

Newsletter of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

The Separationist

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HAPPY NEW YEAR!

January 2004

My Years in the Trenches of 1st Amendment Law A Talk by Thomas Goldstein

4:00PM January 18, 2004
Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston

Thomas Goldstein is a lowcountry lawyer whose candidacy for Charleston County School Board and defense of those legally selling "adult material" have brought him into direct conflict with the political force of the religious right.

"When I first became involved in First Amendment cases, specifically cases involving lawful adult material, I regarded them as straightforward zoning cases," says Goldstein. "The history of America has always been a tremendous tension between the rights of property owners and government, and adult businesses were but one variation of this eternal struggle between the rights of the individual vs. the demands of the government. Not surprisingly, I learned that the majority of citizens support the right of adults to purchase and possess lawful adult

material. Similarly, no one questions the right of government to regulate the dissemination of an adult message, such as regulating spatial separation, zones of operation, and placing an age limitation on possession. However, what I was not prepared for was the claim of a few, select citizens who believe that as the result of their special relationship with God, that they transcend normal government limitation on regulating free speech."

At our January meeting he will tell us about these experiences, talk about the reaction to his statements regarding school prayer during his run for school board, and answer our questions. Please join us on January 18th at 4:00 in Gage Hall next to the Unitarian Church on Archdale street in downtown Charleston.

Other Upcoming Events

◇ Herb Silverman will be debating Dr. Richard Johnson, Professor of Religion at Charleston Southern University, on the topic: "Does God Exist and Does It Matter?" The debate will take place on Friday, January 16, at 7pm at Old Fort Baptist Church (capacity over 600), 10505 Dorchester Road, Summerville. Members of the audience will have an opportunity to ask questions. Please help to ensure that there is a significant SHL presence.

◇ The National Organization for Women will be holding a rally on Roe v. Wade Day, January 22, from 5:30pm-7:00pm, at the Four Corners of Law on Meeting and Broad Streets. Herb Silverman has been asked to give the Invocation in remembrance of those who died because of improperly performed abortions before the Roe v. Wade decision.

Faith Based Parks

A recent series of decisions by Bush administration appointees has resulted in changes to the National Parks Service that are popular with the Religious Right. Not only are religious symbols and monuments displaying bible verses popping up at national parks around the country, but the Grand Canyon National

Park has begun distributing creationist literature which describes the canyon as being only a few thousand years old. Moreover, the Park Service leadership has blocked publication of guidance for park rangers and other interpretive staff that explicitly pointed out the scientific evidence contradicting this fundamentalist viewpoint.

Editorial: France has gone one step too far

France, it seems, is moving in the opposite direction from the United States. Here, as we often decry in these pages, the Separation of Church and State guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution is being wiped away by an administration that gains much of its support from religious fundamentalists. On the other hand, a recent decision in France has been touted by President Chirac as a strengthening of their church/state separation derived from a 1905 law. Among the consequences of the ruling is the decision that no religious garments or emblems can be worn by students attending public schools. This excludes kipot (the "caps" worn by Jewish boys), the head scarves worn by moslem women, and *large* crucifixes.

Surprisingly, we find that we are not entirely happy about this decision. For one thing, it seems to be culturally biased. Neither the kipot nor the head scarves really have any direct religious

significance. Forbidding the head scarves, in particular, seems akin to requiring all children in American schools to wear sexy and revealing clothing as proof that they are not part of a religious sect which might forbid it. Doing so would certainly make some children uncomfortable, but it is difficult to see how anyone would benefit from it.

In any case, we consider the whole thing to be completely wrong-headed. Even though we are atheist and grateful for the protections afforded to us by the Constitution, we think that the visible religious diversity in American schools is a good thing. There is a difference between protecting students from having religion imposed on them by governmental authority, and preventing individual students from publicly acknowledging their own religions. The former is what we need more of in this country, the latter is an example of French separationism going one step too far.

