go.

When Donna Marxer resigned as Treasurer a month before she died last November, I told the Board that I would definitely quit, too, and challenged them to meet without me to plan for the succession and for a reorganization.

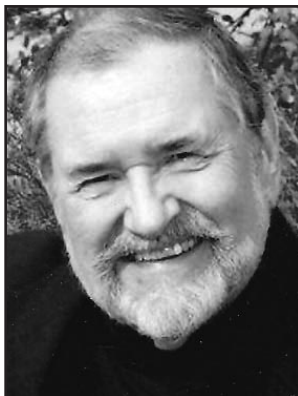
Happily, they have.

A new organization chart is being worked out, spreading responsibilities among more Board members. At a meeting this month two new members will join the Board, and new officers for the remainder of the current 2017-2020 triennium will be elected.

Much more about all of that in April PIQUE.

Speaking of PIQUE, one more thing. I am not stepping down as Editor of this newsletter.

I want to write this until I drop.



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**BOARD OF DIRECTORS:** John Rafferty, *Pres./Editor*; Claire Miller, *V.P.*; Brian Lemaire, *Secty/Treas.*;

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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).

## WHO'S A SOCIALIST?

(Hint: We All Are)

Jonathan Engel

*(Editor: "Could Socialism ever succeed in the United States?" was the question 20-or-so of us discussed in a lively give-and-take at our February 17 monthly Brunch. Jon came prepared with facts as well as opinions, as witness this. – JR)*

In his State of the Union address, President Trump made sure to puff out his chest and assure Americans that "America will never be a socialist country". This has become a revived Republican line of attack, to call Democrats "socialists", especially in an era where some Democrats (notably Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and Bernie Sanders) have embraced that particular sobriquet. But all this sound and fury really signifies nothing.

The United States has always been a capitalist society tempered with socialist-style protections against capitalistic excess. We have a free-market economy, for the most part, but we also have anti-trust laws, child labor laws, environmental regulations (we still have a few), a minimum wage, worker safety laws, and more. Capitalism tempered by the need to be mindful of the common good.

Public education is a form of socialism; so are fire departments. Fire departments? Yes, fire departments. Everyone in a municipality pays taxes that fund its fire department, which is used only by a particular sub-set of people, i.e., those whose houses catch fire. Everyone else is paying taxes that benefit others, but not themselves.

Y'know, socialism, the pooling of resources for the general wellbeing of the community.

It's all a matter of degree. Scandinavian countries tend to tax more than we do and provide greater protections and services for their people. But they still have democratic elections and free enterprise. Yes, there are rich people in Denmark. So to say that Danes are socialist and we are not is ridiculous; it's all a matter of degree.

But Republicans would tell you that their hero, the great businessman Donald Trump, would never resort to socialist remedies or thinking. Guess again. Take his agricultural policy (please!). Trump has imposed tariffs on foreign countries (notably China) and those countries have responded by slapping tariffs on American agricultural products. And so farm income in America in 2018 was about 50 percent of what it was in 2013, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. But Trump didn't want to alienate his rural base, and so government subsidies to farmers were up 18 percent in 2018 over the previous year, by way of \$4.7 billion in tariff relief and \$1.6 billion in disaster aid (see Mary Papenfuss on Huffington Post, "Trump Trade War Helps to Push Farmers into Record Number of Bankruptcies").

And so the great capitalist Trump, that foe of socialism, has in two years changed American farmers from relying on exports to relying on handouts. Which, I hasten to add, none of these self-reliant farmers seem to be turning down.

So who, exactly, is a socialist? A lot more Americans than you might think.

## AOC INSTRUCTS US ALL ON MONEY, POLITICS AND CORRUPTION

John Rafferty

I am not yet completely sold on media darling Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), but on February 6 in the House Oversight Committee, she gave me, as well as her fellow committee members – and millions of viewers subsequently on YouTube – a perhaps simplistic, but nevertheless much-needed tutorial when she questioned witnesses about the role of money in politics.

She played "a lightning round game" (it took less than her allotted five minutes) with the watchdog witnesses on the panel, including Common Cause's Karen Hobert Flynn, CREW's Walter Shaub, and Brennan Center for Justice's Rudy Mehrbani. Here's the transcript. – JR

**AOC:** Let's play a game. Let's play a lightning-round game. I'm gonna be the Bad Guy – which I'm sure half the room would agree with anyway – and I want to get away with as much bad things as possible, ideally to enrich myself and advance my interests, even if that means putting my interests ahead of the American people.

So, Mrs. Hobert Flynn – oh, and by the way, I have enlisted all of you as my co-conspirators, so you're gonna help me legally get away with all of this. So, Mrs. Hobert Flynn, if I want to run a campaign that is entirely funded by corporate political action committees, is there anything that prevents me from legally doing that?

**Flynn:** No.

**AOC:** Okay, so there's nothing stopping me from being entirely funded by a corporate PAC from say the fossil fuel industry, the healthcare industry, Big Pharma – I'm entirely one hundred percent lobbyist-PAC funded.

Okay, so let's say I'm a really, really Bad Guy. And let's say I have some skeletons in my closet that I need to cover up, so that I can get elected. Um, Mr. Smith, is it true that you wrote this article [*holding up paper*], this opinion piece for *The Washington Post* entitled, "These Payments to Women Were Unseemly, That Doesn't Mean They Were Illegal"?

**Smith:** Well, I can't see the piece, but I wrote a piece under that headline in the *Post*, so I assume that's right.

**AOC:** Okay, great. So, green light for hush money. I can do all sorts of terrible things – it's totally legal right now for me to pay people off, and that's considered "speech", that money is considered speech. So I use my special-interest dark money from the campaign to pay off those I need to pay off, and get elected.

