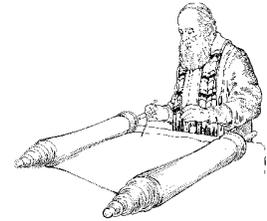




## WHAT'S GOD GOT TO DO WITH IT?: ATHEISM AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

a talk by David Benatar  
4PM Sunday January 15 2006  
at Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston SC



It is commonly thought that theism entails full religious observance and that atheism entails either the abandonment of religious practice or, at least, its reform.

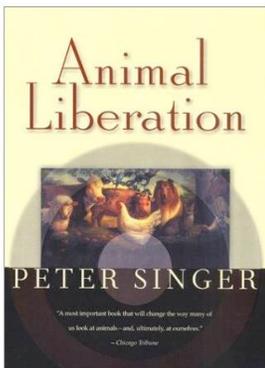
Focusing on Judaism, the speaker at our January meeting will argue against both of these claims.

Professor David Benatar will present the viewpoint that both theistic departure from religious observance and atheistic adherence to religious practice are coherent. He will outline the features of those religions that make them more conducive to atheistic observance. Finally, he will address various objections to full observance by atheists.

Dr. David Benatar is Associate Professor and Head, Department of Philosophy, University of Cape Town. He was an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the College of Charleston from 1995 to 1997. He has worked at both the University of Wisconsin and Brandeis University and is the recipient of the University of Cape Town's Distinguished Teacher Award. Dr. Benatar has published articles on philosophy, religion, and bioethics in a variety of research journals. He has edited scholarly works including *Ethics for Everyday* (2002), and *Life, Death and Meaning* (2004). His forthcoming book, to be published shortly by Oxford University Press, has the intriguing title: *Better Never to Have Been*.

### Humanist Book Discussion Group

The Humanist Book Club will be meeting January 22nd at the West Ashley Barnes and Noble from 3:00-5:00 p.m. to discuss philosopher Peter Singer's "Animal Liberation." This book was a catalyst in spurring the animal rights movement as it is known as today. The book discusses the so-called humane use of animals in scientific research, describes the current state of animal testing, and brings up to date the activities of the animal rights movement. Sharon Strong will be facilitating the discussion and everyone is encouraged to attend and participate in the discussion regardless of whether or not they have read the book.



## The \$1,000 Constitutional Challenge (Continued)

*Editor's Note: When SHL President Herb Silverman challenged Post and Courier readers to find the words "God" or "Jesus" in the Constitution, he started an interesting dialogue on Church/State separation in that paper that has been interesting, but too long to entirely reproduce in a single newsletter. In an earlier issue we published Herb's comments on Skip Johnson's attempt to claim the prize. Below we reproduce Johnson's reply to Herb's comments and Herb's final rebuttal as published in the December 4, 2005 issue of the Post and Courier.*

### Finding God in Constitution 'basic logic'

I accept Herb Silverman's decision not to pay me \$1,000 for showing him God is in the U.S. Constitution, even though to defend his decision, he had to misrepresent my arguments, quote me out of context, ascribe motives to me I never had, claim I made arguments I never made and, for the second time, change the wording of his challenge to fit the need of the moment.

But most of that dealt with backup material I had used to bolster my main argument that God is in the Constitution, so I'll ignore Dr. Silverman's inaccuracies and focus on my whole point that God is in the Constitution. The Constitution writers certainly wanted to keep government from associating itself with any particular religion, and they absolutely wanted to keep church and state separate. But they never intended to write God out of the Constitution. Indeed, by including the word "oath," they purposefully wrote God into the Constitution.

It's basic logic. If A is in B and B is in C, then A is in C. If a ball is in a box and the box is in a barrel, the ball is in the barrel. If God is in "oath" and "oath" is in the Constitution, God is in the Constitution. It's as simple as that.

And despite Dr. Silverman's weak attempt to show otherwise, God definitely is in "oath." That was plainly clear in 1787 when the Constitution was signed. Every dictionary in use then associated oath with deity. So did common usage. Without God, oath had no meaning. The Constitution's signers understood that and that's what they intended. After all, the signers were deeply religious men who saw themselves as working in partnership with God in a bold experiment to establish a whole new form of government, and they fully expected God to lead them after that government was established.

They even took oaths - colonies-mandated religious oaths! - to support Christianity. It never would have occurred to these men to leave God out of the Constitution that was to guide them into the new world. Kings may have sworn oaths by their crowns and knights may have sworn oaths by their knighthood, but the signers of the U.S. Constitution swore oaths only before their God. Otherwise adding the words "or affirmation" would have been redundant.

The writers added "or affirmation" specifically to let people in who would not or could not swear to God.

Dr. Silverman's automobile carries a vanity license plate that reads,

"In Reason We Trust." If Dr. Silverman's brand of reasoning prevents him from seeing the ball in the barrel, I'll keep my trust in God.

--Skip Johnson

### Arguments fall short in search for deity in document

In his rebuttal, Mr. Johnson accuses me of having changed the wording of my challenge, which I made on Sunday, April 3, in The Post and Courier titled, "No faith in president's faith-based social services initiative." Just to make it clear, here is the last paragraph of that article in which I made the \$1,000 offer.

