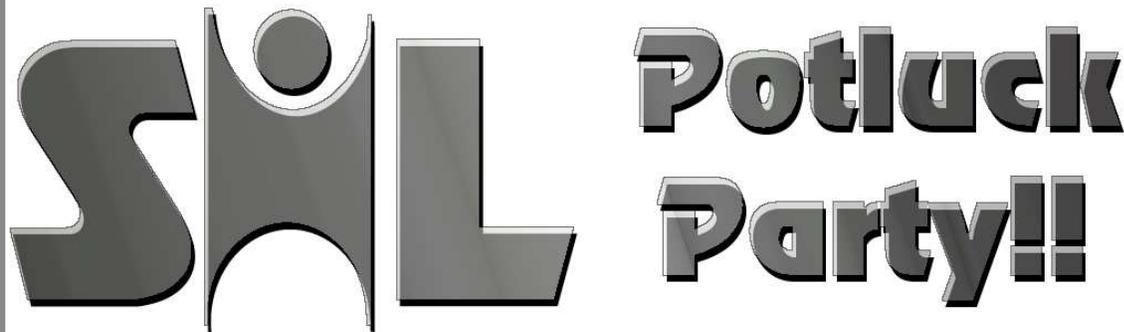


Newsletter of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry  
*The Separationist*

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

May 2004



4pm on May 16  
At Roger's House  
(see directions below)

*Please note the different time, different location and different format for our upcoming SHL meeting on May 16: We will start at 4p.m., at Roger Prevost's house on Folly Beach for a potluck supper and short business meeting.*

This is a chance to get together for a social exchange with folks you never have time to chat with at the regular meetings. SHL members on the mailing list but who never or seldom attend a meeting are doubly welcome at this friendly gathering.

One important item on the brief business meeting agenda will be elections for SHL board members. Please come prepared to nominate yourself or someone else who has agreed to be nominated. It would be wonderful to have some new volunteers for this influential and prestigious role.

Don't forget to bring food and/or drink

along, too. Some of you may wonder what to contribute. As is our custom established years ago by Herb Silverman: "Atheists will bring only food whose ingredients they can see, agnostics are not sure what they will bring or whether there really is food, skeptics will argue whether we really should have a potluck supper at all, pagans will bring wine, anarchists may bring whatever they damn well please, and humanists optimistically believe they will help to complement the meal and make it a wonderful experience for all."

*Directions:* The address is 313 West Hudson Avenue on Folly Beach. To get there, take Folly Road through James Island. When you go over the last bridge and are on Folly Island, take the third right turn onto West Hudson Avenue. Roger's house is three blocks down on the left side and his phone number is 588-9367.

## Thought of the Month the Separationist Editors

People like to think of humans as being superior to all of the other animals with whom we share this planet. For instance, we have heard people brag that only humans understand *death*. As evidence, they might point to all of the human rituals surrounding death. It is true that no other animal reacts to death in this exclusively human way.

Ironically, we view this same fact as possible evidence that humans are the only animals on the planet who do *not* understand death! Look at the sorts of things we do: Some cultures make sure that the bodies are comfortable, with lots of silky pillows and their nicest clothes; Some cultures provide the dead body with food and money, which the dead people will *obviously* need in order to have a happy and fulfilling life on the “other side”; in Vietnam they burn pictures of things to send those objects to their long deceased loved ones; and of course you can always watch someone on TV bringing messages back from the dead people watching over us...

Tell us again, which animal is it that understands death?!?

## Humanist Book Discussion Group by Sharon Strong



### ***This Month's Meeting***

This month's book group meeting will take place on Sunday, May 23, 3:00 – 5:00 p.m., at the Barnes and Noble bookstore in West Ashley (1812 Sam Rittenberg Blvd.). Taking a new direction for the group, we have decided to read a work of fiction: the best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown. Warren McCarl will lead a discussion of this tale, an international murder mystery involving clandestine religious societies, art, symbolism, and secrets from the time of Christ.

We also need to decide on some books to read when our group re-convenes in August, after our usual summer break. Come to the meeting with some ideas to share!