So now I'm elected, I'm in. I've got the power to draft, lobby and shape the laws that govern the United States of America. Fabulous. Now, Mrs. Hobert Flynn, are there any limits on the laws I can write or influence?

**Flynn:** There's no limits.

**AOC:** So there's none. I can be totally funded by oil and gas, I can be totally funded by Big Pharma, so I can come in, write Big Pharma laws, and there's no limit on that whatsoever.

**Flynn:** That's right.

**AOC:** Okay, so awesome. The [other] thing I want to do is

get rich with as little work as possible. That's really what I'm trying to do as a Bad Guy, right? So, is there anything preventing me from holding stocks, say, in an oil or gas company, and then writing laws to deregulate that industry and potentially cause the stock value to soar and [for me to] accrue a lot of money in that time?

**Mehrbani:** You could do that.

**AOC:** I could do that now, the way our current laws are set up?

**Mehrbani:** Yes.

**AOC:** Is it possible that any elements of this story apply to our current government and our current public servants right now?

**Severall:** Yes.

**AOC:** So we have a system that's fundamentally broken. We have these influences existing in this body, which means that these influences are here, in this committee, shaping the questions that are being asked of you all, right now. Would you say that's correct? Mr. Shaub?

**Shaub:** Yes.

**AOC:** One last thing, in relation to congressional oversight that we have, the limits that are placed on me as a congresswoman, compared to the executive branch and compared to, say, the President of the United States. Would you say that Congress has the same sort of standard of accountability, or it's about even, or ...

**Shaub:** Yes. In terms of laws that apply to the President, yeah, there's almost no laws at all that apply to the President.

**AOC:** So I'm being held, and every person in this body is being held to a higher ethical standard than the President of the United States.

**Shaub:** That's right, because there are some committees, ethics committee rules that apply to you.

**AOC:** And it's already super-legal, as we've seen, for me to be a pretty Bad Guy. So, it's even easier for the President of the United States to be one, I would assume.

**Shaub:** That's right.

**AOC:** Thank you very much.

## JESUS AND MO: JUST LOOK AT THE AMAZING EVIDENCE

*(Transcribed from [jesusandmo.net/comic/after2/](http://jesusandmo.net/comic/after2/))*

**Jesus:** Just look at the amazing accuracy of the prophecies in the Book of Daniel. He foretells in remarkable detail the fate of the Greek empire. How can anyone deny The Bible is God's word?

**Barmaid:** Jesus, if a book contains accurate details of historical events it means it was written *after* those events.

**Mohammed:** You only say that because you don't believe in prophecy.

**Barmaid:** Well, in the absence of good evidence that there's any such thing as prophecy, that is the most reasonable explanation.

**Mo:** But there *is* good evidence.

**Jesus:** Just look at the amazing accuracy of the prophecies in the Book of Daniel.

## HERE ARE THE TOP 10 REASONS I DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD

(Reasons 3 & 4)

Greta Christina

*(Editor: The Great Greta has a new book, [Why Are You Atheists So Angry? 99 Things That Piss Off the Godless](#), which is currently available on Kindle, Nook, and soon in print. We reprinted her first two reasons in February PIQUE. The following, and subsequent excerpts in future issues, are/ will be from Ms. Christina's post on AlterNet, 12/14/2018.)*

The question of whether religion is true or not is important. It's not the main point of this book. But "Does God exist?" is a valid and relevant question [and] here are my Top Ten reasons why the answer is a resounding, "No."

### 3: The weakness of religious arguments, explanations, and apologetics.

I have seen a lot of arguments for the existence of God. And they all boil down to one or more of the following: The argument from authority. (Example: "God exists because the Bible says God exists.") The argument from personal experience. (Example: "God exists because I feel in my heart that God exists.") The argument that religion shouldn't have to logically defend its claims. (Example: "God is an entity that cannot be proven by reason or evidence.") Or the redefining of God into an abstract principle ... so abstract that it can't be argued against, but also so abstract that it scarcely deserves the name God. (Example: "God is love.") And all these arguments are ridiculously weak.

Sacred books and authorities can be mistaken. I have yet to see a sacred book that doesn't have any mistakes. (The Bible, to give just one example, is shot full of them.) And the feelings in people's hearts can definitely be mistaken. They are mistaken, demonstrably so, much of the time. Instinct and intuition play an important part in human understanding and experience ... but they should never be treated as the final word on a subject. I mean, if I told you, "The tree in front of my house is 500 feet tall with hot pink leaves," and I offered as a defense, "I know this is true because my mother/preacher/sacred book tells me so" ... or "I know this is true because I feel it in my heart" ... would you take me seriously?

Some people do try to prove God's existence by pointing to evidence in the world. But that evidence is inevitably terrible. Pointing to the perfection of the Bible as a historical and prophetic document, for instance ... when it so blatantly is nothing of the kind. Or pointing to the fine-tuning of the Universe for life ... even though this supposedly perfect fine-tuning is actually pretty crappy, and the conditions that allow for life on Earth have only existed for the tiniest fragment of the Universe's existence and are going to be boiled away by the Sun in about a billion years. Or pointing to the complexity of life and insisting that it must have been designed ... when the sciences of biology and geology and such have provided far, far better explanations for what seems, at first glance, like design.



As to the argument that “We don’t have to show you any reason or evidence, it’s unreasonable and intolerant for you to even expect that” ... that’s conceding the game before you’ve even begun. It’s like saying, “I know I can’t make my case, therefore I’m going to concentrate my arguments on why I don’t have to make my case in the first place.” It’s like a defense lawyer who knows their client is guilty, so they try to get the case thrown out on a technicality. Ditto with the “redefining God out of existence” argument. If what you believe in isn’t a supernatural being or substance that has, or at one time had, some sort of effect on the world ... well, your philosophy might be an interesting one, but it is not, by any useful definition of the word, religion.

