

Newsletter of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry
The Separationist

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

April 2004

The Anthropic Principle: Copernicus Undone?

A Talk by Alex Kasman

4:00PM April 18, 2004

Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston

Ever since Copernicus' astronomical observations removed mankind from its central position of the universe, science has been seen as being at odds with the world's major religions. In contrast to the idea that we are the favorite creation of the universe's creator, scientific advancements often are able to explain the mysteries of the world without reference to a creator and further diminish the apparent significance of our species in the grand scheme of things.

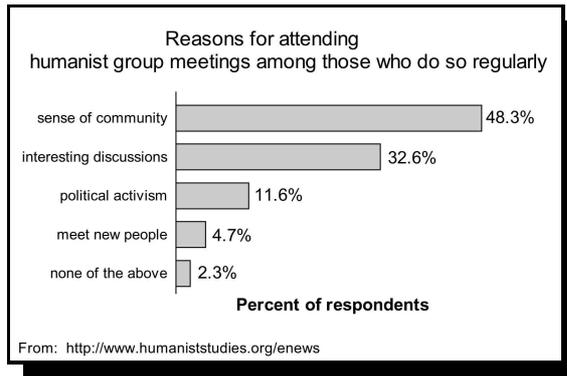
But, what if a scientific discovery could reverse all of that? Consider, for example, if we scanned the skies with a new, more powerful telescope to map out the positions of the galaxies in space and found out that they are actually arranged so as to spell out "God Loves You." That would certainly be a dramatic piece of scientifically derived evidence, if not final proof, in the debate between theists and atheists.

According to some, this is no longer a fantasy but an undeniable fact, although it is unfortunately not so obvious as the literal message spelled out in my fantastical example. Proponents of this viewpoint believe that the existence of a creator of the universe who cares about us can be

determined by looking at the very laws of physics themselves.

This popular argument, going under the name of "The Anthropic Principle" or "Fine-tuning", has attracted the attention of some of the world's leading scientists, philosophers and theologians. In this talk, I will describe the argument itself, compare it to other interactions between science and religion that have taken place throughout history, and will point out what is *right* as well as what is wrong with it.

Alex Kasman is a professor of mathematics at the College of Charleston and a member of the SHL. His research in mathematical physics has been published in respected mathematics, physics and biology journals and has earned him invitations to speak and work in some of the world's most famous research institutes including the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute in Berkeley, the Centre des Recherches Mathématiques in Montréal and the Newton Institute in Cambridge, UK. Alex co-edits this newsletter with his wife Laura, a biologist at MUSC, and those of you who have attended SHL meetings or parties may recall their daughter, Amanda, who likes to give out her original crayon drawings at these events.



Herb Silverman “disinvited” to CSU

Following their January debate “Does God exist and does it matter?”, SHL President Herb Silverman and theologian Dr. Richard Johnson agreed to invite each other to meet with students at their respective schools.

The first of these meetings took place in February at the College of Charleston where Johnson met with members of the Atheist-Humanist Alliance student group. At this meeting, Professor Johnson graciously agreed to answer any questions the students might have. It is rare for people to be able to discuss religious issues with people having different beliefs since asking questions in such situations can be considered impolite. So, this was a wonderful opportunity for these students.

However, shortly before Professor Silverman was scheduled to similarly meet with students at Charleston Southern University (CSU) in March, he received an e-mail message from Johnson canceling the event. “Because of two upcoming special events on campus and other complications,” the message read, “my department chairman has suggested that I not devote class time to

your appearance before my class.”

However, Silverman has reason to believe that these “complications” have more to do with his beliefs than any scheduling issues. In fact, even their original debate which was to be held at CSU was moved to the Old Fort Baptist Church when the university administration refused to allow it to be held on campus.

