



A personal experience in the Supreme Court case, *Abington vs. Schempp*, and what it means today

a talk by Ellery Schempp
4PM Sunday November 13 Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street

Our speaker this month is a hero of cold war battles for the separation of church and state. In 1956, as sophomore at Abington Senior High School, Ellery Schempp initiated a protest to the Pennsylvania public schools practice of "Morning Devotions", which included readings from the Bible and recita-

Please note that the November meeting is on the 2nd Sunday
November 13

tion of the "Lord's Prayer". He read the Koran instead, and was officially reprimanded. In subsequent legal action, with the support of his parents and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), this case eventually reached the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court decision, known as *Abington vs. Schempp* and *Murray vs. Curlett*, was decided in 1963, ending Bible-reading as a devotional practice in schools as a violation of the First Amendment.

Despite the fact that his high school principal wrote letters of *dis*-recommendation to every college he applied to, Ellery went on to Tufts University, where he graduated cum laude with majors in physics and geology. He went on to earn a PhD in Physics at Brown, and became an Assistant Professor of Crystallography and Research Assistant Professor in Physics at the University of Pittsburgh. He later worked or consulted for Lawrence Berkeley National

Laboratory, GE Medical Systems, and American Superconductor Corp. and is the author or co-author of 33 publications in professional physics journals.

Dr. Schempp is a frequent speaker on church-state issues and in 1996 received the Religious Liberty Award from Americans United for Separation of Church and State. In 2002, he was elected to the Abington High School Hall of Fame for his contributions to science (and, indirectly, his role in *Abington vs. Schempp*). Schempp received the 2005 Religious Liberty Award from American Humanist Association.

"One thing that amuses me sometimes," he says, "is that there were a number of persons that wished me and my family ill owing to our position in favor of separation of Bible and schools. I am glad to report that these prayers did not succeed, and I have had innumerable good fortunes."

Regarding the entry for him on Wikipedia, (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ellery_Schempp) Ellery says "I think I am called a "political activist". Not sure I agree. All I wanted was to keep Bible-reading out of schools. I confess to being a liberal. I am an opponent of fundamentalism in all its guises; I am an opponent of "creationism" and "intelligent design". And a lover of our Universe."



Christian (expletive deleted) movie rentals

Move over NetFlix, now there's CleanFlicks, a company that buys general release movies, edits out all the sex, violence, profanity and nudity, and rents you what's left. Their slogan, "It's about choice!", is Orwellian, but their webpage featuring a smiling clean cut white family with five kids, contains not a hint of irony. And despite protests by directors and the movie industry in general, it's been found to be perfectly legal, thanks in part to the long standing practice of editing movies for television (although that was done with the input of the copyright owners). The most popular rental this month, according to their Website, is Troy. The expurgated version must be about 30 minutes long.

Or if you don't like profanity or violence but want the sex scenes left in, or some other combination, there's ClearPlay software. ClearPlay's technology consists of filters, customized for each film, that prevent objectionable material from appearing on the screen or soundtrack. The result is said to be almost seamless. When starting to play each movie the viewer chooses which filters they

want activated. There are three main filter categories (violence, explicit scenes / nudity, and language) and fourteen subcategories (moderate violence, graphic violence, disturbing images, sensual content, crude sexual content, nudity, explicit sexual situations, vain reference to deity(!), crude language and humor, ethnic and social slurs, cursing, strong profanity, graphic vulgarity and explicit drug use. For people who claim to be too innocent for intact movies, they sure do know their categories of objectionable content.

No special discs are required, but not all movies are in the ClearPlay database. So far there are about 500, and more are added regularly.

The filter maker's stance is that its software is not illegal because it doesn't alter the original DVD. I plead guilty to hitting the fast forward through gory scenes sometimes, so I hope they're right. The case is still in the courts.

Now if only someone would make a PreacherFree-TV evangelist blocker...

American Thanksgiving 2005:



- Atheist:** Friend, you need to moisten that turkey with the drippings as it cooks or it will turn out as dry as an old stick!
- Theist :** Don't worry! I believe it will moisten itself.
- Atheist:** Oh? And how is *that* going to happen?
- Theist :** It's a *faith baste* turkey!

Update on Tutoring for Burke High School:

As reported last month, the SHL is joining up with two local churches to provide assistance to students at Burke High School. SHL members Dave Brown and Alex Kasman attended an organizational meeting at the Morris Brown AME Church where they were made to feel welcome and appreciated. There they learned about the two aspects of the program: tutoring and mentoring. Tutors will be assigned to a particular teacher at the school and will arrange a schedule with that teacher to help students

with English and mathematics. On the other hand, mentors are paired up with a particular student, to serve as the student's friend and role model. In both cases, volunteers are expected to work at least one hour per week on a regular (but flexible) schedule. It may be too late to volunteer as a mentor for this year, since mentoring requires training. However, they are still looking for volunteers to tutor. Please contact Sharon Fratepietro for more information or to volunteer at 577-0637 or sharoninsc@hotmail.com.