Again: If I tried to argue, “The tree in front of my house is 500 feet tall with hot pink leaves, and the height and color of trees is a question that is best answered with personal faith and feeling, not with reason or evidence” ... or, “I know this is true because I am defining ‘500 feet tall and hot pink’ as the essential nature of tree-ness, regardless of its outward appearance” ... would you take me seriously?

#### **4: The increasing diminishment of God.**

This is closely related to #1 (the consistent replacement of supernatural explanations of the world with natural ones). But it’s different enough to deserve its own section.

When you look at the history of religion, you see that the perceived power of God has been diminishing. As our understanding of the world has increased—and as our ability to test theories and claims has improved—the domain of God’s miracles and interventions, or other supposed supernatural phenomena, has consistently shrunk.

Examples: We stopped needing God to explain floods ... but we still needed him to explain sickness and health. Then we didn’t need him to explain sickness and health ... but we still needed him to explain consciousness. Now we’re beginning to get a grip on consciousness, so we’ll soon need God to explain ... what?

Or, as writer and blogger Adam Lee so eloquently put it in his Ebon Musings website, “Where the Bible tells us God once shaped worlds out of the void and parted great seas with the power of his word, today his most impressive acts seem to be shaping sticky buns into the likenesses of saints and conferring vaguely-defined warm feelings on his believers’ hearts when they attend church.”

This is what atheists call the “god of the gaps”. Whatever gap there is in our understanding of the world, that’s what God is supposedly responsible for. Wherever the empty spaces are in our coloring book, that’s what gets filled in with the blue crayon called God.

But the blue crayon is worn down to a nub. And it’s never turned out to be the right color. And over and over again, throughout history, we’ve had to go to great trouble to scrape the blue crayon out of people’s minds and replace it with the right color. Given this pattern, doesn’t it seem that we should stop reaching for the blue crayon every time we see an empty space in the coloring book?

*Editor: More of Ms. Christina’s Top Reasons in subsequent issues of this newsletter. Stay tuned. – JR*

## **WHY DID GOD CREATE ATHEISTS?**

**Martin Buber**

There is a famous story told in Chassidic literature that addresses this very question. The Master teaches the student that God created everything in the world to be appreciated, since everything is here to teach us a lesson. One clever student asks “What lesson can we learn from atheists? Why did God create them?”

The Master responds, “God created atheists to teach us the most important lesson of them all – the lesson of true compassion. You see, when an atheist performs an act of charity, visits someone who is sick, helps someone in need, and cares for the world, he is not doing so because of some religious teaching. He does not believe that God commanded him to perform this act. In fact, he does not believe in God at all, so his acts are based on an inner sense of morality. And look at the kindness he can bestow upon others simply because he feels it to be right.”

“This means,” the Master continued “that when someone reaches out to you for help, you should never say ‘I pray that God will help you.’ Instead for the moment, you should become an atheist, imagine that there is no God who can help, and say ‘I will help you.’”

– Martin Buber, *Tales of Hasidim Vol. 2 (1991)*

*Comment: You took the words right out of our mouths, Marty: Let’s all be atheists. – JR*

## **THE PERFECT RELIGIOUS CREED TO TEACH YOUR CHILDREN**

**Scott Kelly**

*(Excerpted from Endurance, astronaut Kelly’s book about his year on the International Space Station, excerpted on The Morning Heresy, 2/11/2019.)*

People often ask me whether I had any epiphanies in space, whether seeing the Earth from space made me feel closer to God or more at one with the universe. ...

I am a scientifically minded person, curious to understand everything I can. We know there are trillions of stars, more than the number of grains of sand on planet Earth. Those stars make up less than 5 percent of the matter in the universe. The rest is dark matter and dark energy. The universe is so complex. Is it all an accident? I don’t know.

I was raised Catholic, and as is the case in many families, my parents were more dedicated to their children’s religious development than they were to their own. Mark and I attended catechism classes until one day in the ninth grade, when my mother got tired of driving us. She gave us the choice of whether to keep going or not, and, as many teenagers would, we chose to opt out. Since that day, organized religion has not been part of my life. When Samantha was ten years old, she asked me at dinner one evening what religion we were.

“Our religion is ‘Be nice to other people and eat all your vegetables,’” I said.

I was pleased with myself for describing my religious beliefs so concisely and that she was satisfied with it.

## WE CELEBRATED DARWIN DAY IN A BIG WAY

Thirty-seven of us gathered in the opulent dining room of Chinatown's Golden Unicorn restaurant on February 8 for SHSNY's Eleventh Annual Celebration of Darwin Day (which was actually February 12, Chuck's 210th birthday) ... and the evening was nothing less than a delight.



Golden Unicorn lived up to its multi-star rating with a lavish and delicious nine-course spread, from Steamed Shrimp Dumpling openers to headliners like Peking Duck and Chilean Sea Bass. When the traditional Chinese-banquet closers of Fried Rice and E-Fu Noodles arrived, most of us were too stuffed (and happy) to enjoy them.



Our own David Orenstein introduced the intellectual theme of the evening with his "TEDTalk"-like presentation, "Charles Darwin: Freethought's Apical Ancestor", a fascinating review of Darwin's role in shaping the 19th century freethought movement, and of his influence on the secular, suffrage, civil rights and atheist and humanist movements of our own day. Thank you, David.