These events were discussed in a recent article in the *Post and Courier* (“Atheist revives debate over academic freedom” 03/21/04, www.charleston.net/stories/032104/mun_21munday.shtml). There are sure to be at least a few readers of the P&C who think it was clever of CSU to “trick” Herb in this way. However, we suspect that after reading Dave Munday’s well written and even-handed article, the majority of readers will have a *lower* opinion of CSU than they had before. In fact, among the many different ways to interpret CSU’s actions – as overly fearful of exposing their students to alternative viewpoints, as a form of censorship, failing to fulfill their end of a bargain, etc. – very few of them can be described as being admirable.

Reminder: Pay Your Dues

Most of you have remembered to send in your membership fees for 2004. However, if you have not yet done so, this is a friendly reminder that our treasurer’s are still waiting for your check (Your dues support the mission of the 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!)

The membership rates are **\$24 for an individual, \$36 for a family and \$50 or more for benefactor status**. Please send a check payable to the “Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry” to **Doris Hoten, SHL Treasurer/ 113 Lancer Drive / Summerville, SC 29485**

CONTACT THE SHL:

Phone: 843-577-0637

E-Mail: kasmansc@juno.com

Web: atheistalliance.org/lowcountry

Mail: P.O. Box 32256

Charleston, SC 29417

News in Brief

British National Curriculum to Include Atheism

Religion has long been a required subject for British school children, and this is not expected to change any time soon. However, the British Qualifications and Curriculum Committee recently drafted new voluntary national guidelines that would include atheism among the belief systems studied. Among the reasons given were the importance of acknowledging the views of a large number of students and/or their families, and the ability to discuss ethics independently of religion.

Another Texas Christian Murders her Children for Jesus

A Texas mother who stoned her 6 and 8 year old sons to death last year because "God told me to" was found not guilty by reason of insanity this month. A third son, 16 months old at the time, survives but is blind and brain damaged. Not only is this case tragically similar to that of

the five Yates children, drowned two years ago by their Texas born-again-Christian mother, but the perpetrator in this case cited Yates as a role model, saying that she and Dorothy Yates were to be "witnesses to the endtimes together".

Pledge Case Proceeds at the US Supreme Court

Michael Newdow, the California plaintiff in the case to remove the words "under God" in public school recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance, has appeared before the U.S. Supreme Court. The physician lawyer, representing himself, has received high marks for his professionalism and presentation from court observers. The possibility exists for the court to be split in a 4-4 tie since Justice Scalia recused himself for having made prejudicial public remarks prior to hearing the case. The Charleston City Council walk-out on the invocation of our President, Herb Silverman, was mentioned in an amicus brief in support of Newdow's case.

Letter to the Editor

Published in Post and Courier / March 6, 2004

According to White House press secretary Scott McClellan, President Bush favors a constitutional amendment to prohibit gays from marrying because "He has always strongly believed that marriage is a sacred institution between a man and a woman."

If, indeed, marriage in this country is "sacred," then President Bush has not gone far enough. He needs to propose a more explicit amendment that would recognize and give benefits only to couples whose marriages are sacred.

If such an amendment were enacted, no longer would I be allowed to perform secular (godless) marriages, which I do regularly as both a notary public and a Humanist Celebrant.

A church may impose any marital limitations on its members it chooses, free from governmental interference.

My wife, a former Catholic, is still married to her first husband according to the Catholic Church even though she received a civil divorce over 25 years ago. Both she and her former husband, also happily remarried, are adulterers in the eyes of the Church because it does not recognize or permit such second marriages. While I may think this position is ludicrous, I defend the right of the Church to espouse such religious views.

President Bush certainly has the right to proclaim Jesus as his favorite philosopher. But it is both wrong and dangerous for him to suggest that biblical authority is the right basis for deciding about everyone else. This country is and must remain a society governed by secular, not religious, laws if we are to keep the freedoms we have.