### ***New Coordinator for Book Group***

*The Humanist Book Discussion Group has a new Coordinator. Loretta Haskell – a long time book group attendee, discussion leader, and SHL Board Member – has graciously volunteered to take over this position, which I have been filling for over three years. It's time for a change! Thank you, Loretta, for taking over this responsibility!*

## Survey Reveals Public Antipathy Towards Atheists

Matt Cherry (IHS)

A nationwide telephone survey of more than 2,000 Americans has revealed that the non-religious are viewed as the greatest threat to the American way of life. The results, released this week, come from a survey conducted last summer by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center. The survey – consisting of 120 questions about the respondents' views on race, religion, intolerance and prejudice – is the first phase of a three-year study called the American Mosaic Project.

When questioned about what belief group doesn't share their vision of American society, 54 percent of survey participants indicated that atheists provided the greatest threat. Muslims were viewed as the second-highest threat.

"This result shows that religion is deeply intertwined with conceptions of American society," commented Doug Hartmann, one of the three professors spearheading the project. "The absence of faith, the belief in a higher being seems to be a major barrier between people in our society."

The new survey corroborates the findings of earlier studies. An April 2001 opinion poll by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life revealed that 66 percent of Americans viewed atheists unfavorably – almost twice the percentage that held a

negative view of Muslims. (While the percentage of Americans viewing Muslims unfavorably has increased significantly since September 11, 2001, the new survey shows that Muslims are still a lot less unpopular than the non-religious.) Another 2001 survey – by the Kaiser Foundation, The Washington Post, and Harvard University – found that 69 percent of Americans would be bothered by a close family member marrying an atheist.

Commenting on these surveys, Mary Ellen Sikes, Associate Director of the Institute for Humanist Studies, observed that, "Members of humanist, atheist, and freethought organizations – 'the community of reason' – are among the most compassionate, ethical, and patriotic people I have encountered anywhere. We volunteer in our communities, serve in the military, and have lower divorce rates than almost every mainstream religious denomination.

"Yet many non-believers feel they must hide their secularism from coworkers, neighbors, and families. We may be the last minority against which intolerance and discrimination are not only permitted, but modeled by political leaders at every level."

### One through One Hundred...

As some of you know, the SHL has arranged for the state of South Carolina to offer "In Reason We Trust" license plates with letter code "FT" for "freethought". (See photo.) The plates should be available this summer, although the procedure for obtaining them has not yet been fully clarified – keep your eyes on this spot for more info as it become available!



One thing we do know is that the plates FT 1 through FT 100 can be distributed by the SHL. The recipients of these plates will have to pay for them just like everyone else, but they get the advantage of being able to select the number of their choice while those who get higher numbered plates will just get the next number in sequence.

If you are planning to purchase an FT plate and have a particular number between 1 and 100 which interests you, *reserve it now!* Note that numbers 1, 10, 13, 28, 69 and 86 have already been taken. The easiest way to get your plate reserved is to sign up for it at the upcoming Potluck Dinner (see front page) where we will post a list. Or, you can write or call either Alex ([kasmana@cofc.edu](mailto:kasmana@cofc.edu)) or Herb ([silvermanh@cofc.edu](mailto:silvermanh@cofc.edu)) who will be maintaining this list.

## News Briefs

### Court Lets VMI Prayer Decision Stand

The Supreme Court announced on April 28, 2004 that it will not hear an appeal from the Virginia Military Institute. They had asked the court to consider overturning a lower court ruling ending their policy of praying at meals. The traditional grace at VMI thanked God for the food, and was found to be unconstitutional as the school is part of the state university system of Virginia.

This lack of action by the court lets stand a ruling of the 4th U.S. Circuit court of Appeals whose judges wrote "In this context, VMI's cadets are plainly coerced into participating in a religious exercise."

Justice Scalia wrote a dissenting opinion arguing that the Supreme Court should have made a ruling on the questions of separation of church and state that this decision raises. In particular, it remains to be seen whether this will have any direct impact on similar policies at the Pentagon and Naval Academy.

