

Newsletter of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry
The Separationist

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

December 2003

SHL Potluck Party!

5:00PM December 20, 2003

Please join us on Saturday, December 20 for a potluck party at Warren and Pat McCarl's house. (You can find driving directions to this location on page 2 of this newsletter.) Starting at 5 p.m., we'll celebrate our friendship with a purely social meeting.

Of course, being a potluck, party goers are expected to bring food to share, but there are no rules about what to bring or sign-up lists. Bring any food and/or beverage you like. Somehow it all seems to work out so everyone gets lots of choices in the five basic food groups: appetizers, salads, main courses, side dishes and desserts.

Also, as usual, bring along any re-sellable books you want to donate for our freethought, bargain-book auction, with Herb Silverman serving as persuasive auctioneer. (All proceeds will go into the SHL treasury, so plan to buy a book too, if possible.)

Do plan to be there. And we especially invite the people on our mailing list who rarely, if ever, come to a meeting, as well as past speakers who are not members.

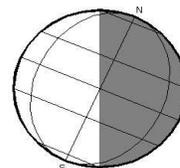
Please note there will be no meeting in December at Gage Hall, but we will return there in January with another speaker and discussion.

Winter Solstice: Myth and Science

SHL members are not the only ones partying this time of year. Many religious holidays including Yule, Saturnalia, and Christmas occur around this time for astronomical reasons. The Winter Solstice (which this year occurs at 2:04AM on December 22) is the time at which the angle between the Earth's axis of rotation and the line connecting the South Pole to the center of the sun reaches its greatest value and begins decreasing again. This results in noticeable effects such as the shortest amount of time between sunrise and sunset of any day of the year – well, at least here in Charleston. If you were at the South Pole you would not see a sunset on this day at all (see figure).

In addition to the many religious myths about

this annual event, there is at least one scientific superstition which deserves debunking. In the coming weeks you are likely to hear someone repeat the old story that it is only during the equinoxes and/or solistices that it is possible to stand an egg upright on its end. There is no plausible explanation for these claims, and you can experimentally verify that it is equally difficult to stand an egg on its end at any time of the year.



Driving Directions to the McCarl's House

1. Take the Airport exit off I-526. **Turn onto International Blvd.** (heading towards the airport)
2. Before you enter the airport make a **left at the traffic light onto Michaux Parkway.**
3. Michaux ends at Dorchester Road which is the first light you come to. Turn **right onto Dorchester**, heading north toward Summerville.
4. Continue on Dorchester Road for about 9 miles (past Air Force base and mall at Ashley Phosphate road) to the **Coosaw Creek entrance**. This is about 0.8 miles past Ashley Phosphate Road. There is a traffic light and a Hess gas station at the entrance.
5. Enter and continue to Guard House (0.5 miles). Continue up Club Course Drive, and 1.1 miles past guardhouse make a **left turn onto Persimmon Woods Drive.**
6. Continue about 0.6 miles on Persimmon Woods Drive until you come to a cul de sac. The McCarl's house is set back, is at the left of the cul de sac as you approach it and has a long white porch in front.

4287 Persimmon Woods Drive (843-767-3123)

Park either in the driveway or in front of the house. It takes about 35 minutes to get to the house from the College of Charleston.

Humanist Holiday Gaining Momentum

HumanLight is a new holiday that celebrates the Humanist vision of a good future, one in which all people can identify with and care for each other, behave with the highest moral standards, and work together toward a happy, just and peaceful world.

The very first HumanLight gathering was held in Verona, New Jersey (in the New York Metropolitan Area) on December 23, 2001 at a gala event attended by about 100 people.

Dec. 23 was selected because it was close to the shortest day of the year, a natural event of note, as well as very close to vacation days that typically lead to family gatherings. The holiday's creators wanted Humanists at family gatherings and other holiday social events to be able to say "Happy Holidays" and mean it; to have a positive, constructive way to start a conversation in which they could explain to loved ones what Humanism is about.

HumanLight was founded by members of the New Jersey Humanist Network. The idea of a December holiday was first brought up for discussion in 1998 and initial planning for the

first celebration began in 2001. The name HumanLight was chosen for its emphasis on humanity (as opposed to the supernatural) and the light of reason.

Six different Humanist groups from New York, California, Wisconsin, and Florida celebrated HumanLight in 2002. For more information about HumanLight, including this year's planned celebrations, ideas for your own HumanLight celebration, pictures, and more, see the HumanLight web site at: www.humanlight.org



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'In Reason. . .' Update

Herb Silverman

The DMV has begun the process to develop and issue "In Reason We Trust" special license plates for South Carolina. This was made possible through the generosity of SHL member contributions. The SHL wrote the necessary check for \$4000. We can recover this money if a minimum of 134 people order the special plate. Let me know if you are willing to order one and please spread the word to others who might be interested in visibly supporting "reason."