Herb Silverman

Proposed Marriage Amendment (found circulating on the Internet)

Any religious person believes prayer should be balanced by action. So here, in support of the Prayer Team's admirable goals, is a proposed Constitutional Amendment to codify marriage on Biblical principles:

- Marriage in the United States shall consist of a union between one man and one or more women. (Gen 29:17-28; II Sam 3:2-5)
- Marriage shall not impede a man's right to take concubines, in addition to his wife or wives. (II Sam 5:13; I Kings 11:3; II Chron 11:21)
- A marriage shall be considered valid only if the wife is a virgin. If the wife is not a virgin, she shall be executed. (Deut 22:13-21)
- Since marriage is for life, neither this Constitution nor the constitution of any State, nor any state or federal law shall be construed to permit divorce. (Deut 22:19; Mark 10:9)
- If a married man dies without children, his brother shall marry the widow. If he refuses to marry his brother's widow or deliberately does not give her children, he shall pay a fine of one shoe. (Gen 28:6-10; Deut 25:5-10)

Quoted

"I remember a weird audition when I was 10. I gave this great reading, but the woman stopped me and said, 'Scarlett, do you accept Jesus as your savior?' I was like, 'I don't know. My parents are atheists.' She said, 'Oh, really? So what does that make you?' and I said, 'Um, a 10-year-old?'" – actress *Scarlett Johansson*, quoted in the *Plain Dealer*, 24 March 2004

"It was, of course, a lie what you read about my religious convictions, a lie which is being systematically repeated. I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly. If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it." – *Albert Einstein*, 1954, from *Albert Einstein: The Human Side*, edited by *Helen Dukas and Banesh Hoffman*

Book Discussion Group by Sharon Strong

This month's meeting of the Humanist Book Discussion Group will take place on April 25, 3:00 - 5:00 p.m., at the Barnes and Noble bookstore in West Ashley (1812 Sam Rittenberg Blvd.). This month, Loretta Haskell will lead a discussion of historian Howard Zinn's memoir *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times*. The author (whose most well-known book is the populist classic *A People's History of the United States*) has been a teacher, writer, and activist for many years. He became socially in-

involved in the 1950s as a professor at Spelman College, a historically black women's college, where his students included the future writer Alice Walker and Children's Defense Fund head Marian Wright Edelman. He went on to become prominent in the 1960s civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements. His memoir narrates some of his personal experiences during the turbulent twentieth century and optimistically reflects on the moral necessity for social engagement.

Regarding Gill Krebs and Adelaide Garnier by Herb Silverman

Gill and Adelaide are founding members of the SHL and have been active since its inception. Gill coordinated our trash pickup, is responsible for SHL publicity, and has been engaged in many other activities. Adelaide has been supportive of all of our programs and, in true humanist fashion, has shown concern for all of us with never a harsh word for anyone. Gill and Adelaide are shining

examples of how inane is the blanket comment by talk-show host Dr. Laura that unmarried people who "shack-up" lack commitment and are ruining our culture. I have never met a couple more devoted to each other through the years than Gill and Adelaide – for better or worse and in sickness or health. We wish them well and hope to see them again soon.

Dear Friends,

Thank you for the encouraging card and your kind thoughts and concerns. It is satisfying to know that we still have friends who care.

We're doing well and keeping healthy. Adelaide's and my life is still great and we are still enjoying each other. Perhaps things will turn out so that we can become active again in SHL.

Again, we miss your friendship and interactions and the monthly meetings.

Thanks again, Gill

Quoted

“Newdow may be a pain in the neck, but he probably is legally correct that the 1954 insertion should not be in a state-authorized pledge. I know this is not consistent with what I’ve written before on this case, but I’ve changed my mind.” – *FSU religion professor Leo Sandon writing in the Tallahassee Democrat, 30 March 2004*