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Is “Jewish Atheist” an Oxymoron?

Excerpted from article by **Herb Silverman** published in *Secular Nation*

In 1990, I was a candidate for Governor of South Carolina in order to challenge the unconstitutional provision that prohibited atheists from holding public office. When talking about it to audiences, I mention that my campaign started with four strikes against me—as a liberal, Yankee, Jew, and atheist. In the Q&A that follows, I am invariably asked how I can be both a Jew and an atheist. This article is my answer, along with an explanation of why so many Jews become atheists

According to all branches of Judaism, a person is Jewish if born to a Jewish mother. Therefore, since my mother was Jewish, so am I. Every Jew considers me a Jew. So who am I to argue? Another way to be a Jew is by converting, though this can become controversial because Orthodox Jews often don't recognize conversion by other branches of Judaism. Some but not all branches are willing to count as Jewish a person with a gentile (non-Jewish) mother and a Jewish father.

I am also without belief in any gods, which makes me a Jewish atheist. Many gentiles are confused by the term “Jewish atheist” because “Christian atheist” really is an oxymoron. To be a Christian, one must believe in Jesus.

Why does the Bible repeatedly say “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,” instead of the more concise, “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?” One Talmudic explanation is that each person must search for and find his own God. My search led me to a god who didn't exist.

When we think of well-known Christians, the Pope and Mother Theresa come to mind. Or maybe Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. Well-known Jews are Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Marx. Recently, my academic institution had a Jewish film series, featuring movies by Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, and the Marx Brothers. What all these Jews have in common is a lack of god-belief. They also openly criticize or make fun of religion. I am hard-pressed to name a pious Jew who is a household name (other than Jesus).

Surprisingly, there are even some Orthodox Jews who are atheists. An Orthodox Jew observes as many of the 613 Commandments (Taryag Mitzvot) as possible. Yes, there are 613—not just 10. Some Commandments can't

be observed because they involve ritual sacrifices at a Temple that no longer stands. Orthodox atheists today observe as many Commandment-based silly rituals as they can, like not mixing wool and cotton, or not having milk and meat at the same meal. But they cannot will themselves to believe in a God they don't believe in.

The 613 Commandments can be separated into ethical Commandments (interaction with human beings) and ritual Commandments (interaction with God). In the previous sentence, I broke one of the ritual Commandments by writing “God.” Orthodox Jews write “G-d” to avoid taking His name in vain. Some of the so-called ethical Commandments have nothing to do with ethics as we know them. Biblical ethics include not having sex with your menstruating wife, or not allowing a widow whose husband died childless to marry anyone but her deceased husband's brother. Overall, I keep about 37 of the ethical and none of the ritual Commandments.

The Torah (Bible), which Christians call the Old Testament, is the foundation for religious Jews. The Talmud is a collection of writings by rabbinical scholars who attempted to clarify and codify various scriptural passages and Biblical law. Their discussions and commentaries reflect conflicting explanations and interpretations. Talmudic study by youngsters might explain why so many Jews grow up to be lawyers (and atheists).

As an Orthodox youth I, too, studied the Talmud. This helped bring me to atheism. Why does the Bible repeatedly say “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,” instead of the more concise, “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?” One Talmudic explanation is that each person must search for and find his own God. My search led me to a god who didn't exist.

Theological ideas about God are generally private matters in Judaism and not enforced by a religious establishment. When a Reform Rabbi spoke to our local Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, I asked him how many in his Congregation are atheists. He said he didn't know, because he doesn't ask such embarrassing questions. I know of two openly atheistic national Jewish organizations: The Society for Humanistic Judaism and The Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations. They both emphasize cultural and ethical precepts within Judaism and promote humanistic values.

Religious Jews are generally not very bothered by my brand of Judaism. They reserve their enmity for Messianic Jews (Jews for Jesus). I enjoy pointing out to ultra-Orthodox Jews that they have more beliefs in common

with Jews for Jesus than with me. Both groups believe the Bible is the word of God and that a Messiah is coming. They differ only on whether it will be a first or second coming.

