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March 2024

HUMANIST Monthly

A Publication of the Capital District Humanist Society
Connecting the Secular Humanist Community of Upstate New York, Western Massachusetts, and Southern Vermont

Sunday, March 10th, 2024

In Person at 12:30 PM and Online at 1:00 PM (DST)

WHAT IS HUMANISTIC JUDAISM?

Most Jews in the United States don't believe in the God of the Bible, yet still consider themselves Jewish. How does this work? We'll talk about the trend in general, then focus on how Humanistic Judaism offers a non-theistic alternative to contemporary branches of Judaism, by defining Judaism as the cultural and historical experience of the Jewish people and removing God and the supernatural from holiday and lifecycle rituals.



Paul Golin

We will also discuss wider implications for secular and humanistic people of all backgrounds, such as acknowledging the familial and cultural pull toward tradition and history; the benefits and pitfalls of ethnic and cultural identity that may continue after secularization; how rituals can enhance life; and what meaning might still be found in religious practices or teachings. Must secular people reject traditional religion wholesale, or might we be throwing the baby out with the bath-water?

Paul Golin is the executive director of the Society for Humanistic Judaism (www.SHJ.org), the community-organizing umbrella of a 60-year-old congregational denomination of American Jewry. He also serves as lead staff for SHJ's pluralistic social justice initiative, Jews for a Secular Democracy, mobilizing Jewish voices to defend the separation of religion and government. Paul is a writer, speaker, advocate, and consultant on issues including secularity, intermarriage, disaffiliation, and inclusion. He co-authored two books and his writing has appeared in the Forward, Jewish Week, Huffington Post, and elsewhere. He is the white Ashkenazi half of a "Jewpanese" (Jewish/Japanese) multiracial household and administers the Jewpanese page on Facebook.

This event is free and open to the public. It will be held at Pinnacle Living at 45 Forts Ferry Road in Latham, New York and via Zoom. Light refreshments will be available before the talk. **Please note that Daylight Savings Time begins the night before.** If you are not a current paid CDHS member, please follow the instructions below to request an email invitation to attend.

ANYONE WHO IS NOT A CURRENT PAID MEMBER of CDHS can attend. Send an email request to: CDHS.Albany@gmail.com. Please send the request several days prior, or you may log onto our Meetup page: <https://www.meetup.com/Capital-District-Humanist-Society/>, then click on JOIN, then click on ATTEND, and use the RSVP function, and the link will be available.

The Capital District Humanist Society provides a supportive community for exchanging ideas, heightening our knowledge of the world and ourselves, fostering moral and ethical growth, and promoting the principles of secular humanism. CDHS is a member organization for people with humanist values. Our values include commitment to free inquiry, rational thought, lifelong education, democracy, social concern, and fellowship.

Capital District Humanist Society, Inc.

Established 1986

Find us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/CapitalDistrictHumanistSociety>



CDHS is affiliated with:

The American Humanist Association (AHA)

Center for Inquiry (CSI)

Humanists International (HI)

The Secular Coalition for America (SCA)

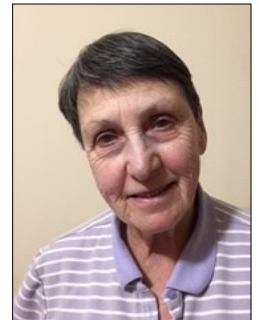
On Sunday, April 14th, 2024, 12:30 PM (In Person) and 1:00 PM (Online)

The Capital District Humanist Society Presents:

End of Life Issues

Perhaps most people would prefer to avoid the topic of death, but it is an inevitable part of life. For some people, having control over death lessens anxiety. The Right to Die Movement dates back about 50 years. This talk will look at the organizations that are active and available today, the documents people should have prepared, and steps people can take so that their wishes are carried out.

Eleanor Aronstein attained both BS and MS degrees in Education, from Russell Sage College. She went on to attain a BA in History from Marist College, and then a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies in Educational Leadership from Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. Her career has included: Coordinator of Education at the Dutchess County Jail, Social Studies and Spanish teacher in the Hyde Park Central School District, Adjunct in History at Marist College, and Supervisor of Student Teachers for SUNY New Paltz, Marist and College of St. Rose.



Eleanor Aronstein

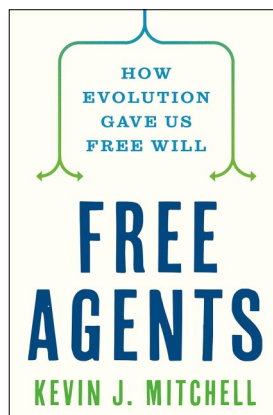
Eleanor's interest in The Right To Die stems from the very painful death of her mother in 1972 and her desire to help people avoid a similar end-of-life scenario. She became very active in Final Exit Network in 2013, giving presentations throughout the Hudson Valley and Upstate area, and considers the work to be a tribute to her mother.