The price for these special plates will be \$54, which is \$30 more than the standard plate. We have money in our treasury to subsidize people who would like the special plate but can't afford the extra cost (students, etc.). The plate will have "In Reason We Trust" in black letters and a picture

of the American flag. It will have the special letter designation RT (reason trust) as the "In God We Trust" plate users have GT. Also, the first hundred "In Reason We Trust" plates, numbered from #1 through #100 might also have a "premium" value. You may wish to place a bid for your favorite number.

The sample plate will be available for inspection sometime in January. Anyone interested in traveling to Columbia with Bill Dusenberry to give final approval should let him know. The whole process will take about six months and updates will be given as the progress is reported to the "Plate Committee." Much thanks to Bill for taking the lead role and for chairing this committee.

News Briefs

SC Baptists Resolutions

South Carolina Baptists passed a resolution at their convention in Columbia on November 11 in support of placing the Ten Commandments or Christian symbols in public places. They also passed a resolution against Catawba Indians creating more gambling venues in the state.

Everyone's a Critic

You have probably heard by now that Mel Gibson – a movie star as religious as he is famous – is producing a film entitled "The Passion of Christ" to present a "very real" account of the last day in the life of Jesus Christ.

Interestingly, assistant director Jan Michelini has been hit by lightning while filming the movie...*twice*, in two different locations. Fortunately, Michelini and star Jim Caviezel (who portrays Jesus in the film and was also hit by lightning during the second strike) are fine. However, it is interesting to speculate what "believers" who must consider such events to be "Acts of God" make of it.

We'll Be Seeing Less of Moore

Alabama's judicial ethics panel removed Chief Justice Roy Moore from office on November 13 for defying a federal judge's order to move a Ten Commandments monument from the state Supreme Court building. The nine-member Court of the Judiciary issued its unanimous decision

after a one-day trial.

SHL Member in NYT Magazine

The November 23rd issue of the NY Times Magazine included a feature article by SHL member Harriet McBryde Johnson entitled, "The Disability Gulag." The editorial squib above the title says, "As the author fiercely resists the world of state-sponsored institutionalization, she argues that for herself and others with severe disabilities having needs shouldn't mean losing all freedom."

'Newdow Yes, AU No' says Court

The Supreme Court has decided to allow Michael Newdow to argue his own case when Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow, 02-1624 is heard by the Court next year. Newdow, a medical doctor who became a lawyer as part of this challenge to the constitutionality of the "under God" clause in the Pledge of Allegiance, is not a member of the Supreme Court Bar and would not have been able to do so without their approval.

However, at the same time, the Court turned down a request by Americans United for Separation of Church and State to participate in the argument.

Justice Antonin Scalia, who recused himself from this case after being criticized for making public statements in support of the "under God" clause of the Pledge, did not participate in these decisions.

Letters to Editors from SHL Members

Sent to The Post and Courier

In his Oct. 21 op-ed, Cal Thomas defended Lt. Gen. William G. Boykin, deputy undersecretary of Defense, for saying that Muslims worship an “idol” and not “a real God.” Lt. Gen. Boykin also referred to the United States as a Christian nation doing battle against Satan.

We are not and never were a “Christian nation.” Our founders understood the devastating nature of holy wars and wisely established a secular state ruled by “We the People” through a godless document known as the United States Constitution. Our freedom of conscience to practice any religion or none has served us well for over two centuries. Though we have not been spared the horrors of war, we at least have managed to avoid sending American troops overseas as part of a religious crusade.

For some of our leaders involved in the “War on Terrorism,” their self-interpreted mission goes beyond preserving American security. They are in a battle between good and evil, between those who side with a Christian God and those who side with a Muslim Satan. I expect more from our leaders than their use of the same rhetoric as Osama bin Laden in proclaiming as an argument for war that we have the real god and our opponents have a false god.

Private citizens certainly have the freedom to express such views, but I fear for this country if it becomes official government policy. There may sometimes be a reason to reluctantly send our brave young men and women into battle, but we must never do so to show that our God can beat up someone else’s God.

Herb Silverman (Published 11/2/03)

Sent to The Post and Courier

I agree with Mike Henslee’s statement (“Removing God”, letter to the editor, 11/5/2003) that atheism

is not a religion. Like monotheism and polytheism it is not a religion itself but a religious belief. There are atheist religions, like Buddhism or Religious Humanism, just as there are monotheistic and polytheistic ones. However, I disagree with his conclusion that atheism is therefore not entitled to the protections promised by the US Constitution. In support, let me quote what James Madison said in arguing against the use of public funds to pay for religious education: “It degrades from the equal rank of Citizens all those whose opinions in Religion do not bend to those of the Legislative authority.” His wording is, I believe, very careful. He refers not to the rights of those who are members of other religions, but those whose opinions in religion differ. I may not have a religion, but I have opinions in religion and James Madison, the author of the US Constitution, seems to agree that I should not be any less a citizen for having them.