Editorial: Gay Marriage Ban is Religious Oppression

A poll conducted by the New York Times and CBS news, announced on December 21, 2003 showed that a majority of Americans oppose allowing same sex couples to get married. The same poll shows that the people who oppose gay marriages believe that marriage is a *religious* not a legal matter. They may be right, but this is precisely the reason that gay marriage ought to be a legal option.

The Separation of Church and State is partly intended to ensure that the government will stay out of religious affairs. For instance, although a majority of Americans might think that all clergy ought to be required to believe in the divinity of Jesus, a law requiring this would obviously violate the religious freedom of non-Christians. In the same way, although their individual churches might not recognize gay marriages, if a majority of Americans truly believe that marriage is a religious

institution, then they should also believe that they do not have a right to impose their concept of it upon others.

Moreover, we must recognize that marriage is a legal matter as well. Therefore it is important to keep in mind the legal principle that the minority has rights which cannot be ignored simply because of majority opinion. That most Americans feel that homosexuality is condemned by their religions is no basis for a law, but no other arguments seem to be offered by the opponents of allowing such marriages. If the wrong precedent is set in this case, we may be subject to more laws which impose the majority's religious beliefs on others. We consequently encourage you to enter a vote at www.marriagepoll.com. (This Website created by an organization that opposes gay marriages presently shows that visitors to the site strongly support its legalization!)

Taking Stands

Herb Silverman

The mission of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry is to increase the visibility and respectability of nontheistic viewpoints within the larger culture, to protect and strengthen secular government as the best guarantee of freedom for all, to foster a sense of community, and to work in coalition with like-minded organizations on joint action to achieve our goals.

We have no trouble taking a position directly related to our mission. There are, of course, cases that are not so clear. In the past year: SHL participated with a number of other groups in an anti-war rally in downtown Charleston a few weeks before the U.S. invaded Iraq; and SHL recently became a cosponsor of the Save Women's Lives March (<http://www.marchforchoice.org/>) to be held in Washington, DC on April 25.

In both cases, some felt we are such a small group that we shouldn't risk alienating any of our members by publicly aligning ourselves with one side on a divisive issue in which reasonable nontheists can disagree. Generally, the "controversial" positions we take are related to those in which the Religious Right exerts undue influence. The SHL took a stance that our country is never justified in partaking in a holy war. Though we did not explicitly say Iraq was a holy war, we were armed with quotes from government officials who seemed to believe it was. And the overwhelming majority of our members favor abortion rights, while overturning Roe v. Wade is a high priority for the Religious Right. An added bonus for our small group by taking public stands is that more people learn about us and we attract new members.

A couple of years ago, the SHL became a member with over 50 other groups in the South Carolina Progressive Network (SCPN), whose mission is to promote - through education

and action - human, civil, and workers' rights, environmental protection and government reform. (<http://www.scpronet.com/>) Concerns prior to joining were of the Network's taking positions not integral to the SHL mission. Not everyone in SHL may favor issues like expanding workers' rights and environmental protection. However, we decided we could support causes that most of our members back as long as they didn't conflict with our mission. Advantages to being a member of the Network are numerous. We show our strength in numbers through joining forces with many small organizations, we get more publicity and respectability, and we receive added support for a number of our own causes. This has worked to our advantage in several ways. A couple of notable examples are (1) we got to ask a question at the City Council forum sponsored by SCPN, which led to my giving the invocation at Charleston City Council and (2) we convinced the mayor, through SCPN, to issue a "Charleston Day of Reason" proclamation.

One of the most satisfying things to me about SHL are the friendships that have developed and the sense of community our members experience when we get together in a location so near to the buckle of the Bible Belt. We often find grateful new members who say, "I thought I was the only one around here with such beliefs." Showing interest and participating in activities important to others can yield great benefits for all concerned. I don't doubt that our outreach has refuted the characterization of Secular Humanism preached by some in the Religious Right. Every time we show public concern for others in our community, someone somewhere learns something positive about people who do good things through secular inspiration.