This program will take place both in-person (at 12:30PM) and online (at 1PM), via Zoom. The in-person event will be held at Pinnacle Living at 45 Forts Ferry Road in Latham, NY. It is free and open to the public. Light refreshments will be available at the in-person meeting before the speaker's presentation. Current paid CDHS members will automatically receive an invite to the on-line meeting via email.

This event is free and open to the public. It will be held at Pinnacle Living at 45 Forts Ferry Road in Latham, New York and via Zoom. If you are not a current paid CDHS member, please see page 1 to request an email invitation to attend.

CDHS Book Group is reading *Free Agents - How Evolution Gave Us Free Will* by Kevin J. Mitchell. They meet on the 2nd and 4th Thursdays.

Contact Frank Robinson if you would like to join the spirited and informative discussion.



CDHS Executive Council

Executive Director	Don Porterfield
Acting Secretary	Sue Parry
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Programs, Publicity	Fred Levine
Publications	Frank H. Wind
	& Carol Quantock
Social Activities	Candace Fuller
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Appointed Positions

Hospitality	Sue Parry
Room Arrangements	Frank Robinson
Caring Network	Rosina Ansaldo

RECAP OF OUR FEBRUARY SPEAKER'S TALK

by Frank Robinson

Melanie Trecek-King is an Associate Professor of Biology at Massasoit College, who spoke about "Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds."

She began with a 1954 cult story, the "Seekers," led by one Dorothy Martin, involving Jesus, aliens in flying saucers, and predictions of Earth's imminent destruction on December 21. Believers prepared to be saved, jettisoning all metal, including tooth fillings, which would have interfered with saucer navigation.

Trecek-King focused on what people believe, and why. The meaning of "belief" is actually a tricky question. She defined it simply as "things you think are true", and act upon (whether true or not). Positing two basic sources for beliefs: 1) personal experiences, with the example of feeling better after homeopathic treatment (i.e., no actual treatment, but there's still a placebo effect), and 2) received wisdom, accepting the beliefs of people around us.

Trecek-King noted we are social primates, programmed by evolution to trust in the group. We do tend to trust our tribe-mates, but they're are not necessarily dependable. Placing trust wisely, she said, is incredibly important.

She cited philosopher W.V. Quine who characterized beliefs as forming a web, with "core beliefs" at the center, most closely linked to one's personal identity, influencing the rest, and being hardest to change. We'll hold to a core belief, even if incorrect, if it serves to make everything else make sense.

So again, beliefs are most tenacious if tied to one's sense of identity. Trecek King said that "social death is worse than physical death." If that sounds like hyperbole, she cited the example of people clinging to Covid denialism, even while themselves dying of Covid.

There's also a dichotomy between falsifiable beliefs, capable of being refuted by evidence, and others that cannot be. The latter are subjective beliefs: for example, "abortion is murder", that actually tend to be the ones held most strongly. And for those we make excuses, to fend off any seeming contrary evidence.

Confirmation bias is, more generally, the embrace of information supporting pre-existing beliefs, while dismissing discordant information. Smarter people are actually more prone to this, being better at coming up with rationales for rejecting the latter.

Trecek-King invoked psychologist Jonathan Haidt's metaphor of the elephant and rider. The elephant is one's unconscious, and is much bigger and more powerful, yet the rider, one's conscious self, thinks they're directing it. Mostly the rider is just coming up with justifications for the elephant's choices.

But overconfidence is the real enemy. There was discussion of the Dunning-Kruger effect: limited competence tends to make people overestimate their abilities, or their dumbness makes them think they're smart.

Her "take home" message was: train your elephant. Be caring, skeptical, humble. She also suggested an exercise, applied to some belief you hold. How sure are you it's true? Why? How would you feel if you're wrong? What evidence would change your mind?

But in today's America we have a problem of people inhabiting different realities, with indeed different understandings of how reality works.

Returning to the story of the "Seekers," when December 21 arrived, nothing happened. At first this threw them for a loop. But then Dorothy said she'd received a message: in fact, it was their steadfastness that saved the world from its otherwise certain doom. So they sallied forth with redoubled faith in their crazy belief system.

