

Newsletter of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

# The Separationist

Visit us at <http://www.atheistalliance.org/lowcountry>

November 2003

## An Open Discussion on Controversial Topics of Interest Led by Dave Brown and Roger Prevost

4:00PM November 16, 2003  
Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston

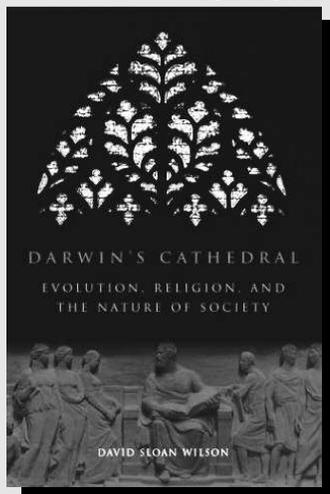
For our November meeting, expect something different. Rather than the usual lecture followed by a short discussion, SHL members Dave Brown and Roger Prevost will moderate a discussion of a variety of topics of interest to the group.

Roger says "Several years ago, the SHL co-sponsored Peter Singer to speak at the College of Charleston about infanticide for the severely disabled and other life and death issues. Afterwards, a group of about fifteen members went to Gage Hall for an informal roundtable discussion of this

*very controversial subject. It was one of my favorite meetings. I realized that most of our members can agree on many things such as the statement of principles of humanism found in Free Inquiry magazine. At the same time, there are many social and moral issues upon which we humanists cannot agree. To me, this is where the fun is. At our next meeting, Dave Brown and I will facilitate a discussion of three or four topics that we feel will be of interest to our group. We anticipate a lively and spirited discourse that we hope will be entertaining and educational for all."*

## Humanist Book Discussion Group

by Sharon Strong



The November meeting of the Humanist Book Discussion Group will take place on Sunday the 23rd, 3:00 - 5:00 p.m. at the Barnes and Noble bookstore in West Ashley, at 1812 Sam Rittenberg Blvd. The book we'll be focusing on will be *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* by David Sloan Wilson. The author takes a look at religion from an evolutionary perspective and argues for the adaptive value of religion in the survival of human groups.

## Letters to Editors from SHL Members

### Sent to The Post and Courier

In a letter to the editor (P&C 9/25/03), M.K. Flood claims that public schools in America are under control of one religion: Secular Humanism. This seems to be a common misconception among fundamentalist Christians based on the facts that public schools teach science and that Secular Humanists believe in science. However, there is a fallacy in this logic.

Consider, for example, what would happen if there was a religion that happened to hold as one of its tenets that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . Would we then be forbidden from teaching this fact in public schools or required to teach about alternatives merely because it was part of someone's religion? No, we would say "Well, it may be in agreement with their religion, but it also happens to be a generally accepted fact that is important for our children to learn." In the same way, the fact that public schools teach science does not mean that schools are teaching Secular Humanism or under the control of atheists. Note that many people who are not Secular Humanists also believe in science, including many Christians. Nor does the fact that Secular Humanism praises science make science into a religion any more than the biblical quote "Give unto Caesar what Caesar's..." makes belief in Julius Caesar a religious belief.

Christians have long told stories of their persecution, but the notion that they are persecuted in America -- a democracy in which the vast majority of people are Christian -- is ridiculous. It persists only because of a lack of appreciation for what it means to protect the religious freedom of non-Christian Americans.

Ironically, Flood's letter includes a quote from Thomas Jefferson, a

non-Christian who is given credit for coining the phrase "wall of separation between church and state." I would like to quote from his good friend, James Madison, who argued against Presidents calling for Americans to pray, saying it would "imply and nourish the erroneous idea of a national religion." In contrast to Flood's implication, this is *not* a statement of intolerance; Madison did not call for a law forbidding people to pray. He merely saw that freedom of religion requires us to keep it separate from government. When a bill was proposed that would give tax dollars to Christian teachers, Madison said: "What a melancholy mark is the Bill of sudden degeneracy?... It degrades from the equal rank of Citizens all those whose opinions in Religion do not bend to those of the Legislative authority. Distant as it may be in its present form from the Inquisition, it differs from it only in degree. The one is the first step, the other the last in the career of intolerance."