### **And a good time was had by all ...**

Dolores Balcerak, Walter Balcerak, Bill Carter, Karen Chamberlain, Brian Engel, Jon Engel, Karen Engel, Will Engel, Joel Galker, Harry Graber, Maria Graber, Lenore Green, Steve Green, Lorraine Gudas, Jay Gumbiner, Charles Heller, Elaine Heller, Dorothy Kahn, Brian Lemaire, Carl Marxer, Connie McKinnon, Margo Meyer, Claire Miller, Carlos Mora, Bob Murtha, David Orenstein, John Rafferty, Sharif Rahman, Chic Schissel, Larry Shaw, Stuart Souther, Marjorie Vai, Harvey Wachtel, John Wagner, Mike Weiss, Blaikie Worth, Bob Worth

*Photography by Lorraine Gudas and Bill Carter.*



# SHSNY CALENDAR: MARCH - MAY 2019

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

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

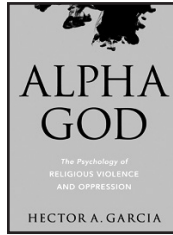
28 East 35 St. (front lounge)  
We'll discuss

**ALPHA GOD:**

*The Psychology of Religious  
Violence and Oppression*

Hector A. Garcia

In this new book by the speaker who fascinated us November 2, "God" is seen as a reflection of the "dominant ape" paradigm so evident in the hierarchical structures of primates, our cousins.



Garcia, a clinical psychologist, examines religious scriptures, rituals, and canon law, highlighting the many ways in which our evolutionary legacy has shaped the development of religion and continues to influence its expression.

The parallels between features of primate society and human religious rituals and concepts – in-group altruism vs. out-group hostility (us vs. them), displays of dominance and submission to establish roles – make it clear that religion, especially its oppressive and violent tendencies, is rooted in the deep evolutionary past.

Karen Chamberlain will lead.

– *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

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## MEET US ON MEETUP

[www.meetup.com/shsny-org/](http://www.meetup.com/shsny-org/)

## TEXT US ON TWITTER

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## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, APRIL 4, 7-8:30 pm  
Community Church of New York  
**THE EPIGENETICS**

**REVOLUTION:**

*How Modern Biology is  
Rewriting Our Understanding  
of Genetics, Disease and  
Inheritance*

Nessa Carey

How do ants and queen bees control their colonies, why are tortoiseshell cats always female, and how do our bodies age and develop disease?

Epigenetics can potentially revolutionize our understanding of the structure and behavior of biological life on Earth. It explains why mapping an organism's genetic code is not enough to determine how it develops, and shows how nurture combines with nature to engineer biological diversity.

Earle Bowers will lead.

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

## SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, MAY 2, 7-8:30 pm  
Community Church of New York  
**THE AGE OF REASON:**

*Being an Investigation of True  
and Fabulous Theology*

Thomas Paine

Paine, who had ridiculed monarchy and inspired American patriotism during the Revolution with *Common Sense*, turned his intellect and wit on revealed religion in *The Age of Reason*.

Although deist rather than atheist, the book shook the American and (especially) English establishments that were horrified by the bloody French Revolution. Even a century later, Teddy Roosevelt called Paine a "filthy little atheist".

– *Paperback and Kindle available.*

## BRUNCH & CONVERSATION

SUN, MARCH 17, 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 \$15 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:*

*How can we detect  
"Fake News"?*

**DRINKING REASONABLY**  
WED, MARCH 20, 6-10:00 pm

Vino Levantino Wine Bar  
210 West 94 Street

(Broadway - Amsterdam Ave)

Get together with other NYC freethinkers in the various groups of the Reasonable New York coalition (including SHSNY) for fellowship, networking, pub grub and reasonable imbibing.



We – humanists, skeptics, rationalists, atheists, agnostics – meet and mingle, discuss the issues of the day and whatever else is on our minds, and just have fun.

Come anytime for any length of time 6-10, or come at 6:00 and enjoy Happy Hour prices until 7:00.

Don't drink alcohol? Don't let that stop you from joining in the conversation and the fun.

# SHSNY CALENDAR: MARCH - MAY 2019

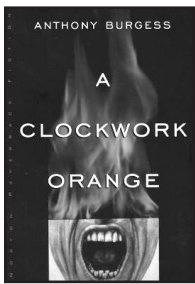
**SHSNY FICTION BOOK CLUB**  
**TUES, MARCH 12,**  
**7:00 - 8:30 pm**

**Nancy Adelman's apartment**  
**205 Third Ave (6H) (18-19 Sts)**

Come for wine, cheese, and sparkling conversation about

**A CLOCKWORK ORANGE**  
**Anthony Burgess**

*"Great Music, it said, and Great Poetry would like quieten Modern Youth down and make Modern Youth more Civilized. Civilized my syphilised yarbles."*



A vicious fifteen-year-old droog is the central character of this 1963 classic. In Anthony Burgess's nightmare vision of the future, where the criminals take over after dark, the

story is told by the central character, Alex, who talks in a brutal invented slang that brilliantly renders his and his friends' social pathology.

*A Clockwork Orange* is a frightening fable about good and evil, and the meaning of human freedom. When the state undertakes to reform Alex to "redeem" him, the novel asks, "At what cost?"

**To reserve your seat on the sofa, and/or to nominate the next book for us to read, contact: editor@shsny.org**

*Advance-Reading Notice:*

**SHSNY FICTION BOOK CLUB**  
**TUE, APRIL 9, 7:00 - 8:30 pm**  
**A SEVERED HEAD**  
**Iris Murdoch**

A brilliant novel "about the frightfulness and ruthlessness of being in love", by one of Britain's premier storytellers.

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

presents

**BRIAN DALTON AS**  
**MR. DEITY**

In the Skeptics Society Distinguished

Lecture Series, "Brian Dalton as Mr. Deity", Mr. Dalton



performs some of his favorite episodes from his famous internet parody of religion live on stage.

The hilarious show includes Lucy (Lucifer), and Jesse (Jesus, or the boy). As a "Forman" (Former Mormon), Dalton also delivered a serious message about the power of religious belief, what it does to the mind, what some of their best arguments are for believing in God, and why these arguments fall far short of proof.