A recording of this talk can be found on the CDHS YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.be/nxhQbpm5_n8

Join the bunch for lunch at the Blue Ribbon Family Restaurant, 1801 State St., Schenectady, NY 12304. We gather at 11:30 on the 3rd Thursday of every month. Our next get-togethers will be on March 21st and April 18th. Please let Judith Herbert know by Wednesday evening if you'll be joining them.

March Social: Schoharie Valley Railroad Museum

All aboard the Schoharie Valley Railroad museum on Saturday, March 30, 2024. We will meet at 11:30 at the Apple Barrel Cafe (<https://shopapplebarrel.com>) and proceed to the museum between 1 and 1:30. Their extensive menu is online. The tour will last about an hour.

Schoharie Valley Railroad Complex is a national historic district located at Schoharie in Schoharie County, New York. The district includes five contributing buildings and four contributing structures. The complex of buildings were built about 1875 by the Schoharie Valley Railroad. They include the passenger station, freight/locomotive house, office, old mill building, storage facility, and four coal silos. The four mile railroad was abandoned in 1942.



Tickets are free by emailing Dee Fuller at candacelf13@gmail.com as soon as you are ready to make the commitment. Individual donations are gratefully accepted. Dress warmly, it could still be chilly.

February 24, 2024 Social: Paths to Humanism

A total of seventeen CDHS members were present at the annual "Paths to Humanism" discussion, hosted this year by Frank and Dee Wind. Three of our newest members shared their stories about how and why they became Humanists. Each member's talk was followed by engrossing question and answer periods and follow-up debates. We wish to thank Linda, Mary, and Jeremy for their willingness to share details of their pre-humanist lives.



From Frank Wind: *I sent the following letter to the Times Union 10 years ago, to speak my mind, and publicize the upcoming CDHS meeting on May 11, 2014. Have the issues addressed back in 2014 been tempered or have they increased?*

Quest for Common Ground

Over the past 26 years since its founding, members of the Capital District Humanist Society have identified themselves by a variety of terms, including freethinkers, agnostics, skeptics and atheists. Most identify themselves as secular humanists.

So, what is secular humanism doing here, on a page traditionally devoted to discussions of religion?

This is precisely what we want - to enter into a dialogue with those who find comfort and direction in religious affiliation. We'd like a place at the table to discuss the key issues that face our world and separate us.

Faith and Values is the name of this page. We have faith in ourselves and in the intrinsic goodness of humankind and we believe that we have values, rooted in a strong moral code that comes from within.

We have a passion for free inquiry, rational thought, life-long education, democracy, social concern and fellowship. When we serve others, we do so because it is the right thing to do, and doing so gives us pleasure. We hope for no other reward.

Secular humanists emphasize scientific methods of knowledge of knowing. We fervently argue for the separation of church and state. We decry the attempts by those who present the United States as a Christian nation grounded in the Bible. We see the Founding Fathers' interest in creating a non-theocratic nation based upon moral precepts. Granted, many of these precepts can be found in the Bible, but these humanist ideals can be traced back to at least the sixth century B.C.E. in Greece.

At the time when our voices are increasing in the public square, confrontations between theists and nontheists are on the rise. Religious and humanist/secular organizations have been waging a pitched battle (and for one side, souls), using as their peaceful weapons of choice bumper stickers, bus wraps and billboards. To many secular humanists, religious groups are increasingly aggressive in their attempts to imbue all society with an enhanced, decidedly Christian, flavor.

Is the chasm between atheists and theists growing wider? Can atheists and theists identify shared values and build partnerships for the common good, or are our disagreements too vast?

Christian Nationalist thwarted in attempt to block funds for public libraries

(from friendlyatheist@substack.com, February 14, 2024)

The newest member of the Arkansas State Library Board tried to punish libraries by invoking a recently passed obscenity law.

Jason Rapert, a Christian Nationalist who has served in various levels of power in Arkansas, recently attempted to block state funds from going to three large library systems. Thankfully, he was outnumbered by his more sensible colleagues. As a state senator in Arkansas for 12 years, he helped push through ultra-conservative legislation. He also (infamously) installed a Ten Commandments monument outside the Capitol in 2017—inspiring legal challenges that continue to this day.

Since then, Rapert has spent most of his time running a group called the “National Association of Christian Lawmakers,” bringing together fellow theocrats to promote fictional histories about the supposed faith-based founding of our country and encourage them to file pro-Christian legislation in their respective states, but late last year, he returned to the political arena.

In November, Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders appointed Rapert to the Arkansas State Library Board, a relatively unknown group that controls some of the funding that goes to libraries across the state. One of his first acts was to propose blocking funding for three giant library systems that sued the state last year after legislators passed what amounted to an obscenity law.

