



Open Discussion Time

4:00PM January 16, 2005

Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston

Instead of having a speaker this month, the January meeting will be a group discussion led by Roger Prevost and Dave Brown. They have picked four topics that are sure to spark some lively debate. The topics are

1. Are school vouchers good for our education system?
2. How should atheists raising children introduce them to the concepts of religion that they will need to live and understand the culture in this country?
3. Red States, Blue States- do the stated principles of Secular Humanism necessarily have us leaning to the political left?
4. The Patriot Act - security versus constitutional rights.

Get your thoughts together and join us for a fun meeting where everyone who wants to gets to speak their mind.

Review of “The God Gene: How Faith Is Hard-Wired into Our Genes” Carole Cohen

Several years ago in this newsletter, I reviewed a book called *Why God Won't Go Away* by two scientists who were eager to demonstrate that a phenomenon occurring in the brains of a small number of meditating monks and nuns could be proof that God existed. In *The God Gene*, geneticist Dean Hamer proposes that he has discovered a genetic component in spirituality. Both books doubtless bring aid and comfort to believers, who feel beleaguered in an increasingly secular society, but in neither book is the evidence convincing.

Since the various studies and experiments described in Hamer's book are complex, I can give only a superficial description. To find out if genes influence spirituality (this term was chosen because it is more inclusive than “religion”), Dr. Hamer utilized a true-false questionnaire to determine subjects' degrees of self-transcendence, which has three components: self-forgetfulness, transpersonal identification, and mysticism. Using twins as the subjects, Hamer discovered a degree of heritability of these traits. To find a gene that influenced spirituality, he turned to

pharmacology and ultimately isolated a gene (VMAT2) associated with brain chemicals such as serotonin and dopamine that can alter normal consciousness. He concluded that a genetic predisposition for spirituality and faith is an evolutionary advantage because it keeps us “from being incapacitated by our dread of mortality.”

Hamer's project is more complex than the one in *Why God Won't go Away*, but both are tarnished by wishful thinking. To be fair to Hamer, he warns the reader early on that the book is about “whether God genes exist, not whether there is a God.” Despite this disclaimer, he demonstrates repeatedly that he is biased toward spirituality. This bias gives the book a peculiarly split personality because the scientist in Hamer is at odds with the Hamer the believer. There is no reason why a scientist can't be religious or spiritual-some great scientists have been one or the other-but the belief should not taint the science.

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News Briefs

Florida Faces Church/State Question

Listening to those who argue for increased involvement of the government in religious activity today, you would think that the concept of Church/State Separation is a recent invention by revisionists. However, if you believed that, it might be difficult to explain a line in the Florida Constitution, written almost 120 years ago.

The Florida Constitution explicitly forbids state money being use "directly or indirectly" to help religious institutions. Clearly, it was the intention of those writing that Constitution to impose a complete separation between the church and the state of Florida. This, however, has become a problem for the proponents of school vouchers in Florida, since that (generally politically conservative) group wishes to see these vouchers used for church run schools.

Florida Senator Daniel Webster has already begun working on an amendment to correct this "problem". But, for the moment, attempts are still being made by both sides to find a resolution through the judiciary.

UGA Cheerleading Coach Stays Fired

On December 21, 2004, a federal judge denied an appeal for reinstatement by a cheerleading coach at

the University of Georgia. Marilou Braswell was fired in August for retaliating against a Jewish cheerleader who had complained about pressure to participate in Christian prayer and Bible study with her teammates. As part of her defense, Braswell points out that the mingling of religious coaching with sports coaching is a common practice in the state of Georgia. Her attorney points out that other coaches freely integrate religious beliefs into their programs and that the university had offered no guidelines about the limits of such religious activity.

Religion, Humanism and the Tsunami

In general, the out-spoken American evangelists who attempted to describe AIDS and 9/11 as the acts of a vengeful god have been largely silent regarding the religious ramifications of the horrific natural disaster that befell South Asia Christmas Day. However, many religious leaders have not. Some Buddhists blame the deaths on bad karma built up from this or past lives and survivors are encouraged to transfer good karma gained from good deeds to their departed loved ones to give them a better rebirth. Muslim groups have varied in their interpretations of the event, from punishment for sins to a test for the survivors. Some Christian leaders have called it a warning that the endtimes

are coming and we should prepare. A Wiccan high priestess explains it as part of Mother Nature's natural cycles, and that our preoccupation with the human toll is due to our mistaken view of ourselves as the center of the Universe.

