

Newsletter of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

The Separationist

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September 2003

“Why We Don’t Believe”

Reginald Vaughn Finley Sr. (The Infidel Guy)

4:00PM September 21, 2003

Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston

“Why We Don’t Believe” will be the title of Reginald Vaughn Finley’s talk at the SHL meeting on Sunday, September 21, 2003 at 4 p.m. As usual, the meeting will be open to the public and take place at Gage Hall, next to the Unitarian Church, at 4 Archdale St. in downtown Charleston.

Reginald Vaughn Finley, Sr., better known to his listeners as *The Infidel Guy*, says his talk will be “a simple look at common sense reasons why many people don’t believe in God”. Mr. Finley is a 29 year old native Atlantan who describes himself as an “agnostic atheist” and is best known for his Freethought internet webcast (read: “online radio program”) broadcast from www.infidelguy.com. That

website, along with The Atheist Network (www.atheistnetwork.com) which Finley co-founded receive over 300,000 visitors each week.

Mr. Finley is living proof that there *are* atheists in foxholes, having served on many overseas missions for the US army. He even worked as a psychic for The Psychic Network (and has since published articles and appeared on syndicated radio shows discussing his experiences and debunking the notion of psychic phenomena). These and other interesting twists are likely to come up during this lecture from a public speaker whose motto is: “Hard hitting discussion that changes minds.”



New Editors

Sharon Strong and Sharon Fratepietro served as the editors of *The Separationist* for the past two years. They did a fantastic job and we are all truly sorry to see them go. However, starting with this issue, Alex and Laura Kasman will take over as the new editors and Warren McCarl will take over the responsibilities of copying and distributing the newsletter. As a result there will be some changes. For instance, you may have noticed that the look has changed. An even more important

change that you should notice is that now we have co-editors who have the same *last name* as each other rather than having the same first name. But, one thing that hasn’t changed is that we want to continue providing SHL members with useful and interesting information. Please do send articles, letters, announcements and any other material related to the goals of the SHL, as well as any comments that you might have about this newsletter to us at kasmansc@juno.com.

“The Roman Origins of Christianity”

Book Review by Alex Kasman



Late last Spring a free copy of “The Roman Origin of Christianity” by Joseph Atwill was mailed to me by the author since my name was listed on the SHL Website. This self-published book argues that the Christian religion was entirely created by the Roman Emperors Titus and Domitian. In fact, Atwill presents some interesting quotes from actual Roman political figures demonstrating that the Senators considered religion to be a useful tool for manipulating and controlling the Roman citizens – foreshadowing the Karl Marx quote that religion “is the opium of the people”. Of course, in those quotes the Senators are referring to the polytheistic Roman religion, but Atwill points out that the Christian religion might even be *better* from the despotic politician’s point of view.

I am certain that many Christians today would be offended by the suggestion that Jesus is just the creation of Roman aristocrats, and reject it out of hand. However, as a skeptic, I was curious to see whether the author had any real evidence to back up this claims. Moreover, I must admit that I have wondered myself about the origins of Christianity which cannot really seem to trace itself back any farther than the writings of Paul in any reliable historical sense.

The Jewish Historian, Josephus, is often cited by Christian apologists as his books are the only early non-Christian writings to mention the existence of a religious leader “Jesus Christ”. Other academic analyses of the writings of Josephus have concluded that these passages that describe Jesus are later additions. (Their evidence is that early Christian writers also refer to Josephus, but never to the passages that explicitly discuss Jesus, and that the passages involving Jesus really do not fit in with the surrounding text either contextually or stylistically.) However, Atwill suggests another explanation for the appearance of Jesus in the writings of Josephus. It is a historical fact that Josephus was a close associate (“adopted son”...a relatively common relationship in ancient Rome) of Titus Flavius. So, as Atwill describes it, Josephus’s writings were just part of

the conspiracy.