Act 372 of 2023 was passed to keep harmful content out of the hands of children... though, importantly, what counted as harmful was never properly defined. It also punished librarians who allowed kids to check out those books, but critics rightly argued this amounted to censorship and a judge prevented the law from going into effect. A trial is set to begin later this year. Still, Rapert argued that three of the 18 plaintiffs in the case—the Central Arkansas Library System (CALS), the Fayetteville Public Library, and the Eureka Springs Public Library—should be barred from receiving any public dollars until the case is resolved.

Rapert got no support for his motion, so it quickly died. Eventually, the board unanimously approved giving the state funds to all eligible libraries. That included over \$200,000 to the library systems in question.

While that is extremely good news since libraries provide all kinds of important services for communities, and withholding any funding amounts to punishing the people who use those services the most, Rapert isn't about to stop here. He's hell-bent on making sure kids can't access books that discuss sex, LGBTQ topics, or mature topics. The way the Arkansas law is written, though, the way for librarians to avoid punishment would likely be to remove those books from the reach of adults, too.

Rapert claimed the books he finds objectionable are “targeting” and “lying” to children: ***“We have people that say, ‘We don’t know whether we’re little girls or little boys.’ That’s a lie,”*** he said. ***“We have people that say it’s okay to have books about rape and explicit sex in front of young children. That’s a lie.”***¹

If Rapert wants to prevent kids from reading books that include depictions of rape and sex, then he should start with the Bible and vow to go after every pastor in the state. But of course, he won't, because his religion always gets an exception. It's everyone else who has to suffer because he's too immature to handle tough topics.

¹ ***Direct quote from Jason Rapert***

INTERESTED IN SOCIAL ACTION? APPLY HERE!

(contributed by Sherry Levine)



We've had individuals inquiring regarding group participation in social action in our community. Many members have been participating in activities like this on their own, but a group activity would be a lovely way to continue cohesiveness in membership and get that "Feel Good" warm fuzzy feeling. We are looking for ideas/venues and specific dates and locations for these activities. In the past, we've worked packing weekend meals for children with food insecurity, worked at food pantries, helped at the AMC fund drive, and tutored.

Can we do a roadside clean up? Pick apples for pantries? Concern for the Hungry-- packing Thanksgiving baskets? Prepare meals at Ronald McDonald House for families with critically ill children in AMC? At this time we have some ideas, and welcome more input! If you can organize even one event, you will be keeping with Humanist values and make our land a bit better while we are here. There are others with whom you can work. Contact Sherry Levine or anyone else on the Executive Committee (see directory for email addresses).

Richard Dawkins' Inspiring Presentation on Youtube

Science, the Poetry of Reality, Jewel in Humanity's Crown can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ubsmu2jN-4E>. This is must-see video!



Science, the Poetry of Reality, Jewel in Humanity's Crown | Richard Dawkins

Food for Thought



Seen on a car in the Capital District area

Rep. Eric Morrison (D-Delaware House of Representatives) Interviewed in the Fall 2023 Issue of *The Humanist*



Rep. Eric Morrison

The following is an excerpt from an interview with Representative Morrison by Sarah Levin in the Fall 2023 issue of *the humanist*:

LEVIN: What are your policy priorities and how does your nonreligious worldview impact your policy platform?

MORRISON: I support public policy that is people centered and also empowers and lifts up marginalized groups and individuals. It frightens me how much of a say that corporations, the wealthy, and the powerful have in our government, our laws, and our political system overall. I believe that my nonreligious worldview makes me a better legislator. In everything I do, I practice critical thinking without relying on a religious text or prayer to inform me regarding the right thing to do. I also rely on reputable studies, statistics, and professionals. And of course, I listen to my constituents.

The Worst House Chaplain Ever, Plus History

(from the Secular Coalition for America's *Heretic on the Hill*, submitted by Olga Porterfield, February 16, 2024)

Last Monday, February 19th, was the Presidents Day holiday when we observed the birthday of George Washington on February 22nd and of Abraham Lincoln on February 12th. Like many of the Founders, Washington's real views on religion are difficult to determine because he wrote very little about them. He encouraged people to go to church but sometimes failed to do so himself for weeks. He was a church official but often left before communion. Jefferson wrote that "...it was observed that he had never, on any occasion, said a word to the public which showed a belief in the Christian religion."

Washington did write about choosing workmen for Mount Vernon in 1784, suggesting they could be "Mahometans, Jews, or Christians of any Sect, or they may be Atheists"—as long as they were good workers. And he clearly opposed the idea of a state religion which he grew up under as a Virginia resident under British rule.