In other words, Mr. Deity debunks his own existence.

## PLANNING AHEAD

The usual SHSNY schedule (barring blizzards, holidays and schedule conflicts/screwups) is ...

**Book Club: First Thursday**

at the Community Church of NY  
**Fiction Book Club: 2nd Tuesday**  
 at Nancy Adelman's apartment

**Brunch: Third Sunday**

at Stone Creek Lounge  
**Drinking Reasonably**  
**Third Wednesday**

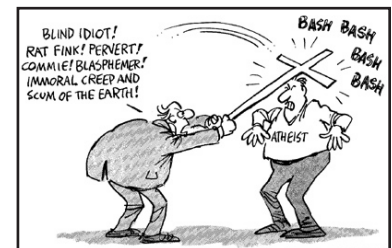
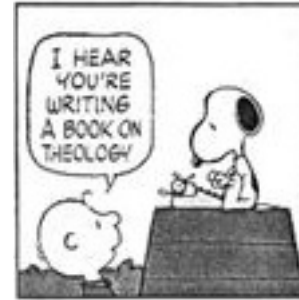
at Vino Levantino Wine Bar  
**Great Lectures on DVD**

**4th Wednesday**

at Stone Creek Lounge.

**More info:**

www.shsny.org  
 and/or 646-922-7389



## THE ENLIGHTENMENT WORKED!

Steven Pinker

*(Excerpted from the first chapter of our February SHSNY Book Club selection, Enlightenment Now, by Prof. Pinker.)*

The Enlightenment has *worked* – perhaps the greatest story seldom told. And because this triumph is so unsung, the underlying ideals of reason, science, and humanism are unappreciated as well. Far from being an insipid consensus, these ideals are treated by today’s intellectuals with indifference, skepticism, and sometimes contempt. When properly appreciated, I will suggest, the ideals of the Enlightenment are in fact stirring, inspiring, noble – a reason to live. ...

The Enlightenment is conventionally placed in the last two thirds of the 18th century, though it flowed out of the Scientific Revolution and the Age of Reason in the 17th century and spilled into the heyday of classical liberalism of the first half of the 19th. Provoked by challenges to conventional wisdom from science and exploration, mindful of the bloodshed of the recent wars of religion, and abetted by the easy movement of ideas and people, the thinkers of the Enlightenment saw a new understanding of the human condition. The era was a cornucopia of ideas, some of them contradictory, but four themes tie them together: reason, science, humanism, and progress. ...

The Scientific Revolution was revolutionary in a way that it is hard to appreciate today, now that its discoveries have become second nature to most of us. The historian David Wootton reminds us of the understanding of an educated Englishman on the eve of the Revolution in 1600:

*He believes witches can summon up storms that sink ships at sea. ... He believes in werewolves, although there happen not to be any in England – he knows they are to be found in Belgium. ... He believes mice are spontaneously generated in piles of straw. He believes in contemporary magicians. ... He has seen a unicorn’s horn, but not a unicorn.*

*He believes that a murdered body will bleed in the presence of the murderer. He believes that there is an ointment which, if rubbed on a dagger which has caused a wound, will cure the wound. He believes that the shape, color and texture of a plant can be a clue to how it will work as a medicine because God designed nature to be interpreted by mankind. He believes that it is possible to turn base metal into gold, although he doubts that anyone knows how to do it. He believes that nature abhors a vacuum. He believes the rainbow is a sign from God and that comets portend evil. He believes that dreams predict the future, if we know how to interpret them. He believes, of course, that the earth stands still and the sun and stars turn around the earth once every twenty-four hours.*

A century and a third later, an educated descendent of this Englishman would believe none of these things. It was an escape not just from ignorance but from terror. ... To the Enlightenment thinkers the escape from ignorance and superstition showed how mistaken our conventional wisdom could be, and how the methods of science—

skepticism, fallibilism, open debate, and empirical testing – are a paradigm of how to achieve reliable knowledge. ...

The Enlightenment thinkers were men and women of their age, the 18th century. Some were racists, sexists, anti-Semites, slaveholders, or duelists. Some of the questions they worried about are almost incomprehensible to us, and they came up with plenty of daffy ideas together with the brilliant ones. More to the point, they were born too soon to appreciate some of the keystones of our modern understanding of reality.

They of all people would have been the first to concede this. If you extol reason, then what matters is the integrity of the thoughts, not the personalities of the thinkers. And if you’re committed to progress, you can’t very well claim to have it all figured out. It takes nothing away from the Enlightenment thinkers to identify some critical ideas about the human condition and the nature of progress that we know and they didn’t.

*(And from the concluding chapter, “Humanism” ...)*

We are born into a pitiless universe, facing steep odds against life-enabling order and in constant jeopardy of falling apart. We were shaped by a force that is ruthlessly competitive. We are made from crooked timber, vulnerable to illusions, self-centeredness, and at times astounding stupidity.

Yet human nature has also been blessed with the resources that open a space for a kind of redemption. We are endowed with the power to combine ideas recursively, to have thoughts about our thoughts. We have an instinct for language, allowing us to share the fruits of our experience and ingenuity. We are deepened with the capacity for sympathy, for pity, imagination, compassion, commiseration. ...

We will never have a perfect world, and it would be dangerous to seek one. But there is no limit to the betterments we can attain if we continue to apply knowledge to enhance human flourishing.

This heroic story is not just another myth. Myths are fictions, but this one is true – true to the best of our knowledge, which is the only truth we can have. We believe it because we have *reasons* to believe it. As we learn more, we can show which parts of the story to continue to be true, and which ones false – as any of them might be, and any could become.

And the story belongs not to any tribe but to all of humanity – to any sentient creature with the power of reason and the urge to persist in its being. For it requires only the convictions that life is better than death, health is better than sickness, abundance is better than want, freedom is better than coercion, happiness is better than suffering, and knowledge is better than superstition and ignorance.