You might say, since I don't observe religious rituals or believe what religious Jews believe, why bother talking about my Jewishness? Other atheists should easily be able to identify with some of my reasons. I grew up in an era when there was considerable discrimination against Jews. A number of Jews changed their names and tried to pass for gentiles, hoping for acceptance into mainstream culture. I found this deplorable. My Jewish juices flowed most deeply and proudly when anti-Semitism was present. Having relatives who died in the Holocaust, I was not about to give Hitler a posthumous victory by killing off my own Judaism.

Several decades ago, my identity with Judaism was strong. Whenever one Jew committed an indiscretion, it seemed to affect all Jews. Today, in America, there is relatively little discrimination against Jews and quite a bit against atheists. For this reason, you might say that my loyalty has shifted. I now think of myself as an atheist who happens to be a Jew, rather than as a Jew who happens to be an atheist.

But my Judaism is more than anti-anti-Semitism. There are certainly parts of Jewish culture and values that have shaped me. It is no coincidence that a disproportionately high percentage of Jews have been engaged in civil rights activism, or that numbering less than 1/4% of the world population they have been awarded 21% of Nobel prizes. Making education of children (which includes praise for those who ask questions) such a high priority in the Jewish culture is undoubtedly a reason so many of us become atheists. Besides, I happen to like latkes, knishes, and gefilte fish—which also makes me a gastronomic Jew.

But far be it from me to be an apologist for Judaism, especially the religious kind. I find fundamentalists of all religions to be a grave threat to our civilization. In my own family, I have an ultra-Orthodox aunt who, when she found out I was getting married, asked just one question: Is she Jewish? When she got the dreaded answer that Sharon Fratepietro is not Jewish, my aunt refused to meet or talk to her. Had this aunt been my mother, she would have sat Shiva (a Jewish ritual to mourn the dead). Sharon and I, who married in our 50's, can laugh about it. But this kind of attitude has split apart many families. A more moderate family member, who heard that Sharon and I were both atheists, wanted to know why I couldn't marry a Jewish atheist.

Another bonus to being Jewish is that I can criticize Jews, Jewish practices, or Jewish beliefs without being labeled anti-Semitic, just as criticism of U.S. political leaders or policy is better tolerated from American citizens. I have published many letters in newspapers that could only come from a Jew.

I can't complete an article about being Jewish without a touch of Jewish humor. So let me end with a Jewish Joke, appropriate for atheists.

Four Rabbis are arguing about a Talmudic passage. Three give one interpretation, but Rabbi Levy gives another. After several hours of Rabbi Levy trying to convince the other three, he looks to the sky in desperation and says, "God, please give us a sign as to who is correct." Suddenly, it gets very dark, begins to thunder, and a booming voice shouts: "Levy is correct!" After a stunned moment of silence one of the other Rabbis says, "O.K. That makes it three to two."



Humanist Book Group

by Loretta Haskell

The SHL Book Club will meet on Sunday, November 27th at the West Ashley Barnes & Noble to discuss *How We Believe: Science, Skepticism, and the Search for God* by Michael Shermer from 3:00-5:00 p.m. This book explores the latest research and theories of psychiatrists, neuroscientists, epidemiologists and philosophers offering insights into age-old questions that include how and why humans put their faith in a higher power, even in the face of scientific skepticism. Everyone is invited to attend regardless of whether or not they have read the book. Alia Marks will facilitate the discussion.

Letters to the editor by SHL Members

To the Post and Courier:

Now that I am retired, I find that I have more time to indulge my long term passion for reading books about science and history. The more I read, the more surprised I am by people who in this day and age still believe in such things as "creationism" and "intelligent design".

I recently completed an excellent book, "Atom", by Lawrence Krauss, and would like to share a quote from this book with readers of the Post and Courier. Krauss is talking about the French scientist Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier, considered by many to be the father of modern chemistry. Lavoisier had the misfortune to be born wealthy, and during the French Revolution was arrested and guillotined in 1794 at the age of 50. When he was arrested and tried he was in the middle of several important experiments and asked the judge to delay his death sentence until after he had finished this work. The judge is reported to have claimed "The new republic will have no need for science or scientists. Off with your head."

Here is the quote: "There are times, such as when the state school board in Kansas in 1999 removed evolution from its science curriculum, when I am reminded of Lavoisier, and shudder at the damage that can be done by ignorance combined with power. Even the magnificent modern edifice called science, built up over half a millennium of small increments toward the truth, is not safe from the vicissitudes of the political world. If, as Carl Sagan claimed, science is a 'candle in the dark,' banishing the demons that haunted the benighted eras of mankind, it burns tenuously at best. One generation of ignorance, steeped in myth and mysticism, is all that may be needed to snuff it out."

In the political climate in which we now live, this quote seems particularly pertinent.

