

Newsletter of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

The Separationist

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February 2004

What is the Center for Inquiry? The Challenge of the New Enlightenment

A Talk by D.J. Grothe
4:00PM February 22, 2004
Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston

With purveyors of unreason increasingly more influential in our society, what can rationalists do to respond? Highlighting the various organizations at the Center for Inquiry such as CSICOP, the Council for Secular Humanism, and the Campus Freethought Alliance, D.J. Grothe will deliver a multi-media "frontline briefing" about the latest issues confronting science and reason, both on- and off- campus, and how you can get involved.



As director of campus and community programs for the Center for Inquiry, D.J. Grothe directs the Campus Freethought Alliance, a secular, pro-science alternative

to organizations such as Campus Crusade for Christ and fringe-science/paranormalist movements. Mr. Grothe has traveled and lectured widely throughout North America, speaking on secular ethics, religious-political extremism, church-state separation and science advocacy. His writings have been published in newspapers throughout the United States, and he has spoken on numerous radio and television programs. He is currently finishing a book on the need for public argument in a secular democracy.

Before taking his M.A. in philosophy and intellectual history at Washington University at St. Louis, DJ worked as a corporate magical entertainer and public speaker for companies such as IBM, Southwestern Bell, Estée Lauder and Ralston Purina.

Book Discussion Group

by Sharon Strong

Please note that the February meeting of the Humanist Book Discussion Group will take place on the fifth (not fourth) Sunday of the month, February the 29th. We will keep to the same time and location, however, meeting from 3:00 - 5:00 p.m. at the Barnes and Noble bookstore in West Ashley, at 1812 Sam Rittenberg Blvd. In honor of the month of Darwin's birthday, we have chosen to focus on *Mapping Human History: Genes, Race, and Our Common Origins*, by noted science journalist Steve Olson. Citing the latest genetic, linguistic, and archaeological

evidence, the author examines the origins and early migrations of biologically modern humans. Sam Moskow will be leading the discussion.

Note: Author Steve Olson will be on campus at the College of Charleston this month and members of the SHL book group are invited to an open forum to talk about *Mapping Human History* with him! The forum will be from 11:45AM until 12:30PM on Saturday February 28th in room 112 of the Science Center (corner of George and Coming).

An Award for Herb

The Institute for Humanist Studies (IHS) surprised SHL President Herb Silverman recently with the first "Humanist Innovator of the Year" award. The event took place at the Humanists of Florida-IHS Conference in Tampa, Florida, on January 24. Matt Cherry, Executive Director of IHS, cited Herb's enduring, patient determination to persuade many national freethought organizations to work together for the benefit of all freethinkers. The multi-organizational Coalition for the Community of Reason and its successor, the Secular Coalition for America, were inspired by Herb's vision.

With his usual perceptive humor, Herb gratefully accepted the award and later noted that the award, a golden globe, bears an uncanny resemblance to a bomb. Fortunately, it did not cause any delays at the airport when Herb flew home from Tampa.

The Conversation Mother Warned You About Comes to Charleston!

by Chris Lindstrom

On Tuesday January 20th, fifteen brave people came together to have a conversation that matters, a conversation about important issues that affect our lives but are normally "off limits" – religion & politics. Half of the group consisted of Christians from a local church and half were from Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry. A few of the bravest had agreed to act as facilitators.

This was the first time a Garrison-Martineau Project event had occurred outside of the state of California. The Project's goals are to help break down stereotypes and misperceptions believers and non-believers have of one another and improve civic discourse by facilitating small group dialogue. While over 100 people in the San Francisco Bay area had already participated, it was unclear how easily the program could be adapted for the buckle of the Bible Belt!

We are happy to report that the evening was a resounding success. Surprisingly, conversation in South Carolina was even more congenial than that reported in California – not sure if it's that southern charm or what! People spent the first hour explaining the experiences that had brought them either into or away from religious belief. The second hour was spent exploring the human experiences that shape their social concerns.

One humanist explained that although she felt she had had a good experience with religion, she had come to the conclusion that god was a projection of the human mind. Nearby, a secular Jew explained how his early "required attendance" in Hebrew school and Talmudic logic analogies

had finally convinced him that since god hadn't stopped the mass killings of Hitler, Stalin and other moral monsters, he either didn't exist or wasn't worthy of being called god. In still another group, a man tried to describe what his "baptism by the Holy Spirit" was like. I think the words he used were "transcendent certitude". While words were clearly inadequate to entirely explain the experience to those of us who had never "been baptized" in this way, it was clear to all that the experience he had had was very moving and that he continued to treasure it to this day.