### Humanists in Foxholes Get Official Recognition

On July 25, 2003, the American Humanist Association Emblem of Spirit was added to the National Cemetery Administration's list of authorized emblems of belief for government-furnished headstones and markers. Previously, choices of no symbol or an atomic symbol identified as atheist were available. The authorization of the humanist symbol was the result of two years of persistent lobbying by the American Humanist Association and several of its military veteran members.

According to David Schettler, Director of Memorial Programs Service at Veterans Affairs, "the emblem will be added to NCA's official list of authorized emblems of belief." And "a graphic of the emblem will be included in the next revision of the 40-1330 application for a government headstone or marker." Form 40-1330 lists over 30 symbols that can be

placed on government issued headstones or markers and can be viewed on the internet at <http://www.cem.va.gov/hm.htm>.

"The agency's decision should be a reminder that there are indeed atheists, Humanists, and others in foxholes," continued Hileman. "There are clearly many veterans who want to be remembered in death as the proud Humanists they were in life."

*Note: There already was a symbol available for atheists! However, it was one that we didn't recognize or particularly like. It looks like the symbol for nuclear energy (stylized electron orbitals) with an "A" in the middle. – The Editors*

### Less Swearing in Court

The South Carolina Supreme Court ruled unanimously in March that state citizens do not have to swear an oath to God in order to serve on a jury. Circuit Judge Marc Westbrook dismissed a Lee County man from jury duty in 2000 for refusing to say "so help me God" even though a state law from the 1700's allows for non-religious affirmations. The juror, Robert Woodham, said he wasn't religious and thought the phrase violated the separation of church and state. The supreme court agreed, found that Westbrook was wrong, and ruled that no religious oath can be mandatory for jurors. Westbrook was not sanctioned, however.

On a more promising note, North Carolina District Judge James M. Honeycutt sent a letter to his local officials in March asking that religious references and oaths be removed from his courtrooms. He said that in an increasingly diverse culture, the burden should not be on non-Christian individuals to request an oath that does not require mention of the Bible or Christian God. He also points out that it will save the courts valuable time, as it will allow him to swear in persons of diverse beliefs at the same time.

## Is there an Alternative to AA in the Bible Belt?

Anne Boone

Alcoholics Anonymous is a wonderful organization. AA works on the principle of alcoholics helping fellow alcoholics; sharing, non-judgemental support, etc. It is based on a 12 step program, which has helped many alcoholics for many years. The AA program, as many of you may know, is based on admitting that you are helpless to your addiction, and that you can only be "saved" through a "higher power".

As an alcoholic agnostic, the "higher power" concept has always been a problem with me. At every local AA meeting that I have attended (at least a dozen, in different locations), the "higher power" is *God*. I pointed out at one meeting that "God" had been mentioned about 10 times in the first 15 minutes of the meeting. I was not criticizing. I was just stating a fact. One fellow attendee replied that he, also, had a problem with the religious aspect of AA. He said that he thought of "GOD" as "a Group Of Drunks". That did

get a hearty laugh from the whole group.

In other parts of the country, there are alternatives to AA and the very religious 12 step program: SOS, Liferings, Agnostic AA, the Health Recovery Center, Rational Recovery Systems and in California (my daughter lives there), you name it! Here, in the Bible Belt (at least in SC), these other options don't exist. (If I've missed something, I would be very grateful to hear about it.)

From my personal experience, the group 'thing', the getting together of people who are concerned with alcoholism is probably one of the best ways to tackle this problem. If there are other Secular Humanists, or anyone else, who would like to look into the possibility of future group meetings, please contact me. My phone number is 766-9909 and my e-mail address is [a.boone@earthlink.net](mailto:a.boone@earthlink.net).

## Letters to the Post & Courier from SHL Members

The April 4 news story "Study: Religion tonic for teens" concluded that "young people who are religious are better off in significant ways than their secular peers ... religious congregations benefit teens by affirming who they are, expecting a lot from them and giving them opportunities to show what they can do."

Without knowing what types of "secular peers" that the "young people who are religious" were compared with, this study is meaningless.