Cisco H. Lindsey

To the Post and Courier:

When Herb Silverman issued a challenge to anyone who can find "God" mentioned in the U.S. Constitution, many people probably thought the \$1000 prize would be easy to claim. After all, over the past few years, several famous television commentators (who honestly should have known better) have mistakenly claimed that the phrase "one nation Under God" or the statement

that "America is a Christian Nation" appear in the Constitution.

As Skip Johnson unintentionally shows in his recent Post and Courier piece (10/2/05), this is quite far from the truth. Although Johnson claims to be finding "God" in the Constitution and claiming the monetary prize, the weakness of his evidence only goes to further support Silverman's original contention: the Constitution of the United States is a secular document and makes no mention of God or a role for religion in government.

Johnson does not limit himself to discussing the Constitution. Interestingly, the very existence of the other examples he presents seems to argue against his point. After all, he is able to refer to various famous Americans and other documents which unambiguously refer to a deity or religion. That it was included so explicitly in other documents and speeches of the day makes it even more mysterious that the only clear discussion of such topics in the Constitution is the prohibition on the establishment of a national church. Mysterious, that is, unless one believes it was not an accident but rather the intended purpose of the authors to steer clear of religion in the establishment of their new government.

Of course, Johnson argues that "God" is mentioned there, included implicitly in the word "oath". As he acknowledges, the word "oath", at least today, can be used to mean a promise outside of any religious context. His claim that in 1787 it necessarily meant "an oath to God" is undercut by one simple fact: the oath to be taken by the president is included in the Constitution and, as written, it is entirely secular in nature. This seems like rather convincing evidence that the word "oath" here did not have any hidden religious meaning.

Johnson also argues that there is religious significance to the fact that the Constitution excepted Sunday as a day on which the President had to return a bill to Congress. Of course, this is not entirely unrelated to the fact that Sunday is the sabbath for many Christians. However, allowing Sunday as an exception here falls far short of the sort of official affirmation of religion that many seem to believe the Constitution contains. It certainly does not qualify as "finding God" mentioned explicitly. It is merely a rather practical acknowledgment of the fact that in a country with freedom of religion and so many Christians, it is unreasonable to expect the same sort of business

efficiency on Sunday as on the other days of the week.

Many of Johnson's other points are essentially irrelevant to the original question but perhaps deserve a brief mention here as well. Johnson points out that US Currency has the words "In God We Trust" printed on it. Of course, this is not evidence of "God" being mentioned in the Constitution, but it should also be noted that these words were not included on any US currency until the 19th century and not on paper money until the 20th century and so have even less bearing on what was intended by the Framers in 1787. Johnson also chooses to quote Jefferson (from the Declaration of Independence). His quotes are rather selective, though, since he fails to mention Jefferson's famous letter in which he coins the powerful metaphor "Wall of Separation between Church and State" and makes it clear that he really did believe the US government was created as an entirely secular entity. (In fact, it may also be of interest to note that Jefferson was the only president thus far who did not voluntarily add the words "so help me God" to his inaugural oath.) It is also odd that Johnson fails to find any quotes from James Madison, who is generally recognized as the author of the US Constitution itself. Madison, though himself a Christian, made his opinion clear when he argued that it was unconstitutional for a president to call for a national (non-denominational) day of prayer. Like Jefferson, Madison believed in the "wall of separation".

I hope that some other Post and Courier readers have attempted to respond to Silverman's challenge and were surprised to see no explicit mention of religion or God in this nation's founding document. The fact is, even though a very large percentage of Americans are extremely religious, our government is secular. This is in no way a contradiction. The point of a secular government is not to prevent Americans from being religious, but rather to stay neutral on matters of religion so that we really have freedom of religion free from government coercion. That those who wish to argue otherwise must resort to using the dictionary definition of "oath" from 1787 is a good indication that their evidence is very weak indeed.

Alex Kasman

The Separationist

**Newsletter of the
Secular Humanists
of the Lowcountry**

Editors:

**Laura and Alex
Kasman**

SHL Calendar:

**November 11. Atheists in Foxholes
March.** Washington DC.

For more information contact
lcartercenter@yahoo.com

**November 13 (Sunday) 4PM Gage
Hall** Monthly meeting with speaker
Ellery Schempp.

**November 20 (Sunday) 6PM Gage
Hall** UUC Diversity Discussion on
Welcoming and inclusiveness featuring
the Film: *"We're Your Neighbors/Gay
Youth"*.

**November 27 (Sunday) 3PM. Barnes
and Noble, West Ashley** SHL Book
Discussion Group

Join the SHL:

The Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry (SHL) is a group of free-thinkers 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:

<http://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.

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