Regarding social concerns, in one group, a man described how after raising three children, he had become concerned that "parents didn't have the influence they used to". In another group, a teacher described her struggle with teaching "values education" without mention of her Christian faith. Often, she explained, she really wanted to say, "God doesn't like it when we treat each other that way" but of course, that was against the rules. One of the nonbelievers in the group said that if a teacher mentioned god in her child's classroom that way, she would not be happy about it because she felt children should remain "innocent" of these religious ideas until old enough to make up their own minds.

All in all, it was a wonderful conversation. Participants indicated some impatience with waiting for another! If you'd like to participate or help plan another, let us know.

Note: See related article on page 3 by Sharon F.

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Democratic Candidates on Separation of Church and State

From chaplain-led prayers to “Our Savior Jesus Christ” at the inauguration to establishment of the Office for Faith-based Funding initiatives, the stand of the current administration on separation of church and state is abundantly clear. But what about the seven (at this writing) remaining democratic candidates for president?

Based on the January 28th televised debate and visits to official web pages, there are clear differences between them. Wesley Clark was the only candidate directly asked his opinion on this topic during the January 28 debate in Greenville. In his answer he said that he went to church as a child, but thinks there should be separation of church and state, and specifically referred to Bible reading in his childhood public school as insensitive and wrong. (This got a big round of applause from the Greenville South Carolina audience!) There is also indication that Howard Dean is in favor of separation. In an interview on his web site, when asked about ACLU efforts to remove ten commandments monuments from public spaces, he said “in general, I agree with the ACLU about not putting religious plaques in public spaces. The Ten Commandments shouldn’t be in a public park. We’re a sectarian country. The state should not be in the business of advocating for a certain religion.” Dean has also said his favorite philosopher is David Hume, who was overtly atheist in his writings. It’s not clear what either of these candidates plans to do about faith-based funding programs already in place. John Kerry’s campaign material specifically addresses this point. From his website, we learn that “John Kerry believes that a strategy for enhancing our common life in our cities should include room for faith-based

solutions. While making certain to honor the Constitutional guarantee of separation of church and state,...Kerry will provide new funding and support for faith-based charities or centers that provide social services.”

Joseph Lieberman has said that it is his “personal political mission...to have people of faith feel equally welcome in the Democratic Party as they are in the Republican Party.” Lieberman is also an outspoken advocate of keeping “under God” in the Pledge, and (in)famously said that “the constitution grants us freedom of religion, not freedom from religion.” John Edward’s views on religion are hard to pin down. He liberally peppers his speeches with phrases like “in the eyes of God”, “thank God”, and “God Bless America,” but no opinions on religious issues could be found on his web page. Dennis Kucinich also has no mention of church/state issues on his web site, although he was apparently endorsed by a group for Transcendental Meditation, and he does not invoke deities in his speeches. Perhaps most surprising of all, a search of the Reverend Al Sharpton’s campaign website for the words “faith”, “God”, “church”, or “religion” came up empty. In the televised debate, Sharpton only mentioned religion in the context that we should not demonize religion just because some religious zealots do terrible things.

So in summary, none of the candidates is making church/state separation a major issue in their platform. However, if it is an important issue to you, it is probably possible to “read between the lines” and use this information in making your choice.

A Lowcountry Garrison-Martineau Encounter

By Sharon Fratepietro

On the evening of January 20, seven Secular Humanists and eight Christians met for directed conversations at Herb Silverman and Sharon Fratepietro’s house in downtown Charleston. Chris Lindstrom, founder of the Garrison-Martineau conversation project, traveled from her home in Sunnyvale, California, to Charleston for the event. When the evening

ended, all present judged the meeting worthwhile and many wished for further conversations.

Chris Lindstrom had been a fundamentalist Christian before becoming an atheist, and she had found it difficult to communicate about her change of mind with family and friends. While trying to resolve this problem, she found an inspiration in (Continued on page 4...See also page 2.)