*Alex Kasman*

### Sent to The Post and Courier

William Murchison, columnist for the Creators Syndicate, in his column, titled *Anglicans suffer under the tyranny of 'the tolerant'*, which appeared in your paper today 10/16/03, stated that Kendall Harmon, conservative Anglican (read that Biblical Literalist) claimed that "We have gone from 'sinners in the hands of an Angry God' to clients in the palm of a satisfied therapist." People have to find some intelligent understanding and caring from somewhere. It is difficult to get it from the oriental despot God pictured in the Hebrew Bible or

in the Hell threats of the Christian Bible. Murchison asked "How much tolerance, nonetheless, can one church stand?" If you look over the different Christian religious organizations, the question should be "How much intolerance can the modern Christian Churches stand?" The answer seems to be that intolerance is one of their main impulses and they can stand 'quite a lot of it.' They have improved, however, and they have held off on stoning people that act differently, that hold different views, and you don't often encounter Christians that physically attack others for wearing clothes woven with different yarn, eating shell fish, or activities that are held to be an abomination to the supernatural. What the Literalist Biblical thinkers need to understand is that the world of certainty is a myth and is unreal. People only act under certain conditions and these conditions are always changing. Our understanding of what is involved in the human situation has vastly improved over the past two to three thousand years. The causes of homosexuality and the effect it has on society are better understood today. The way that we can live the most moral lives is to educate ourselves to a twenty-first century understanding of life and the world, examine the consequences of our actions on other people and other values that we have, and to act in accord with the most intelligent expectations for ourselves and society in the long run. Bigoted hatred of people that we do not understand has damaging consequences to our society. We need to learn from the tolerant Episcopalians.

*Bill Upshur*

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## A General Whose Commands Come from a Higher Source A Separationist Editorial

There are, unfortunately, probably quite a few Americans who view the world the way that Jerry Boykin does. Boykin says that America is a "Christian Nation". He believes that G.W. Bush was not *elected*, but "was appointed by God." And, most significantly, Boykin believes that the U.S. Army is fighting for (and with the help of) the one true God against the evil forces of Satan. This last one is the most important because, unlike the other Americans who agree with him, Lt. General Boykin is the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence.

Since the LA Times broke the story in October, many other news outlets have been discussing General Boykin and his religious views. The main question they consider is this: What message are we sending to the Moslem people of this world? Many Moslems who are unconnected to any terrorist activity are worried about US policy. They have not been convinced by the claims of the Bush administration that his "War on Terror" is not actually a war on them and their religion. It certainly seems that their fears are well-founded when this important position in the Pentagon is given to a man who has been quoted as saying that our "spiritual enemy will only be defeated if we come against them in the name of Jesus."

A recent report issued by a White House advisory committee suggests that we undertake "a major struggle to expand the zone of tolerance and marginalize extremists." We agree with the conclusion of the Los Angeles Times that "appointing Jerry Boykin, with his visions of holy war in the Islamic world, to a top position in the United States military is no way to marginalize extremism." However, there are other important issues here which are receiving little or no attention.

The general and his defenders have argued that in America, he is entitled both to freedom of speech and freedom of religion. So, what could be wrong with what he did? However, it is possible that someone's religious beliefs could be indicative of their qualifications to hold a certain job. Here's a hypothetical situation: suppose there is a person whose religion says that when someone gets sick, it is because God wants them

to die. Can this person believe this and discuss these beliefs in America? We certainly hope so. Would we let this person work as a doctor in our local hospital? I hope not!