## JUST FOR SCIENCE-NERD FUN ...

Spend a few minutes today with a fascinating video on YouTube. It turns out you can fit all the planets in the Solar System (and the dwarf planets) in the space between Earth and the Moon. Check it out at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmvqMkVZKxw&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmvqMkVZKxw&feature=youtu.be)



## WE'LL ALL BE FORGOTTEN. HOORAY!

Hemant Mehta

(Excerpted from "Conan O'Brien Saying 'We'll All Be Forgotten' One Day Isn't Nihilistic at All", at [friendlyatheist.com](http://friendlyatheist.com), 1/23/2019)

**D**uring an interview to promote his now-shorter talk show, Conan O'Brien told *The New York Times* that the idea of this being his "final act" as a performer didn't really bother him so much.

**NYT:** *Is this how you want to go out, with a show that gets smaller and smaller until it's gone?*

**O'Brien:** *Maybe that's O.K. I think you have more of a problem with that than I do. [Laughs.] At this point in my career, I could go out with a grand, 21-gun salute, and climb into a rocket and the entire Supreme Court walks out and they jointly press a button, I'm shot up into the air and there's an explosion and it's orange and it spells, "Good night and God love." In this culture? Two years later, it's going to be, who's Conan? This is going to sound grim, but eventually, all our graves go unattended.*

**NYT:** *You're right, that does sound grim.*

**O'Brien:** *I had a great conversation with Albert Brooks once. When I met him for the first time, I was kind of stammering. I said, you make movies, they live on forever. I just do these late-night shows, they get lost, they're never seen again and who cares? And he looked at me and he said, [Albert Brooks voice] "What are you talking about? None of it matters." None of it matters? "No, that's the secret. In 1940, people said Clark Gable is the face of the 20th Century. Who [expletive] thinks about Clark Gable? It doesn't matter. You'll be forgotten. I'll be forgotten. We'll all be forgotten." It's so funny because you'd think that would depress me. I was walking on air after that.*

Part of that sounds downright nihilistic. Nothing matters. We'll all be forgotten. Who gives a shit about anything? Why bother living? It's a kind of mindset religious people frequently attribute to atheists who aren't living with a particular greater purpose.

But the flip side is that this mindset is actually liberating, as O'Brien suggests near the end. We don't have to live to create some grand legacy; we can live to make the most of the life we have right now. O'Brien gets fulfillment by making people laugh — and even if he's "forgotten" in a century, he will have helped a lot of people find joy in the midst of the mundane and depressing. Your own memory may fade, but while you're here, you have a choice in how to live. Do you want to slouch through life or make the most of the incredible luck that brought you here? Do you want to hurt people or help them? Do you want to contribute to the betterment of the world or make others suffer as a result of your actions?

When you realize you can just enjoy this life instead of trying to position yourself for a better next one, a huge burden is lifted from you.

That's not nihilistic at all. That's a relief.

## GOD WORKS IN (REALLY) MYSTERIOUS WAYS

Jonathan Engel

**R**ecently White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said in an interview that Donald Trump is President of the United States because that's what God wants. "I think God calls all of us to fill different roles at different times and I think that He wanted Donald Trump to become president."

Nice to know that the Huckster, who breaks the Eighth Commandment (Thou shalt not bear false witness) on a daily basis, has a direct pipeline to the Creator and knows Her political preferences. So much for democracy and the will of the people.

The question of exactly how the Trump presidency came about is a complicated one, involving factors such as the Electoral College, Russian interference, journalistic deficiencies, voter suppression, missteps by the Clinton campaign, and more. Sifting through these factors is difficult and tedious work, and so I concede that simply attributing the election to (blaming it on?) God's will is easier than actually doing the hard labor of political analysis. After all, it happened, so it must be God's will, right? Okay, so let's go down that road.

Robert Mueller was appointed special prosecutor to investigate Trump, so that must be God's will, too. In 2018 Democrats took back the House of Representatives, so I guess that God wanted that to happen as well. But She left Republicans in charge of the Senate, so She must have been keen to see what fireworks would fly with a divided government. Oh, that Almighty One, what a prankster, what a scamp.

So it appears that Sarah Sanders attributes phenomena that she approves of (like Trump's election) to "God's will". But what about things she *doesn't* approve of, like the Mueller probe? I guess she attributes such things to other forces. (Could it be ... Satan?) And I suppose that the God Sarah is talking about is the one that she happens to worship. I mean, it's hard to imagine Trump's election being the work of Allah, what with the Muslim ban and all.

Does this all sound ridiculous? I certainly hope it does. The type of thinking that attributes political or any other events to "God's will" is so facile as to hardly constitute thinking at all. If there is a God (and you might have guessed by now that I certainly doubt it), She must be pretty pissed off that people go around attributing all the insanity in the world to Her. Maybe that's why She gave us Donald Trump: to punish us for invoking Her name in connection with all that is bad in the world. On the other hand, maybe humans are responsible for their own actions, and natural phenomena occur pursuant to the scientific laws of nature and nothing else. Just a thought.