Another piece of the puzzle that seems to fit well with Atwill’s thesis is the location and power of the Church in Rome. One of the first popes, Pope Clement, is sometimes described – even in Christian writings – as being a follower of Titus Flavius. In fact, a “conspiracy theory” such as Atwill’s would go a long way to explaining how the followers of Jesus Christ – according to their own stories, a leaderless and loose group of anti-authoritarians spread across Europe and the Middle East – came so quickly to be controlled by a hierarchical political structure based in Rome.

These two things are, perhaps, the strongest pieces of evidence the book is able to present. Unfortunately, the *rest* of its “evidence” is so weak, that it not only fails to help the author make his point, it makes his thesis less and less convincing with each page.

For instance, he will alternately claim that the Roman authors of the New Testament were trying to hide their intent, and that they are leaving obvious clues (often in the form of subtle jokes) to allow people to figure it out. Moreover, his explanation of why the different books of the New Testament give such radically different descriptions of the events occurring on the day of the crucifixion are so *contrived* that even the explanations of fundamentalists come out sounding more reasonable. And, his supposed “mathematical proof” on page 117 that there is a probability of only one in 254, 803, 968 that his interpretation is incorrect is no more valid than a similar “proof” I read years ago demonstrating that Mikhail Gorbachev is the anti-Christ.

This book certainly gives the reader food for thought. However, it does such a poor job of supporting its own thesis that I would hesitate to recommend it to anyone. Still, if any members of the SHL are interested in reading it I would be happy to loan them the copy we received. Alternatively, you can purchase the book or download the first few chapters at <http://www.joeatwill.com>.

You Glow, Girl

by Henry J. Czekalinski

Am I missing something here?

The god who supposedly created the universe, almost infinite in size and filled with countless wonders of staggering proportions, is reduced in our day to performing second-rate parlor tricks that would make even the great pretender himself, P.T. Barnum, blush with shame—or perhaps, envy.

I am referring to the recent “miracle” of the glowing Virgin (*The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, August 14, 2003) on the bell tower of St. Joseph the Provider Catholic church in Campbell, Ohio – not exactly the center of that universe.

Like the guy who used to paint Mail Pouch Tobacco signs on the sides of barns 50 years ago, today god peddles his wares with suddenly-appearing images on the sides of ramshackle buildings, water towers, trees, grain elevators, silos and churches – usually in places like Campbell, Ohio – not exactly the world headquarters of Phi, Beta, Kappa either.

Quite a comedown from the biblical days of pillars of flame, inexhaustible loaves and fishes, talking bushes and parting waters. But then with donations down, perhaps god can't afford the really showy stuff anymore.

“Don't close your mind to the possibilities.”

the Reverend Thomas Thompson, director of the Marion Library at the University of Dayton, says about this “mysterious illumination.” “It's a tribute to [people's] beliefs,” he adds supportively – a not unexpected ballyhoo from someone who lives off the handouts of the gull. . . , er, faithful. (To be fair, the reverend does caution against naiveté and gullibility, but he doesn't suggest canceling the bus trip to Campbell, Ohio, either; not exactly what I would call a stirring appeal to reason.)

And speaking of gulls, some pilgrims have also noticed stains underneath a nearby statue of Jesus, sparking speculation among the gathering throng that it may be blood – yet another sign from the cut-rate cosmic Karnac – while a flock of pigeons circles unnoticed overhead.

Like the thousands who are themselves flocking to St. Joseph's church, this wonder has me convinced. From now on as I travel the gravel lanes of rural Ohio, I promise to scan intently every chicken coop, corn crib, outhouse and barn for any hint of the glowing, dripping, weeping, or oozing signature of the deity, peering at me ever so faintly from the weathered boards. “There it is,” I'll say to the believers gathered about me. Right there. Across the bottom of that barn. A sign! A sign!”

TRE T YO RSELF TO TH BEST



Note: Henry J. Czekalinski is an atheist in Ohio who learned about the SHL after the Charleston City Council's recent snub of Herb Silverman. Since then he has become a contributor to our Website and now to our newsletter as well!