A Lowcountry Garrison-Martineau Encounter (continued from page 3)

the 19th century friendship of Christian abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and atheist sociologist Harriet Martineau. Chris developed a plan for dialog that matches groups of two pairs of believers and non-believers, plus a facilitator, in non-confrontational conversations. The talks last for two hours. The participants first tell their own stories of movement toward belief or non-belief, and then relate individual concerns about contemporary social issues. The point of the discussions is not to debate, convert or disparage anyone's view. The goal is to better everyone's understanding of how people can hold such disparate theological beliefs, and thus encourage more civil public consideration of social issues that usually polarize society.

In written evaluations after the evening ended

on January 20, all participants reported great satisfaction with their conversations. "It gave me a chance to talk with and understand people I never would have otherwise," said one, summing up the feelings of many. Refreshments and socializing followed the discussions.

Jack Hoey from Seacoast Christian Community Church in Mt. Pleasant, and Sharon Fratepietro from the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry in Charleston, organized the event. Other participants included five Christians from Seacoast Church, one Christian from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Charleston, and six atheists or agnostics from the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry. Find more information about the Garrison-Martineau project on the Web at www.garrison-martineau.com.

Saturday Morning Cartoon Promotes Skepticism?

Being the parents of a young child gives the editors of the Separationist an excuse to watch a lot of cartoons and other kids shows. There are actually a lot of shows that we enjoy. However, around Christmas-time we were becoming annoyed at the number of shows whose purpose was to "pooh pooh" skepticism. The general outline of such a show is that one character on the show insists on believing in some far fetched notion (most frequently on cartoons it is the existence of Santa Claus) that their friends reject, but at the end of the show a miraculous sign arrives to show that their faith was justified all along. The point of such shows, of course, is not to convince children to expect such miraculous signs, but to get them to "keep the faith" even in their absence.

That is why we were especially pleased to see a cartoon with the opposite viewpoint. One episode of the *Recess* (a show about kids in an elementary school which did have one of these "faith in Santa" cartoon earlier in the year) essentially shows the formation of a religion. The character called "swinger girl", as usual, is riding the swingset behind the school and trying to go "over the top". When another girl nearby looks up to see how she's doing, swinger girl is *gone*. Convinced that by going over the top of the swing, swinger girl has "gone to the other

side", she begins worshipping the swingset and quoting swinger girl's wise sayings. Soon she has followers who all wear special swinger girl hats and forego their usual playground activities to worship and contemplate swinger girl and her mystical disappearance.

Only a few of the regular characters on the show are skeptical of this whole notion and are concerned about the strange behavior of the other children. However, contrary to the usual scenario, it is the *skeptics* who this time have their viewpoint justified when swinger girl shows up for school the next day and explains that she did not go over the top at all, but rather failed to do so and then went with her parents in their car when they came to pick her up.

The show includes a few reassuring comments suggesting that even if it wasn't *true*, there were positive things that came out of this newly formed religion. Still, some "pro-skeptical" points cannot be entirely lost on the show's young audience. For instance, it demonstrates that religions can be started by people who are deluded rather than people who are divinely inspired. Moreover, if that is the case, the show makes it perfectly clear that spending your day worshipping the figment of that person's imagination is a real waste of time when you *could* be playing kick-ball instead!