**Comment:** *Jon, while you're talking to Ms. Sanders, could you ask her about God's elevation of Adolph Hitler in 1933? – JR*

**H**ow much vanity must be concealed — not too effectively — at that — in order to pretend that one is the personal object of a divine plan? — *Christopher Hitchens*,

## RELIGION'S SMART-PEOPLE PROBLEM

### Part 2 – Conclusion

John G. Messerly

(Reprinted from “Religion has a smart-people problem: The shaky intellectual foundations of absolute faith” at rawstory.com, 1/14/2019 ... and Forwarded by Jon Engel)

*Editor: In the first part of this essay, Mr. Messerly considered the negative correlation between intelligence and religiosity, and the positive one between religious belief and social dysfunction ... and asked, “Why, then, do some highly educated people believe religious claims?” Why, indeed? – JR*

First, smart persons are good at defending ideas that they originally believed for non-smart reasons. They want to believe something, say for emotional reasons, and they then become adept at defending those beliefs. No rational person would say there is more evidence for creation science than biological evolution, but the former satisfies some psychological need for many that the latter does not. How else to explain the hubris of the philosopher or theologian who knows little of biology or physics yet denies the findings of those sciences? It is arrogant of those with no scientific credentials and no experience in the field or laboratory, to reject the hard-earned knowledge of the science. Still they do it. (I knew a professional philosopher who doubted both evolution and climate science but believed he could prove that the Christian God must take a Trinitarian form! Surely something emotional had short-circuited his rational faculties.)

Second, the proclamations of educated believers are not always to be taken at face value. Many don't believe religious claims but think them useful. They fear that in their absence others will lose a basis for hope, morality or meaning. These educated believers may believe that ordinary folks can't handle the truth. They may feel it heartless to tell parents of a dying child that their little one doesn't go to a better place. They may want to give bread to the masses, like Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor.

Our sophisticated believers may be manipulating, using religion as a mechanism of social control, as Gibbon noted long ago: “The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosophers as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful.” Consider the so-called religiosity of many contemporary politicians, whose actions belie the claim that they really believe the precepts of the religions to which they supposedly ascribe. Individuals may also profess belief because it is socially unacceptable not to; they don't want to be out of the mainstream or fear they will not be reelected or loved if they profess otherwise. So-called believers may not believe the truth of their claims; instead they may think that others are better off or more easily controlled if those others believe. Or perhaps they may just want to be socially accepted.

Third, when sophisticated thinkers claim to be religious, they often have something in mind unlike what the general populace believes. They may be process theologians who

argue that god is not omnipotent, contains the world, and changes. They may identify god as an anti-entropic force pervading the universe leading it to higher levels of organization. They may be pantheists, panentheists, or death-of-god theologians. Yet these sophisticated varieties of religious belief bear little resemblance to popular religion. The masses would be astonished to discover how far such beliefs deviate from their theism.

But we shouldn't be deceived. Although there are many educated religious believers, including some philosophers and scientists, religious belief declines with educational attainment, particularly with scientific education. Studies also show that religious belief declines among those with higher IQs. Hawking, Dennett and Dawkins are not outliers, and neither is Bill Gates or Warren Buffett.

Or consider this anecdotal evidence. Among the intelligentsia it is common and widespread to find individuals who lost childhood religious beliefs as their education in philosophy and the sciences advanced. By contrast, it is almost unheard of to find disbelievers in youth who came to belief as their education progressed. This asymmetry is significant; advancing education is detrimental to religious belief. This suggest another part of the explanation for religious belief – scientific illiteracy.

If we combine reasonable explanations of the origin of religious beliefs and the small amount of belief among the intelligentsia with the problematic nature of beliefs in gods, souls, afterlives or supernatural phenomena generally, we can conclude that (supernatural) religious beliefs are probably false. And we should remember that the burden of proof is not on the disbeliever to demonstrate there are no gods, but on believers to demonstrate that there are.

Believers are not justified in affirming their belief on the basis of another's inability to conclusively refute them, any more than a believer in invisible elephants can command my assent on the basis of my not being able to “disprove” the existence of the aforementioned elephants. If the believer can't provide evidence for a god's existence, then I have no reason to believe in gods.

In response to the difficulties with providing reasons to believe in things unseen, combined with the various explanations of belief, you might turn to faith. It is easy to believe something without good reasons if you are determined to do so—like the queen in *Alice in Wonderland* who “sometimes ... believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast”.

But there are problems with this approach. First, if you defend such beliefs by claiming that you have a right to your opinion, however unsupported by evidence it might be, you are referring to a political or legal right, not an epistemic one. You may have a legal right to say whatever you want, but you have epistemic justification only if there are good reasons and evidence to support your claim. If someone makes a claim without concern for reasons and evidence, we should conclude that they simply don't care about what's true. We shouldn't conclude that their beliefs are true because they are fervently held.

Another problem is that fideism—basing one's beliefs exclusively on faith—makes belief arbitrary, leaving no way to distinguish one religious belief from another. Fideism allows no reason to favor your preferred beliefs or superstitions over others. If I must accept your beliefs without evidence, then you must accept mine, no matter what absurdity I believe in. But is belief without reason and evidence worthy of rational beings? Doesn't it perpetuate the cycle of superstition and ignorance that has historically enslaved us? I agree with W.K. Clifford: "It is wrong always, everywhere and for everyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

Why? Because your beliefs affect other people, and your false beliefs may harm them. The counter to Clifford's evidentialism has been captured by thinkers like Blaise Pascal, William James, and Miguel de Unamuno. Pascal's famous dictum expresses: "The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of." William James claimed that reason can't resolve all issues and so we are sometimes justified believing ideas that work for us. Unamuno searched for answers to existential questions, counseling us to abandon rationalism and embrace faith. Such proposals are probably the best the religious can muster, but if reason can't resolve our questions then agnosticism, not faith, is required.

Besides, faith without reason doesn't satisfy most of us, hence our willingness to seek reasons to believe. If those reasons are not convincing, if you conclude that religious beliefs are untrue, then religious answers to life's questions are worthless. You might comfort yourself by believing that little green dogs in the sky care for you but this is just nonsense, as are any answers attached to such nonsense. Religion may help us in the way that whisky helps a drunk, but we don't want to go through life drunk. If religious beliefs are just vulgar superstitions, then we are basing our lives on delusions. And who would want to do that?