World Peace March at Marion Square

The SHL is co-sponsoring a “March for World Peace” to be held on Saturday September 13 in Marion Square. There will be some speakers in Marion Square beginning at 2:00PM followed at 2:40 by a walk down King Street to Broad Street. In an e-mail message, a representative of ThinkingPeople of Charleston (the organizers of the event) said “As of today we have Brett Bursey speaking, Bradford Station and Shosha Capps performing. They are just the beginning.”

Herb Debates on "Evolution and Morality"

Does accepting the concept of the evolution of species have significant moral implications? Jack Hoey (Seacoast Church) and our own Herb Silverman will be engaged in a public debate with the title "Evolution v. Creationism: Secular v. Religious Morality" on Wednesday September 24 at 7:00PM. The debate will be held on the campus of the College of Charleston in the Physician's Auditorium located just off of George Street between St. Philip and Coming Streets.

Who do you trust?

According to a July 24th article in the Post and Courier, "The 'In God We Trust' automobile license tag is far and away the most popular special tag in the state, selling almost nine times as many as the second-best seller."

An SHL "Drive With Reason" Committee, headed by Bill Dusenberry, is developing a plan to permit the citizens of SC to purchase an "In Reason We Trust" licence plate. According to the P&C article, one must guarantee in advance that 400 tags will be sold (or put down a deposit of \$4,000). We will coordinate with groups in other parts of the state through the South Carolina Secular Coalition.

We will keep you informed as these plans progress. Please contact Bill (bishopbill@comcast.net) with any thoughts or to express your interest in purchasing one of these new, unlikely-to-become-best-selling, automobile tags.



Joke: The Wailing Wall

A journalist assigned to the Jerusalem bureau takes an apartment overlooking the Wailing Wall. Every day when she looks out, she sees an old Jewish man praying vigorously.

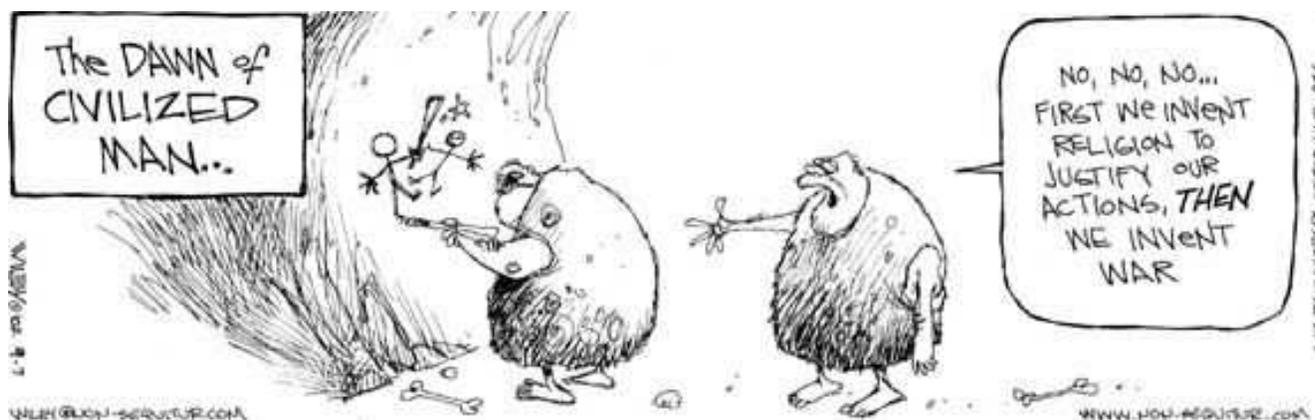
One day she asks him "You come every day to the wall. How long have you done that and what are you praying for?"

The old man replies, "I have come here to pray every day for 25 years. In the morning I pray for

world peace and then for the brotherhood of man. I go home have a cup of tea and I come back and pray for the eradication of illness and disease from the earth."

The journalist is amazed. "How does it make you feel to come here every day for 25 years and pray for these things?" she asks.

The old man looks at her sadly. "Like I'm talking to a wall."