Henslee further suggests that “[our Founding Fathers] were religious people and understood the importance of religion in government”. Obviously, one would have to include Constitution author Madison and Thomas Jefferson (the author of the Declaration of Independence) among our “Founding Fathers”. Mr. Henslee might then be surprised to read about the religious beliefs of these men and what they said about the relationship between government and religion. In deciding whether James Madison would be “turning over in his grave” regarding these recent decisions as Henslee suggests, consider this: Madison wrote that American Presidents should *not* issue proclamations calling for a day of prayer. To do so, he said, would “seem to imply and certainly nourish the erroneous idea of a

national religion.” Madison also said “Religion and government will both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together.” Jefferson coined “separation of church and state”, calling in fact for a *wall* to separate them. It is notable that he did not say “so help me God” at his inauguration as have so many others. He once wrote that Christianity, “like all superstitions of the world” was “founded on fables and mythology”. Based on these and many other similar quotes, I conclude that Henslee is quite wrong: not only would these men not have been bothered by recent rulings upholding the notion of separation between church and state that they fought for so strongly during their lives, I think they would fully support them.

Finally, let me answer Henslee’s rhetorical question “Aren’t the Ten Commandments the foundation of all civil and moral laws?” The answer, of course, is “No”. There were civil and moral laws before anyone spoke of the Ten Commandments (see, for instance, the Code of Hammurabi). There are countries whose moral and legal systems developed completely independently of influence from Jews and Christians (see, for instance, India, China, Japan, and Tibet). Also, I’d like to point out that the connection between the Ten Commandments and the moral and legal laws even in *our* country is quite questionable. Of the Ten Commandments (and here I mean the ones in Exodus 20 which are usually quoted, not the completely different ones in Exodus 34 which are actually called “the Ten Commandments” in the old testament) only *three* correspond to laws (the prohibitions on killing, stealing and bearing false witness) while several seem to have little to do with anything we would consider a question of either morality or law.

Alex Kasman

Humanist Book Discussion Group

Sharon Strong

In December we always do something a little different, since we won't be able to meet at Barnes and Noble (due to the frenetic holiday atmosphere). We will meet at Warren McCarl's home at 4:00 on Saturday, December 20, just prior to our SHL annual holiday potluck. Instead of focusing on a particular book, we will be holding a brainstorming session on books to read during the coming months, so bring your suggestions and, if possible, copies of books you'd like the group to consider. In January we will resume our regularly scheduled meetings on the fourth

Sunday of the month, 3:00 –5:00 p.m., at the Barnes and Noble bookstore in West Ashley, at 1812 Sam Rittenberg Blvd. We will begin the new year by considering the book "Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of Our Time" by Michael Shermer. The author (publisher of *Skeptic* magazine) examines such issues as creationism, Holocaust denial, alien abductions, Satanism, near-death experiences, and psychics and why so many folks actually believe in this stuff.

Humanist Groups Organize Progressive Conference

The *Institute for Humanist Studies* and the *Humanists of Florida Association* are organizing a conference, "Progressive Action in Regressive Times" for January 23-25 in Tampa, Florida. The intent of the event is to get progressive groups together in order to work out how best to influence the public and the policymakers. You can register

online at humaniststudies.org.

Conference Highlights include keynote speaker Reverend Barry Lynn of Americans United for Separation of Church and State and a forum on secular and religious partnerships for progressive change featuring SHL president Herb Silverman.

Joke: The Death of a Skeptic

During the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution, one morning's executions began with three men: a rabbi, a Catholic priest, and a rationalist skeptic.

The rabbi was marched up onto the platform first. There, facing the guillotine, he was asked if he had any last words. And the rabbi cried out, "I believe in the one and only true God, and He shall save me." The executioner then positioned the rabbi below the blade, set the block above his neck, and pulled the cord to set the terrible instrument in motion. The heavy cleaver plunged downward, searing the air. But then, abruptly, it stopped with a crack just a few inches above the would-be victim's neck. To which the rabbi said, "I told you so."

"It's a miracle!" gasped the crowd. And the executioner had to agree, letting the rabbi go.

Next in line was the priest. Asked for his final words, he declared, "I believe in Jesus Christ – the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost – who will rescue me in my hour of need." The executioner then positioned this man beneath the blade. And he pulled the cord. Again the blade flew downward – thump! creak! – stopping just short of its mark once more.

"Another miracle!" sighed the disappointed crowd. And the executioner for the second time had no choice but to let the condemned go free.

Now it was the skeptic's turn. "What final words have *you* to say?" he was asked. But the skeptic didn't hear. Staring intently at the ominous engine of death, he seemed lost. Not until the executioner poked him in the ribs and the question was asked again did he reply. "Oh, I see your problem," the skeptic said pointing. "You've got a blockage in the gear assembly, right there!"

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

Editors:
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SHL Calendar

Saturday, December 20: Humanist Book Discussion Group, Saturday 4:00-5:00p.m. at the McCarl's home immediately preceding the Potluck Party. They will be holding a brainstorming session on books to read during the coming months, so bring your suggestions and, if possible, copies of books you'd like the group to consider.

Saturday, December 20: SHL Potluck Party 5:00 at home of Warren and Pat McCarl. See driving directions on page 2 (inside). Bring a dish to share, books to sell and be prepared to have a good time!

January 23-25, 2004: "Progressive Action in Regressive Times" conference in Tampa, Florida. Register online at humaniststudies.org.

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

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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