Let us apply the same reasoning in the very real case of General Boykin. Boykin believes that an all-powerful deity (who, for some unknown reason, decides not to just solve the problem by himself) is going to ensure a military victory for the US. Can such a man properly judge the risks and benefits of the missions on which he will be sending his soldiers? As evidence that the people he was fighting in Somalia were really *evil*, Boykin presents a photograph that he took of the city of Mogadishu from a helicopter which contains an "inexplicable" dark spot. Can a man with such a loose grasp on reality and logic be trusted to decide who are our enemies?

Furthermore, we ask whether it is even appropriate for any officer in the US military to hold the viewpoint that ours is (as Boykin bluntly puts it) a "Christian army". Certainly, there are members of the army who are not Christian (including, but not limited to, Jews, Moslems, atheists, and Buddhists). Is it appropriate for him to marginalize these soldiers for their religious views? It would seem that such behavior should be punished. However, in this case it is not simply tolerated but apparently *rewarded!* Given that he has said these things, how can American soldiers who are not Christian trust that in following General Boykin's commands, they are risking their lives for their country, and not for *his* religion?

Since these statements have been made public, General Boykin has apologized for making them. He has claimed that they do not mean what they sound like they mean. (For instance, he was quoted as saying that he knew he would beat a Moslem warlord in Somalia because he knew his own god was bigger than the warlord's god. Boykin now explains that he was referring not to the warlord's worship of Allah, but to his worship of power and money. Yeah, right!) As we see it, these apologies and explanations do not change the fact that the general's stated beliefs indicate his inability to properly serve in a position of authority in the US military.

## And Another Highly Placed General...

*Speaking* of Generals who make questionable public statements, Secretary of State Colin Powell, speaking on the Charlie Rose Show in September, revealed his own beliefs regarding the separation of church and state in America. Even though he noticed his “slip” and attempted to correct it, his attempted correction is equally “interesting”. For the record, here is the complete statement as quoted from the transcript of the show:

“Every country in that region would be better served by an Iraq that is firmly democratic, is not interested in invading its neighbors, not interested in weapons of mass destruction, has a representative form of government, *is an Islamic country by faith, just as we are, you know, a Judeo-Christian and – it’s hard to tell any more, but we are a faith – a country of many faiths now – and that is living in peace with its neighbors.*”

## Meet-up with Atheists via the Internet

A new Website provides a mechanism for strangers with common interests to get together in cities around the country (and elsewhere as well). Groups can be formed to discuss politics, entertainment, etc. Bill Schultz from Internet Infidels has written to suggest that some members of the SHL make use of

[atheists.meetup.com](http://atheists.meetup.com) to make contact with atheists in the Lowcountry. The meetings of the atheist group are held at 7PM on the third Tuesday of the month. All that’s needed to get it started is for someone to sign up and suggest a meeting place!

## Our affiliations grow...

Americans United for Separation of Church and State has now become the fifth national organization with which SHL is affiliated. We have been regularly displaying their literature at our monthly meetings. Americans United will now work with us to promote religious liberty and preserve church-state separation. They are willing to provide us with materials

for meetings, speakers for events, research on important issues and help with publicity. We may also apply to them for grants when we have appropriate special projects. Please visit their website at <http://www.au.org/> and consider becoming a member of this fine organization.

## License Plate Update

Dear SHL members and supporters,

As you know, there are numerous special license plates allowed in South Carolina. By far the most popular is “In God We Trust.” The Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry have completed all the necessary forms to apply for special “In Reason We Trust” license plates. However, we need to send a check for \$4000 to the Department of Motor Vehicles before they will produce and distribute the plate.

Since we only have about \$3300 in our SHL bank account, we are taking up a special collection. We also need to have enough money left over for operating expenses for the year. In addition, we plan to pay the added costs for students and others with limited income who would like to support “reason” on their license

plates.

If the DMV refuses to produce our special license plate, you will get your money back and the ACLU will provide us with legal representation (“South Carolina Says No to Reason”). So please give generously. It’s the reasonable thing to do.