Book Discussion Group by Sharon Strong

On Sunday, September 28, the Humanist Book Discussion Group will recommence its regular monthly meetings following the summer hiatus. Continuing on the same schedule as last year, our meetings will take place on the fourth Sunday of the month in the Barnes and Noble bookstore at 1812 Sam Rittenberg Blvd., 3:00-5:00 p.m. At our next meeting, Bill Upshur will be leading a discussion of the book *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* by Louis Menand. This book is a sort of "quadruple biography" of four men (Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Dewey) who developed a distinctive philosophy

of pragmatism following the Civil War and helped shape the American world of ideas in the 20th century and beyond. Looking ahead, on October 26 we will be discussing *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* edited by Kimberly Blaker. Each of the chapters (including one titled "Inerrancy Turned Political" by our fearless leader Herb Silverman) explores a different facet of the fundamentalist mindset of the religious right and details some of their attacks on American civil liberties. All our books are available at the West Ashley Barnes and Noble. Everyone is welcome, even if you haven't had a chance to read the book!

News Briefs

Pledge Update: The June 2002 ruling by a three judge panel of the ninth circuit Court of Appeals declaring the phrase "Under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance to be unconstitutional was quietly upheld by the greater court in February 2003. It was however modified to apply only to public school settings. Both parties are now requesting to be heard by the U.S. Supreme Court. Meanwhile, the Texas state legislature passed a bill this spring requiring students to pledge allegiance to the Texas flag as well as the U.S. flag, and all 50 state attorneys general have asked the Supreme Court to review the ruling.

Citadel prayers before meals go silent: The administration of the Citadel has voluntarily decided to replace the longstanding thrice daily prayers before meals with a moment of silence following a federal appeals court decision that similar prayers at VMI are unconstitutional. As with the past court battles allowing women to attend, both schools could have maintained their all male student body and their prayers if they gave up public funding.

Alabama Commandments Monument Update: The U.S. supreme court refused to overrule a November 2002 decision of a U.S. District court requiring the removal of a Ten Commandments monument from the rotunda of the Alabama State judicial building. Alabama supreme court justice Roy Moore, who placed the monument there two years ago defied the court ordered removal deadline of August 20, and was suspended without pay by a judicial ethics panel. Moore supporters have staged sit-ins and publicly burned six supreme court decisions including Roe v. Wade, and the recent Texas sodomy decision in protest. On August 27th, the monument was moved to a location accessible only by employees of the court and not to the general public.



**THE SEPARATIONIST
Newsletter of the
Secular Humanists
of the Lowcountry**

Editors:
Alex and Laura Kasman
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SHL Calendar

Saturday, September 13: World Peace March starting in Marion Square (Calhoun and King Street) at 2:00PM.

Sunday, September 21: Reginald Finley's talk "Why We Don't Believe" at the monthly SHL meeting, is open to the public and takes place at Gage Hall at 4:00PM.

Wednesday, September 24: Herb Silverman and Jack Hoey debate on the topics of evolution and morality at the College of Charleston's Physician's Auditorium, 7:00PM.

Sunday, September 28: Humanist Book Discussion Group, Barnes & Noble, 1812 Sam Rittenberg Blvd. (West Ashley), 3-5:00PM.

October 10-12: Freedom From Religion Foundation Annual Convention. Washington, D.C. For more information go to www.ffrf.org

JOIN THE SHL

The Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry (SHL) is a group of freethinkers who believe in the humanist philosophy. Members come primarily from the Charleston, SC area. The SHL is affiliated with American Atheists, the American Humanist Association, the Atheist Alliance, and the Council for Secular Humanism.

Annual tax-exempt membership fees are \$24 (individual) or \$36 (couple or family); additional donations are always welcome. Members receive this newsletter and can participate in activities planned for the Lowcountry. Contact the Editors for further information.

CONTRIBUTE...

Please contact the editors with any questions or comments about this publication. Contributions of short articles, news items, letters-to-the-editor or other information of interest to SHL members are always appreciated. (Note the mailing address, e-mail address, and Website listed elsewhere on this page.)

On the Web at [HTTP://WWW.ATHEISTALLIANCE.ORG/LOWCOUNTRY](http://WWW.ATHEISTALLIANCE.ORG/LOWCOUNTRY)

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