"The framers of our Godless Constitution (and I'll give \$1,000 to anyone who can find the words God or Jesus in it) had the foresight to establish the first secular country. They recognized that religious institutions must rise or fall through voluntary contributions, not through taxes imposed on all citizens. Forcing taxpayers to subsidize religions they may not believe in is no different from forcing them to put money in the collection plates of churches, synagogues or mosques."

Nobody, including Mr. Johnson, could find the words "God" or "Jesus" in the Constitution. Of course, there are people who believe God is everywhere, or implied in the Constitution, but that is a subjective finding, and my challenge was for the objective finding of the word or words.

(continued on page 3)

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TOM THE DANCING BUG

BY RUBEN BOLLING



## Postage Stamps

Is there a freethinker under the postmark on this newsletter? We here at the Separationist are attempting to make use of two stamps recently released by the USPS that honor prominent American atheists. One is of the Nobel prize winning physicist Richard Feynman who said "It doesn't seem to me that this fantastically marvelous universe, this tremendous range of time and space, ... can merely be a stage so that God can watch human beings struggle for good and evil - which is the view that religion has. The stage is too big for the drama." Also appearing on a recent stamp is lyricist Yip Harburg, best known for his work on the film version of The Wizard of Oz. Harburg did not hide the fact that he was non-religious since age 15, and although his lyrics are not "preachy", his atheistic perspective is sometimes apparent. Do you know of any other atheists on US postage stamps? Let us know!



### Herb's Challenge (Continued from Page 2)

A Christian like Mr. Johnson should recall the diversity of an oath as far back as biblical times. In James 5:12, it says, "Do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath." This is why some Christians today will not swear an oath, either by heaven (God) or by earth (secular).

In my answer to Mr. Johnson's first response, I meant to show him the respect of addressing each of the numerous points he raised for God's appearance in the Constitution. I am truly sorry that he feels I quoted him out of context and distorted his claims, and I wish he had been specific about how I had done this. It certainly was not my intent to misrepresent his point of view.

Through our exchanges, including related letters from Post and Courier

readers on the topic, I expect that both sides of the argument have been covered fully. So I now have a new challenge, which I hope Mr. Johnson will accept.

I have participated in a number of dialogues between atheists and Christians, either individually or in a group.

Several members of the group I serve as president, the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, have met with a group of local Christians to carry out the Garrison-Martineau Project. This encounter is named for two 19th-century individuals, William Lloyd Garrison, a staunch Christian, and Harriet Martineau, an atheist.

They spoke frankly about their similarities and differences, got to know each other and became good friends. Those who participated in our local project all found the experience to be enlightening and worthwhile.

Another time, some members of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry met with some members of the First Baptist Church of Charleston.

We took turns hosting potluck dinners, along with discussions. We called our group BaSH (Baptists and Secular Humanists). Again, the exchange turned out to be meaningful for those who participated.

So I will be contacting Mr. Johnson with the hope that we can get together and find common ground on a number of important issues. I am optimistic that we can develop a relationship and an understanding that both of us will appreciate.

How about dinner on Dec. 16, Skip?

-- Herb Silverman

## Recommended reading: **The Atheist Manifesto**

From a very young age, most American children are taught that it is impolite to criticize another person's religious beliefs, at least to their face. People who speak about their blind faith in God are accorded huge amounts of respect in modern American society, while those who openly state that they do

*"The endgame for civilization cannot be mutual tolerance of patent irrationality."*

not believe in God are held in very low regard. Is it time to end the taboo against criticism of irrational religious beliefs? Sam Harris, a philosophy graduate of Stanford who has studied eastern and western religions, and author of the non-fiction book *The End of Faith*, argues tolerance of faith-based unreason by progressives is as great a menace as religion itself. Harris' thesis, that appeasement of religious extremists of all faiths by moderates is the greatest threat to world peace, can be found online in his "Atheist Manifesto."\*\* Harris writes, "It seems profoundly

unlikely that we will heal the divisions in our world simply by multiplying the opportunities for interfaith dialogue. The endgame for civilization cannot be mutual tolerance of patent irrationality."

In addition, the "manifesto" contains ideas and facts that might be useful to you in debates or discussions on this topic. For instance, it points out that many of the least religious countries are also among the healthiest and most secure. And the dubious link between Christian literalism and Christian values is also belied by indices of charity. Consider the ratio in salaries between top-tier CEOs and their average employee: in Britain it is 24 to 1; France 15 to 1; Sweden 13 to 1; in the United States, where 83% of the population believes that Jesus literally rose from the dead, it is 475 to 1. Despite the gospel parable, many a camel, it would seem, expects to squeeze easily through the eye of a needle.

If you aren't sure there is a problem, there are also scary statistics. Perhaps the most shocking is that 68% of Americans say they believe in Satan, while only 28% "believe" in evolution.

\*\*[http://www.truthdig.com/dig/item/200512\\_an\\_atheist\\_manifesto](http://www.truthdig.com/dig/item/200512_an_atheist_manifesto).