Make your (tax-deductible) check out to SHL and mail it to:

Herb Silverman  
6 Peele Place  
Charleston, SC 29401

-Herb

P.S. I can guarantee that your contribution will not be the largest. Mine will be. So if you want me to cut a big check, you know what you need to do.

## Beatification of Mother Teresa

Mother Teresa, founder of Missionaries of Charity, is in the news again. Although many revere her as a perfect example of Christian charity, others suggest she is little more than a fraud. The latter viewpoint, most famously presented in the book *The Missionary Position* by Christopher Hitchens, is echoed in a new book by Aroup Chatterjee. In the introduction, to *Final Verdict*, Chatterjee says "Many people tell me that Mother Teresa should be left alone because she did 'something' for the underprivileged. I do not deny that she did. However her reputation, which was to a good extent carefully built up by herself, was not on a 'something' scale. More importantly, that 'something', at least in Calcutta, was quite little, as my book will show." This book is presently available for free at [www.meteorbooks.com](http://www.meteorbooks.com).

Such arguments have not dissuaded the Vatican. In October, the Pope formally beatified

Teresa, leaving her just one step short of canonization. The beatification required the recognition of a miracle, which in her case was the 1988 cure of Monica Besra's tumor through the use of a locket supplied by the Missionaries of Charity.

Once again, however, claims of fraud have arisen. Even Besra's husband, Seiku Murmu, is quoted in Time Magazine as saying "My wife was cured by the doctors and not by any miracle." In fact, doctors at a hospital where Besra was treated claim that the lump which she had in her abdomen was not technically a tumor, and that it responded well to the treatments she received. Unfortunately, an investigation of whether these claims are true may never be possible since the Missionaries of Charity obtained the original medical records two years ago and now refuses to let anyone see them.

## SC News

### Jesus Excluded from Town Council Meeting

U.S. District Judge Cameron Currie issued a ruling in October in favor of Darla Kaye Wynne, a Wiccan priestess who sued the town of Great Falls, SC over the Christian references in the prayers which open their council meetings. Currie wrote that neither the town council nor any person giving an invocation at public meetings should "(invoke) the name of a specific deity associated with any one specific faith or belief." As per the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Marsh vs. Chambers*, legislative prayer is considered constitutional as long as it is "non-sectarian" or did not endorse a specific religion.

The judge's ruling specifically states that prayer, even prayer mentioning "God" is allowed. At present, the ruling applies only to Great Falls. The town of Great Falls has already appealed the ruling and the state attorney general Henry McMaster has agreed to help them fight it. However, if it survives this appeal, it would then apply to all governments in South Carolina and the other four states in the fourth circuit.

### Lunch Bible Club Temporarily Suspended

The bible club "Lunch Buddies" has been meeting at James Island Middle School for five years. Students attending the religious social leave school grounds to attend the meeting which features prayer and a ten to fifteen minute devotional in addition to free pizza and soda.

As of October, however, the program has temporarily been halted in response to a complaint by parent Collin White whose child attended the meeting without her permission. At issue are several questions. Everyone is in agreement that students should not be leaving school property during school hours without parental permission. The groups which sponsor the club have agreed to arrange to get permission slips in the future if the club continues to meet off campus. Still, White has also been quoted in the Post and Courier as saying that she believes that the activities of this group violate the separation of church and state guaranteed by the US Constitution. It remains to be seen whether such complaints will have any long term consequences.

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

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**SHL Calendar**

**Sunday, November 16: An Open Discussion on Controversial Topics of Interest to Humanists** led by SHL members Dave Brown and Roger Prevost at our monthly meeting. 4:00PM at Gage Hall on Archdale Street in downtown Charleston.

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**JOIN THE SHL**

The Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry 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, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, 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. For more information consult our Webpage at:  
[atheistalliance.org/lowcountry/join.html](http://atheistalliance.org/lowcountry/join.html)

**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.)

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