Assuming that the "young people who are religious" are members of a church, and that "their secular peers" have no such comparable secular affiliation, then it's safe to speculate that it might actually be the social comfort and involvement that the church often provides that is beneficial to the child, and not necessarily the religious component.

If the "secular" children studied were members of a Unitarian Church, an organized secular humanist group or a Buddhist temple, for example, there is a strong likelihood that this study would have demonstrated little in the way of any significant differences between the groups.

But this is speculative. And your readers need much more information before they can reasonably draw any conclusions from a study of this sort. How intact were the families of both groups, for example?

Typically, church attendance is associated with a family consisting of a mother, father and children. Was this also the case with the secular family situations? And secular children are most often not members of any group similar to a religiously oriented church.

Additionally, secular children are often ostracized, stigmatized and ridiculed by their "religious" peers; obviously this rejection doesn't make it any easier for non-religious children to be happy, socially accepted youngsters.

Perhaps if the children who were members of the dominant religious groups were taught to be more tolerant of the children who were being raised in secular environments, then the personal problems associated with rejection (smoking, drugs and depression) might be significantly reduced.

Any activity that brings youngsters together, in a mean-

ingful caring environment, whether it's religious or secular, is bound to have a positive influence on our children. Let's try to remember this the next time there is a study suggesting that "faith" is a better method of socializing our children than "free thought."

It's not the religion; it's the social network and support that has the positive effect on the child.

– WILLIAM DUSENBERRY

(Published in April 13, 2004 P&C)

In the March 31 letter "Advice to atheists," Professor Herb Silverman was advised "to consider the many intellectuals who have expressed a belief in the existence of God." The writer gives Albert Einstein as an example and then, for Dr. Silverman "and all other atheists," he gives a quote from the great patriot Thomas Paine.

All of the atheists that I know are, if not classed as an intellectual, are at least intelligent and have carefully examined different concepts of God as well as the reasoning of many intellectuals that have tried to justify belief in a supernatural God. I am sure that Dr. Silverman is well aware of the ideas of these intellectuals. The critic appears to be unaware or unwilling to acknowledge the main thrust of Einstein's religious ideas – "The idea of a personal God is an anthropological concept which I am unable to take seriously" and "I do not believe in immortality of the individual, and I consider ethics to be an exclusively human concern with no superhuman authority behind it."

As for Thomas Paine, in "The Age of Reason," he states "Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and tortuous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we call it the word of a demon than the word of God. It is a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind." What would Paine think of Mel Gibson's film?

– BILL UPSHUR

(Published in April 27, 2004 P&C)

### Adopt-A-Highway Pickup

Roger Prevost

If you hate litter as much as I do, you can do something about it. On May 15, it is time again for our tri-annual trash pick up. Our pickup area is beautiful Highway 61, between Drayton Hall and Magnolia Gardens. The Highway Department supplies orange bags for the trash and orange safety vests. Be sure to bring your own work or garden gloves. In return for keeping this stretch of highway clean, the SHL gets it's name on an Adopt-a-Highway sign. We'll meet 9:00 a.m. at the small dirt parking lot just across the street from the main Drayton Hall entrance on Highway 61.

If you have any questions, call me at home 588-9367 or on my cell 224-3960.

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

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**SHL Calendar**

**Saturday May 15, 2004:** *Adopt-A-Highway Pickup* – Join organizer Roger Prevost and the crew, 9am at the dirt parking lot across from Drayton Hall on Hwy 61

**Sunday May 16, 2004:** *SHL Annual Summertime Potluck* – This will be our last meeting before the summer break. It will be a potluck supper followed by a short business meeting. These potlucks are a great opportunity to socialize and get to know other SHL members. Newsletter subscribers who never or seldom attend a meeting are encouraged to come to this friendly gathering. Don't forget to bring food and/or beverages. 4PM at Roger Prevost's house on Folly.

**Sunday May 23, 2004:** *Humanist Book Discussion Group* – Meets 3-5pm at the West Ashley Barnes and Noble bookstore to discuss Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

**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/](http://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)

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