‘Tomorrow is April 1, but for Randi, every day is April Fools’ Day. He’s one of the world’s top debunkers (he prefers the terms ‘skeptic’ and ‘investigator’)... Religion and belief in the paranormal, he says, are ‘exactly the same thing. It’s based on the same evidence, which is no evidence.’ Randi says he has no problem with people whose faith is based on faith [sic] ‘except that they vote.’ And that their beliefs leave them vulnerable to people out to make a buck.” – *Eliot Kleinberg in the Palm Beach Post, 31 March 2004*

Conspiracy Finally Revealed Sue Danním

For a long time, it has been unclear to many *believers* how so many scientists and other academic experts could be atheists. “They can’t actually *believe* that there is no God,” comments Herbert Milhaus Sneedlaw, who has published numerous articles on the subject. “After all, the bible explains it all quite carefully and I don’t see how there is any room for doubt.”

In fact, scientists are privvy to such a large amount of information that should be relevant – astronomical data, the details of molecular biology, the fossil record, archaeological evidence from the biblical era – that the reality of God should be completely apparent to them. Still, a large portion of them remain non-believers. In fact, the vast majority of scientists, even those who claim to be believers, deny the existence of any sort of evidence to support the most important claims of the bible and frequently report discoveries that appear to be in actual contradiction to the bible’s claims!

For a growing number of suspicious Christians, the only possible explanation was that the scientists were part of a vast conspiracy designed to hide the evidence that supports

a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. Suddenly, this is no longer simply a conspiracy theory!

On April 1, 2004 the National Academy of Sciences released a shocking news brief detailing this conspiracy. They announced that in fact, thousands of scientists had been part of this plot to hide important evidence for more than a century. Each time a scientist made a discovery which failed to contradict the bible, the discovery was “covered up” and all related documents hidden at the Air Force’s secret *Area 51* base in New Mexico.

“It is just as we suspected,” exclaimed Sneedlaw upon hearing the news. “The only thing I don’t understand is *why* they did it!”

However, when this question was raised with a representative of the National Academy of Sciences, she had only this to say: “It was all just an April Fool’s Joke. Ha!”

Among the articles believed to be now located at the infamous *Area 51* are a pair of suede tennis shoes formerly worn by (*Continued on p. 14*)

WWW: Wit and Wisdom on the Web

Here is a page that you can browse for entertainment or refer to as a serious resource:

<http://www.skepticsannotatedbible.com/>

At the Skeptics Annotated Bible you can read the entire Old and New Testaments, and even the Quran. The text is annotated with footnotes and icons indicating such things as the presence of absurdities, misogyny, conflicts with standard facts of science and history, and apparent injustices. Perhaps my favorite feature is the ability to click on the \neq symbol which indicates an internal contradiction. It appears in any place that says something which directly contradicts something said elsewhere in the bible, and clicking on it immediately brings up the contradictory statements.

Thanks to Bill Dusenberry for pointing it out! Please write in with your own suggestions! Our e-mail address is kasmansc@juno.com.

THE SEPARATIONIST
Newsletter of the
Secular Humanists
of the Lowcountry

Editors:
Alex and Laura Kasman
(kasmansc@juno.com)

SHL Calendar

Sunday April 18, 2004: *"The Anthropic Principle" at SHL Meeting* – At our regular monthly meeting, SHL Member Alex Kasman will give a lecture on this fascinating subject at the cutting edge of the interaction between science and religion. Gage Hall on Archdale Street in Downtown Charleston, beginning at 4PM.

Sunday April 25, 2004: *Book Discussion Group* – The book group meets from 3:00-5:00 at the West Ashley branch of Barnes and Noble to discuss Howard Zinn's *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*.

Tuesday April 28, 2004: *Americans United Group Meeting at 7:30* – Americans United for Separation of Church and State meet at Vickery's downtown

May 6–9, 2004: *American Humanist Association 63rd Annual Conference* – "Oasis in the Desert" in Las Vegas. See www.americanhumanist.org for more information.

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:

www.atheistalliance.org/lowcountry/

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)

Secular Humanists
of the Lowcountry
P.O. Box 32256
Charleston, SC 29417