Of course, not all religious groups have used this as an opportunity to preach. There are many good organizations working to help the survivors of the tsunami disaster, both religious and non-religious. By coincidence, Institute for Humanist Studies runs a humanist relief agency in Indonesia and is accepting donations for tsunami disaster relief. Find out more at www.humaniststudies.org

Creationism in Public Schools to be Revisited in South Carolina

A bill is currently in committee in the South Carolina senate that would create a Science Standards Committee of 19 members (only two of which are mandated to be scientists) for the sole purpose of studying the teaching of the origin of species in public schools. If convened, they are to determine by February 15, 2006 on "whether there is a consensus on the definition of science" and "whether alternatives to evolution as the origin of species should be offered in schools." The bill is S.114, and is sponsored by Senator Ritchie.

Humanist Book Discussion Group

Loretta Haskell

The Humanist Book Club will meet to discuss Joseph Campbell's "The Power of Myth." The book was published as a companion to the PBS interview between Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell on the subject of myth and meaning in today's world. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, the Doubleday Editor at the time, was heavily instrumental in its publication. The club will meet at the West Ashley Barnes & Noble on January 23, 2005 from 3:00 - 5:00 and Sharon Strong will facilitate. Please join us if you are interested in the discussion regardless of whether or not you have read the book.

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Open Letters from SHL Members

Published in Post & Courier 12/23/04

It is a fact that the majority of those who lived in the 13 colonies when the United States was created considered themselves Christians. It is a fact that the majority of those that live in the 50 states today consider themselves Christians. If that is what we mean by a Christian nation, then let us all concede that the United States is a Christian nation.

It is a fact that the First Amendment forbids Congress to establish a religion. It is a fact that the courts have held this prohibition applies to lower levels of government as well. That means the government at every level has no business promoting any religion, Christian or otherwise, even though the United States is a Christian nation.

For some Christians, this is unacceptable. Symbols and celebrations of Christianity must be everywhere or these people feel deprived. If anyone objects to having Christian symbols and celebrations forced on them, these Christians feel that they are under attack and claim that there is anti-Christian bigotry. Nonsense.

If you want your children to learn about their religion, teach them at home or in your religious institutions. If you want to pray, do it at home or in your religious institutions. Religious symbols and celebrations are a private matter and a matter for your religious community.

But, I join these Christians in objecting to the attempt to gloss over Christmas celebrations by calling them holiday celebrations. I belong to several organizations that have holiday parties in December. Well, folks, if Christmas didn't occur in December, none of these parties would happen. They are Christmas parties. But that's all right because these are private organizations, not public schools and not government.

So I call on all non-Christians to wish their Christian friends a genuine, "Merry Christmas," and I call on all Christians to recognize the right of the rest of us not to have your celebrations forced on us at public expense.

SAMUEL M. MOSKOW

Published in the Post & Courier 12/25/04

One and a half cheers for Cal Thomas' Dec.

16 op-ed criticizing the charade of blending commerce with spirituality. I, too, would like to see people focus more on feeding the hungry and clothing the naked (good humanistic values) than on buying unneeded items they can't afford.

I part company with Thomas, however, when he complains about Santa becoming a God-substitute who requires nothing more of children than that they be nice. What's wrong with that? I hope children will notice that being nice to others makes them feel good about themselves, and that this simple discovery follows them into adulthood. Santa doesn't ask children to worship him or to put love for him above love for family and friends. He asks only that we be good for goodness' sake. Three cheers for Santa!

HERB SILVERMAN

Letter sent to Anthony Romero Executive Director of the ACLU

Dear Mr. Romero,

I am a board member of the South Carolina affiliate and a long time supporter of the ACLU. I watched your NOW interview with Bill Moyers and thought you did a fine job, with one exception. While you said all the right things about Church/State separation, you danced around your own religious beliefs. When Moyers asked if you were religious, you talked about how you were brought up religious and how religious your mother is. When Moyers asked if you believed in God, you refused to answer. While you certainly have the right to remain silent, you also have the right to come out of your atheist closet (which I assume you are in) just as you are out of your gay closet. Gays would properly be outraged were you to avoid acknowledging your orientation because of political expediency. In our creeping theocracy, I'm sure you have heard politicians of both major parties wrongly assert that "freedom OF religion does not mean freedom FROM religion." Democrats are beginning to compete with Republicans in publicly proclaiming their religiosity. At a time when so many Americans equate atheism with immorality, we need more nontheistic public figures to acknowledge who they are, especially when asked.

Sincerely, HERB SILVERMAN

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Review of "The God Gene" Carole Cohen

(Continued from Page 1) Here is a sampling of passages that convey Hamer's less than rigorous approach to the subject.