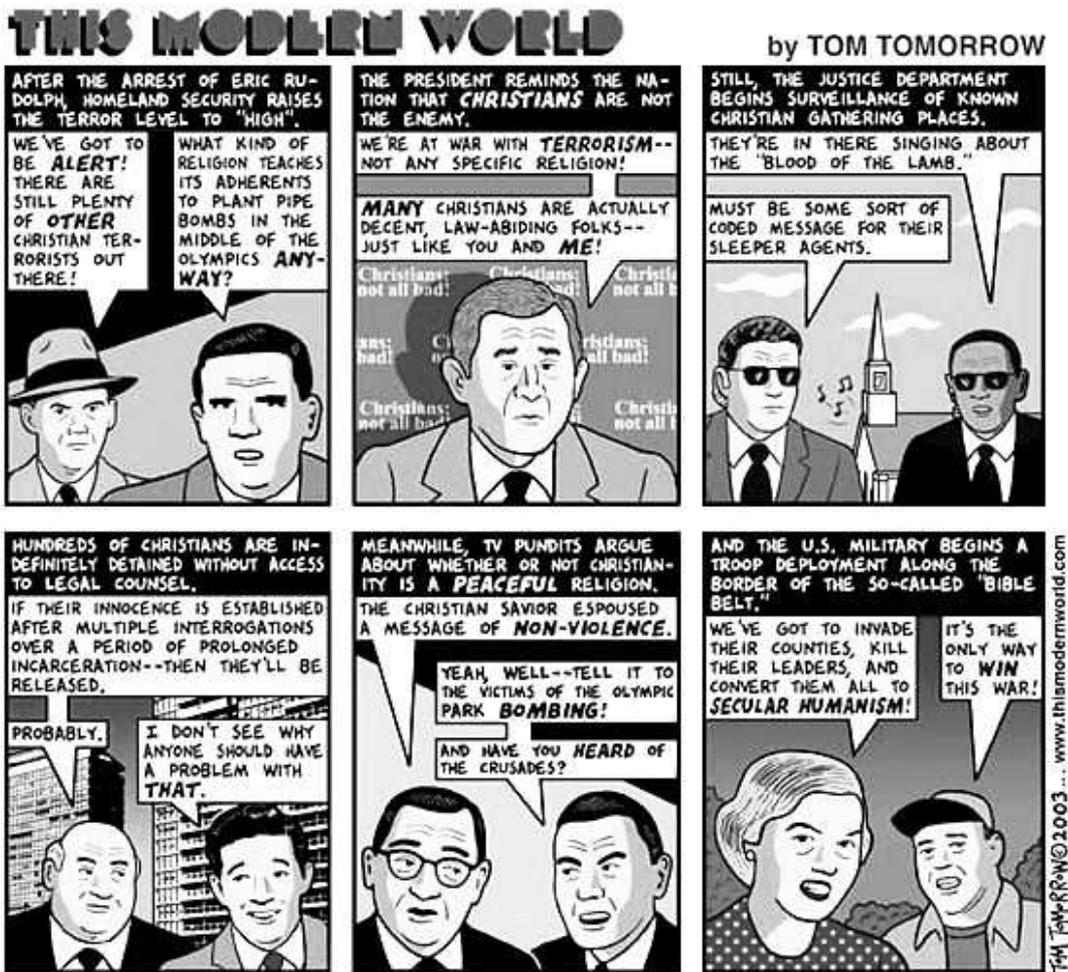
On Last Month's Debate by Herb Silverman

My January 16th debate at Old Fort Baptist Church with Dr. Richard Johnson, Professor of Religion at Charleston Southern University, was attended by more than 750 people (full balcony). The topic was: "Does God exist and does it matter?" Of course Dr. Johnson and I did not convince each other. But I was pleased by the response of the audience, especially from the students. In my concluding remarks I said I hoped they would leave with more questions than they came with, because one of the best ways to learn is through questioning and by hearing many sides of an issue. I then offered a reading list of 10 books on biblical criticism. To my pleasant surprise, all 40 copies of the list I brought were taken and more had to be photocopied.

Near the end, I thanked those in attendance for ignoring the passage in Cor. 6:14: "Believers must not commune with unbelievers. What fellowship

hath righteousness with unrighteousness, light with darkness, believers with infidels?" I pointed out that biblical passages like this prevent many Christians from even listening to an "infidel" like me, not just city council members who walked out on my invocation but also Dr. Johnson's own (Baptist) institution, which refused to allow the debate on his campus. I know that many students there subsequently complained to the administration about such a prohibition.

Debating rewards, for me, come when I receive emails like this one: "First off, Great Job! I have always admired people who are able to stand up and give an account for what they believe and not worry about what others think of them. You made some very good points tonight. You even made me rethink some of the things that I have chosen to believe."



THE SEPARATIONIST
Newsletter of the
Secular Humanists
of the Lowcountry

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SHL Calendar

Sunday February 22, 2004: *SHL Monthly Meeting with Special Guest DJ Grothe* – Our guest will speak about the Center for Inquiry beginning at 4:00PM at Gage Hall on Archdale Street. NOTE: This month we are meeting on the fourth Sunday instead of the usual third.

Saturday February 28, 2004: *Steve Olson Forum at College of Charleston* – The author of the book that is being read by the book group will coincidentally be in town the day before to discuss his book with the C of C community. SHL members are also invited to talk with him from 11:45AM–12:30PM in Room 112 of the College's Science Center

Sunday February 29, 2004: *Humanist Book Discussion Group* – The book group will be meeting from 3-5PM at the West Ashley Barnes and Noble store to talk about Steve Olson's book *Mapping Human History*

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, American Humanist Association, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, Atheist Alliance, 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. Members receive this newsletter and can participate in activities planned for the Lowcountry. 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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