Note: The two editorials reflect the opinions of the editors and the article above reflects the opinion of the author (Herb). They are not intended to express a unanimous viewpoint of all SHL members. In fact, as the discussions led by Roger Prevost and Dave Brown at our November meeting demonstrate, we have a diversity of opinions within our group. Moreover, when such differences of opinion are manifested, we appreciate an open discourse. With that in mind, we – the editors of the Separationist – encourage all those with other viewpoints to submit articles presenting their own opinions.

Beginning Logic - a modest proposal

Jacques Benbassat

Just as any Southern Baptist or Afghan mullah, we atheists are convinced that we are right and that those who disagree with us are wrong. Just as any believer, and in spite of occasional denial, most of us are full of missionary zeal. Convinced as we are, that departure from logic and reason, abandonment of critical thought in favor of so-called "faith" has created most of the bloody trouble this world has experienced, most of us would like to see new generations learning to think for themselves and learning to stand on their own two feet without recourse to imaginary powers outside themselves. Great as that desire may be, most of us nevertheless uphold the First Amendment to the Constitution of the USA and we know that we have no right to oppose anyone's free exercise of religion. We would abhor the Stalinist approach to the problem, its violence, intolerance and injustice.

There is another way. Let us not show those who believe how wrong they are, it would do us no good. We may win an argument through logic, and win it quickly and easily, but we can never convince the faithful that he has lost it. But neither do we tell the children in our public schools that creation according to Genesis is an impossibility, a most unlikely event or a legend. We do, however, teach the scientifically proven facts of evolution, the prehistory with its dinosaurs, the rudiments of geology and paleontology, we take children on field trips to natural history museums and digs where the remains of beings having lived millions of years ago are unearthed. The Religious Right has not failed to accuse us of bias because of it, of attacking religion, of counteracting the influence of parents upon their children, of teaching the "secular religion of humanism" and of asking for equal representation, the teaching of "Creation Science". Suits have been brought and have been dismissed all the way up to the Supreme Court. The teaching of evolution cannot be suppressed any more than the teaching of geometry, even if there were religious doctrines that denied the existence of the square.

There is however yet another discipline that could be taught systematically. Even now teachers insist on it in judging the arguments in an English composition, for example, and that discipline is the application of logic to the questions of life. It finds its way into Math, History, English and other subjects, but is not yet taught in "Logic Classes" as I would propose them.

A course of logic, in public schools, should always avoid all matters touching on religion. Enough other examples abound to illustrate the many liberties with ordinary logic and common sense that people take.

Examples taken from a child's daily experience could be used to train a child in the art of thinking originally, clearly, logically and usefully. For example:

Argumentum ad hominem, the argument "directed at the man": "Johnny claims his dad has a pilot's license. Everybody knows that Johnny is a creep and a liar, so we know it isn't true". Yet, Johnny can be a rat-fink, and his father can still be a pilot.

Fallacy of presupposition: "When will this rain stop making everybody unhappy?" This presupposes that the rain is indeed making everybody unhappy.

Converting a conditional: This fallacy is an argument of the form "If A then B, therefore if B then A." For example, "Whenever Betty hasn't done her homework she claims to be sick the following morning and stays home. Betty did not show up today, so she must have failed to do her homework."

Exercises of this type would not only amuse the students, but would stimulate their natural intelligence and propensity to ask questions and recognize nonsense. A class on Logic could also discuss the rules of evidence used in court and explore the logical reasons behind them. Current statements by politicians could be reexamined under a more glaring light, and even courtroom dramas become opportunities for exercises in logic:

"O.J. Simpson is black, and we know how prejudiced people are, therefore it must be a lie when they say he killed his wife!", or inversely: "O.J. Simpson must be guilty because he was acquitted by a mostly non-white jury".

Whether a course in Logic would or would not affect a child's ability to believe the supernatural should not be the schools' or the government's concern but it could well induce someone to stop and think carefully and logically before asserting superiority over others, before inventing or adopting arguments to support one's visceral likes and dislikes, before jumping to conclusions about anything.

No doubt, such a program will come up against vociferous opposition from some quarters, as so much in our culture is based on anything but reason and logic. Tested in the courts however, a curriculum that were to include the teaching of it and the promotion of independent thought could not easily be shot down.