Lincoln really sounded like an atheist early in life but later, through political expediency or because of a real conversion, sounded a lot like a Christian. More than one person who knew him in his twenties said that Lincoln could shock people by saying that the Bible was just an ordinary book, or that Jesus was an illegitimate child. There is a story that he wrote an essay about his true beliefs but a friend burned it out of concern for his budding political career. In 1843 Lincoln wrote, "It was everywhere contended that no Christian ought to vote for me because I belonged to no Church, and was suspected of being a Deist." So happy birthday to George and Abe, whatever you did or didn't believe in.

A little more history, although this time I'm going somewhere with it: There has been a House and Senate Chaplain since 1789 and they open each day with a prayer. Which seems odd for a government founded on separation of church and state. Shocker: the chaplains have always been Christian, although there have been many guest chaplains of different religions. James Madison opposed the idea because it violated the First Amendment and because the practice discriminated against religions such as the Quakers and Catholics whom he said "could scarcely be elected to the office."

The guest chaplain on January 30 was Pastor Jack Hibbs, who has been described as a Christian Nationalist involved in the January 6th insurrection, with a long history of hatred toward Jews, Muslims, LGBTQ+ individuals, and anyone inconsistent with his "biblical worldview." He was described that way in a letter from 26 House members to Speaker Mike Johnson and the House Chaplain who both made Hibbs' appearance possible. Congressman Jared Huffman (D-CA) took the lead on the letter. We made a few suggestions at his request.

Here's one good paragraph: "These facts suggest a breathtaking lack of consideration for the religious diversity of our Congress and pluralistic nation. It appears that Speaker Johnson – with the tacit approval of the House Chaplain – decided to flout the Chaplaincy guidelines and use the platform of the Guest Chaplain to lend the imprimatur of Congress to an ill-qualified hate preacher who shares the Speaker's Christian Nationalist agenda and his antipathy toward church-state separation." You can read the letter here (https://secular.org/?mc_cid=deaecf826a&mc_eid=6a420c267a&mc_cid=1165699abb&mc_eid=6a420c267a).

I doubt there will be a reply from Johnson but if there is I'll let you know. We will keep after Johnson's support for church services in the Capitol, Christian nationalist chaplains, and the completely unnecessary and inappropriate tradition of Congressional chaplains. Traditions die hard but it can happen. The Congressional Prayer Breakfast is a shell of what it once was.

Your advocate,
Scott MacConomy
Director of Policy and Government Affairs
Secular Coalition for America

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(518) 533-2666 E-mail us at cdhs.albany@gmail.com
Visit us on the web at humanistsociety.net

The Capital District Humanist Society (CDHS) is an independent, non-profit (and non-prophet), non-partisan and strictly non-religious educational and social organization for those who share humanist values: commitment to education, rational and free inquiry, democracy, social concerns and fellowship. CDHS is affiliated with the four major humanist organizations - the American Humanist Association (AHA), the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH), the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) and the Humanists International (HI).

There are five types of CDHS member support: Individual, \$50/yr.; Family, \$80/yr.; Sustaining, \$100/yr.; Patron, \$150/yr.; and Lifetime Member, one contribution of \$1000 or more.

Members receive our publication, *The Humanist Monthly*, and vote by mail each September on the make-up of the governing Executive Council. Members are eligible for election to the Executive Council and may also serve as appointed officials. Members are welcome to attend Executive Council meetings.

The IRS recognizes CDHS as a tax-exempt organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Therefore, all donations, both cash and materials with established "fair market value", qualify as charitable contributions for income tax purposes.

Donations are gratefully accepted to help speed our growth. CDHS is a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization under the IRS Code. Financial disclosure information and our annual report are available upon request.

If you know of someone who may be interested in CDHS, please pass this newsletter along or give us the name; we will send a sample copy or two with no obligation.

We value your input. In the best humanist tradition, CDHS has no rigid picture of itself. We ask you to join us, not follow us. What activities and services would you like CDHS to provide its members? Send us your suggestions, questions, and comments.



CDHS

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MEMBER SUPPORT FORM

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Address _____

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Email _____ Fax _____

How did you hear about the Humanist Society? _____

All this information will be included in our Directory, which is distributed to members only, unless you request otherwise by checking and signing here: ☐ I do not want to be listed in the CDHS Member Directory _____

Levels of Member Support

Annual Payment **Date** ____/____/____

- | | | |
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☐ Please send me additional information