## Workplace Religious Freedom Act

When senators Rick Santorum, Hillary Clinton and John Kerry all co-sponsor a bill with "Religious Freedom" in the title, it's probably a good idea to find out what's going on. While not new, The Workplace Religious Freedom Act ( H.R. 1445 and S.677) is picking up steam after a Supreme Court decision this spring that proponents say gutted the existing protections for religious freedom of employees provided by Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The American Humanist Association and ACLU as well as employers are concerned about the bill's vague language regarding what types of accommodations businesses will be required to make. While religious dress and holidays are a non-issue for almost everyone discussing the bill, the possibility of employees being able actively proselytize at work or to refuse to perform their duties for religious objections (such as dispensing birth control) is a major concern for civil liberties groups.

## In Brief

### SHL Monthly Movie Club

On the first Saturday of each month, members of the SHL see a movie and share a meal as part of the SHL's monthly movie club. The movies are selected the week prior to the meeting and are chosen to be the sort that would stimulate interesting conversations during the meal. For more information, check out our web-page or write to [weatherfeller@comcast.net](mailto:weatherfeller@comcast.net).

### New Archeological Discovery Fuels Debate

At the October meeting of the SHL, Alex Kasman spoke about six controversial theories concerning ancient Israel and Judea. One of these was the theory that the Bible's stories of a unified Israel under kings Saul, David and Solomon from their capitol in Jerusalem is a myth created to unify the history of the two separate nations of Israel (in the north, with its capitol in Samaria) and Judea in the south (with its capitol in Jerusalem). The evidence for this theory is largely the complete absence of evidence for a large and powerful centralized government of any kind in Judea or Jerusalem before the collapse of the northern nation of Israel long after Solomon's supposed reign. Unlike the buildings, roads and documentary evidence of the government in Samaria, there is a stunning lack of archeological and documentary evidence for David and his royal family.

However, a new discovery provides at least some evidence to the contrary. Although this one finding is not enough to completely destroy the controversial theory, it certainly

will require its proponents to rethink their viewpoint.

Israeli archeologist Eilat Mazar has found the ruins of an ancient stone building near Jerusalem which she claims is the remains of David's palace. Thus far, she has produced no convincing evidence that it must be the palace, but merely the existence of this building in ancient Judea seems contrary to the claims of those who argued that Judea was nothing more than a loose agrarian society ruled by warlords. In addition, Mazar discovered a bowl which is engraved with the Hebrew alphabet written in "alphabetical order".

### UU Diversity Series

The public is invited to a free viewing of the fourth film in the Unitarian Church's Social Justice Film Series to be presented on Sunday, January 29, at 6 p.m. The Color of Fear, an internationally acclaimed film, is about eight men of various ethnicities engaging in an intimate and honest dialogue about race and the effects of racism on their lives and families. In this film, the pain and anguish that racism has caused in the lives of North American men of Asian, European, Latin, and African descent is examined. Out of their confrontations and struggles to understand and trust each other emerges an emotional and insightful dialogue most of us fear, but hope will happen sometime in our lifetime.

Facilitated "Discussion Circles" will provide an opportunity to share views and feelings about the films from the standpoint of the personal experiences and background of the participants, in an atmosphere free of judgment and criticism. When a

group of participants concludes that action is needed to deal with a particular issue, volunteers will assume responsibility for implementing a plan of action.

The meetings will be held in Unitarian Church's Gage Hall. Depending on the degree of interest and the scope of the discussions, the meetings could last as long as 3 hours. Light refreshments will be served during the discussion session. Child care will be provided. Parking is available behind Gage Hall and at nearby public lots.

### Membership Renewal Reminder

If you have not already done so, please take the time now to renew your membership in the SHL. All SHL memberships come up for renewal in January. Information about renewal and a form to be completed appeared in the December 2005 issue of the Separationist. But, briefly, the membership rates are \$24 for an individual, \$36 for a family and \$50 or more for benefactor status. To renew your membership in the SHL for 2006, please send a check (along with the form or a cover letter giving your name, mailing address and possibly also an e-mail address) to

Doris Hoten, SHL Treasurer  
113 Lancer Drive  
Summerville, SC 29485

Checks should be made payable to "Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry" and are deductible for tax purposes.

**The Separationist**

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

**Editors:**

**Laura and Alex  
Kasman**

**SHL Calendar:**

**January 15 4pm**

**SHL Meeting at Gage Hall**

*“What’s God got to do with it? Atheism and Religious Practice,”* a talk by David Benetar, Professor and Head of the Philosophy Department at the University of Capetown, South Africa.

**January 22 3pm**

**Humanist Book Discussion Group at Barnes and Noble in West Ashley**

Discussing Peter Singers “Animal Liberation”.

**January 29 6PM**

**Color of Fear at Gage Hall**

UU Diversity Series

**February 4 Movie Club**

Place and time to be determined.

**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 Web-page 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](mailto:newsletter@lowcountry.humanists.net) or use the contact information at the bottom of page 2.

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