Why is all this important? Because human beings need their childhood to end; they need to face life with all its bleakness and beauty, its lust and its love, its war and its peace. They need to make the world better. No one else will.

## READERS RESPOND

*To the Editor:* In John G. Messerly's article ("Religion's Smart-People Problem, Part 1", February PIQUE) he mentions the notion that religious belief may have conferred some evolutionary advantage, and therefore evolved by natural selection and can be inherited. But while behaviors are often inherited, beliefs are not. Beliefs are taught, not contained in DNA. A child born to devoutly religious parents but who, in infancy, is given up for adoption to an atheist family will almost certainly grow up an atheist. — *Chic Schissel*

My feelings on religion are starting to morph. I'm still very much an atheist, except that I don't necessarily see religion as being a bad thing. . . . I'm almost saying certain people do better with religion, the way that certain rock stars do better if they're shooting heroin.

— *Patton Oswalt*

## INTRODUCING THE SHSNY -OF-THE-MONTH AWARDS

So, how about all the small-bore clowns and villains whose Sidiocies and peccadillos don't rate, say, a half-column or so herein? Let's give them their Warholian fifteen minutes with -Of-the-Month Awards, as per the following.

### *Monster-Of-the-Month*

Baptist Pastor Jonathan Shelley of the Stedfast (*sic*) Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, tells his congregation how to deal with "rebellious" teenagers and "lazy gamers":

*"You know how you could squash rebellion in a public school today? Take the rebellious one out and stone him. I bet they'd shapen up pretty quick. ... [If they] just don't want to hearken to their parents, God says they should be put to death."*

### *Pigs-Of-the-Month*

While not a single Republican senator joined the effort to give back pay to hundreds of thousands of federal contractors who were unpaid during the partial government shutdown ... or acted to prevent the expiration of the legislation authorizing relief and health care for first responders sickened while cleaning up 9/11 debris ... Mitch McConnell, Chuck Grassley and John Thune sponsored a bill to fully repeal the estate tax on the inherited wealth of billionaires.

### *Bigot-Of-the-Month*

"Time for the Ku Klux Klan to night ride again" is the first line of the editorial written by Goodloe Sutton, editor and publisher of the *Democrat-Reporter* in Linden, Alabama.

*"Democrats in the Republican Party and Democrats are plotting to raise taxes in Alabama. ... This socialist-communist ideology sounds good to the ignorant, the uneducated, and the simple-minded people. ... If we could get the Klan to go up there and clean out D.C., we'd all been better off. ... We'll get the hemp ropes out, loop them over a tall limb and hang all of them."*

### *Theologian-Of-the-Month*

The Wyoming State Senate last month defeated a proposal to outlaw the death penalty in that great state. We can only wonder how many senators were persuaded by the argument of Republican Senator Lynn Hutchings:

*"The greatest man who ever lived died via the death penalty for you and me. I'm grateful to Him for our future hope because of this. Governments were instituted to execute justice. If it wasn't for Jesus dying via the death penalty, we would all have no hope."*

### *Ick-Of-the-Month*

Appearing on the Sunday edition of "Fox and Friends", host Pete Hegseth told his co-hosts, Ed Henry and Jediah Bila, that he didn't believe in the need for hand washing.

*"My 2019 resolution is to say things on-air that I say off-air. I don't think I've washed my hands for 10 years."*

After Henry and Bila laughed uncomfortably at his bizarre confession, Hegseth doubled down, declaring:

*"I inoculate myself. Germs are not a real thing. I can't see them; therefore, they're not real."*

Reader nominations, to editor@shsny.org, are encouraged.



## STUDY: MOST INNOCENT PEOPLE NEED TO HIRE THIRTY-FIVE LAWYERS AT SOME POINT

Andy Borowitz

(From [newyorker@newsletter.newyorker.com](mailto:newyorker@newsletter.newyorker.com) 1/14/2019)

WASHINGTON (The Borowitz Report) – Most people who are innocent of any crimes will still need to hire thirty-five lawyers at some point, a new study shows.



According to the study, thirty-five is the “bare minimum” number of lawyers that an innocent person should have on retainer in the event that he or she becomes the subject of an entirely unjustified criminal investigation.

“An innocent person who has absolutely nothing to hide should do everything in his or her power to avoid answering questions from investigators,” Professor Davis Logsdon said. “Thirty-five lawyers can help you do that. ... Nothing says ‘I’m innocent’ like hiring thirty-five lawyers.”

Logsdon emphasized that thirty-five lawyers provide necessary protection against unforeseen legal complications. “If, for example, one of your lawyers goes to prison, you will still have thirty-four,” he said.

Logsdon acknowledged that such legal help does not come cheap. “Legal bills for thirty-five lawyers can be very expensive, unless you’re a person who doesn’t pay his bills,” he said.

## GOOD ON YOU, GUV

In his incoherent State of the Union bluster-and-blather last month, the Orange Idiot attacked New York State’s new law that codifies a woman’s right to an abortion, and even called for repealing *Roe v. Wade*.

Governor Andrew Cuomo, with whom we do not always agree, but who supported and signed the new legislation, smacked back with an OpEd in *The Times* the very next morning, an essay which concluded ...

*Thanks to the nation’s founders, no elected official is empowered to make personal religious beliefs the law of the land. My oath of office is to the Constitutions of the United States and of the State of New York – not to the Catholic Church. My religion cannot demand favoritism as I execute my public duties.*

*Our country is founded on pluralism. The First Amendment defines our most sacred freedoms, including freedom of the press, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. But the first one listed is freedom of religion. We cannot have true freedom of religion without separation of church and state. And the country cannot function if religious officials are dictating policy to elected officials.*

*Only by separating constitutional duties from religious beliefs can we have a country that allows all people the ability to pursue their own theological and moral principles in a nation true to its founding premise of religious freedom.*

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Time to step down

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