(This article is reprinted with permission from the September 2003 issue of "The Voice of Sanity", the newsletter of the Upstate SC Secular Humanists.)

Blue Laws Update

Blue laws, those laws that regulate business hours and ban liquor sales on Sundays, are in the process of being wiped from the books in up to 21 states. Even Massachusetts, whose Puritan founders passed the first blue laws to enforce observation of the Christian sabbath and holy days, is doing away with them. (Pulling weeds on your own property on Sunday used to be a criminal offense in Massachusetts.) Although always discriminatory with respect to non-Christians, it is economics rather than a new appreciation for civil liberties that is apparently driving the trend. Back when most households had at least one person at home fulltime, shopping chores were easily accomplished Monday through Friday, 9 to 5. When women started entering the work force in large numbers the laws were whittled down, bit by bit, by necessity, as fewer people had time to shop on weekdays. Nevertheless, some clergy in the states eliminating restrictions on Sunday business hours and liquor sales are decrying the move as yet another sad sign of the secularization of America. Of course, police, firefighters, healthcare workers, dairy farmers, utility workers, and clergy, have long worked on

Sundays and probably no one is suggesting that they stop. On the negative side, more business freedom means less leisure for retail workers. Recently, even the Christian Family Bookstores chain decided to open its stores on Sundays for the first time in their 70 year history when marketing research showed that a favorite after church activity is shopping.

Some readers of the Separationist may be surprised to learn that serious blue laws are still on the books in South Carolina. Section 53-1-40 of the S.C. Code of Law makes it illegal to conduct any regular business on Sunday. Relatively recent Charleston prosecutions under this law include a clothing merchant arrested in 1984 for selling clothing on Christmas Eve and an employee of Kroger arrested for selling a paint brush and a car antenna to an undercover police officer in 1983. That we have not seen such prosecutions in the Lowcountry more recently is due to a later provision (53-1-150) that exempts any county which collects a large amount of revenue from hotel taxes, but most of the state remains subject to these archaic laws.

Humanist Book Discussion Group

Sharon Strong

In January our regularly scheduled meeting will take place 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.

TIME TO RENEW...

Once a year we ask you to support Charleston's primary freethought organization by sending in your membership dues to the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry. We would like to ask that you send in your yearly contribution for 2004 at this time. A number of readers of this newsletter have already paid this year's dues, but if you have not, you can send a check, payable to the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, to:

Doris Hoten, SHL Treasurer / 113 Lancer Drive / Summerville, SC 29485

Please try to send your dues as soon as possible. The membership rates are:

\$24 -- individual

\$36 -- family

\$50 or more -- benefactor

Your dues support the mission of SHL by helping us to print and distribute this newsletter, provide refreshments at our regular meetings, present our guest speakers with honoraria, and consider further ways to get the secular humanist message out into the community. Thank you in advance for your contribution and for doing your part to support the secular humanist community in South Carolina.

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

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SHL Calendar

Friday, January 16: Does God Exist and Does it Matter? (Take 2) Some Christians were not satisfied with the defense of their religion offered by Jack Hoey in Herb's last debate. Consequently, a "second match" has been scheduled. Herb and Dr. Richard Johnson will debate at the Old Fort Baptist Church, 10505 Dorchester Road in Summerville.

Sunday, January 18: SHL Monthly Meeting featuring a talk and Q&A session with lawyer Thomas Goldstein. 4:00PM at Gage Hall on Archdale Street in downtown Charleston.

Thursday, January 22: Roe v. Wade Day – Herb Silverman will give the invocation at this rally. 5:30PM at the corner of Meeting and Broad streets.

January 23-25: Progressive Action in Regressive Times conference in Tampa, Florida. See humaniststudies.org.

Sunday, January 25: Humanist Book Group – Discussing *Why People Believe Weird Things* at West Ashley Barnes and Noble, 3-5PM.

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 Assoc., Americans United, the Atheist Alliance, the Council for Secular Humanism, and the SC Progressive Network.

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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