1. Despite the title, Hamer acknowledges that the expression "God gene" is not correct because many genes are involved in consciousness. Moreover, the specific gene he discovered "plays only a *small, if key*, role in human spirituality."
2. Acknowledging that genetic data that explains individual differences in spirituality can't be applied to the whole species, Hamer says "...the *hope* is that the same genes that play a role in individual differences also are key players in the overall trait." I could understand the use of hope in the context of a scientist working on a cure for diabetes, but in this context the word suggests an unacceptable bias.
3. A clinical trial gave sugar pills to Parkinson's patients, who thought they were receiving medications. Nonetheless, their own brains began producing dopamine. Hamer apparently finds something spiritual in this because he says, "Do placebos work solely through the brain, or is there something going on here?" We may not know yet what process of the brain is involved in this phenomenon, but why assume it is spiritual?
4. Even though Hamer indicated that the book is not about religion, there are a number of references to the positive effects of religion. He cites a study of older people in North Carolina that found that those who attended church at least once a week lived longer than those who attended less frequently. In the description of the study it was unclear if gender was one of the variables, but you don't have to be a scientist to know that women, who make up a higher percentage of churchgoers, live longer than men.
5. Experiments have been done on intercessory prayer. One group of hospital patients in serious condition was assigned to an anonymous group of volunteers who prayed for them; a control group was left prayerless (unless their friends and family were doing some surreptitious praying). The patients were told about the experiment, but did not know to which group they were assigned.

"The results were, in a word, miraculous," according to Hamer, who then goes on to say that prayer has nothing to do with God genes. Why then spend so much discussing the subject unless the author is indulging in some wishful thinking?

6. One of the most blatant examples of Hamer's "split personality"-his inner conflict between scientist and believer-is the discussion of St. Francis's prayer for travelers. Hamer notes that a prayer is a meme, a self-replicating unit of culture that is passed on only if it appears to work. However, believing that it will work can cause the release of dopamine, the feel-good brain chemical. And, though Hamer doesn't say so, perhaps the effect of the dopamine causes the people experiencing a crisis (let's say sailors in a storm) to make a superhuman effort to save themselves. Up to this point, this is good science. There is ample evidence that what goes on in the brain can influence the body. However, Hamer does not stop there. He concludes with this statement: "This isn't to say that prayer to St. Francis doesn't work. It *very well may* [italics added]. The point is that, given the above, people would continue to practice and pass on this meme even if it didn't work." These last two sentences encapsulate my problem with this book. First Hamer implies St. Francis answers prayers, and then he seems to say that prayer is just a meme and there is no divine intervention, just occasional lucky outcomes.

These are just some of the many instances of self-contradiction, ambiguous evidence, and just plain waffling that occur in *The God Gene*. Dr. Hamer clearly would like to believe there is something non-material in the cosmos. His acknowledgments end with thanks to his spiritual guides, and at one point he speaks wistfully about never having had the experience of satori. If he could indeed prove that spirituality is part of our human make-up (and this book has certainly not done that), would Dr. Hamer then take the next step and start the search for the ineffable? If so, he would be among the illimitable numbers of humans, past, present, and future, who refuse to accept their mere materiality.

Save the Date for Adopt-a Highway Roger Prevost

The SHL participates in the SC Department of Transportation's Adopt a Highway program. Adopt a Highway began in South Carolina in 1988 and has become one of our state's most successful programs in combatting litter on our highways. In exchange for our participation, the SHL gets a roadside sign that enhances our group's image through community involvement. Our next pick up date is February 19th at 9:00 AM. Our new pick up area is Harborview Road on James Island. Details of where to meet will be in next month's newsletter. If you have questions, contact Roger Prevost at 588-9367.

THE SEPARATIONIST
Newsletter of the
Secular Humanists
of the Lowcountry

Editors:
Alex and Laura Kasman

SHL Calendar

January 16, 2005: *SHL Meeting* – An open discussion on controversial topics led by Roger Prevost and Dave Brown. 4:00PM at Gage Hall on Archdale Street.

January 23, 2005: *Book Discussion Group* – Discussing Joseph Campbell's "The Power of Myth." The club will meet at the West Ashley Barnes & Noble from 3:00 - 5:00 and Sharon Strong will facilitate.

February 6, 2005: *Positive Atheism* – A sermon given by SHL President Herb Silverman at the Unitarian Universalist Church at their 11AM service.

March 25 - 27, 2005 : *31st National Convention of American Atheists* – To be held in Philadelphia, PA. For more information <http://www.atheists.org/convention/>

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:

lowcountry.humanists.net

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. Write to us at newsletter@lowcountry.humanists.net or use the contact information at the bottom of page 2.

On the Web at [HTTP://LOWCOUNTRY.HUMANISTS.NET](http://LOWCOUNTRY.HUMANISTS.NET)

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