



The Separationist



PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEWS OF GOVERNMENTAL PRAYER

a talk by **BENJAMIN R. STEPHENS**
4PM Sunday February 19 2006

While there are many facets of psychological well-being which may be enhanced through prayer, the focus of our February speaker's presentation will be on several concerns about the psychological effects of governmental prayer on well-being. Dr. Stephens' talk will consider both supporters and detractors of governmental prayer. Clemson University offers a public prayer at home football games, and so with this convenient sample he designed a survey to measure preferences, rationales, and reactions of undergraduates and other fans prior to a football game. The responses suggest that some supporters of governmental prayer are at risk for developing intolerance towards diversity of religious views. Such intolerance is a source of conflict and can have a negative impact of psychological well-being. Those opposed to governmental prayer are a diverse group, and experience distress and negative outcomes when exposed to govern-

mental prayer. The long-term psychological risks of governmental prayer will be discussed.

Benjamin R. Stephens (B.S., Psychology, University of Georgia; Ph.D., Developmental Psychology, The University of Texas at Austin) is currently Professor and Undergraduate Coordinator in Psychology at Clemson University. Dr. Stephens' research and teaching cover a broad range of topics in human development across the lifespan, including how to better promote deep learning, critical thinking, and communication skills in adolescence and adulthood. With support from the National Science Foundation, he employs electronic student portfolios as a method to foster reflective and integrative learning by undergraduates in the classroom and in laboratory training experiences. His work was honored in 2005 when he was named as Clemson University's recipient of the Award for Innovative Excellence in Teaching, Learning, and Technology.

Humanist Book Discussion Group



The Humanist Book Club will be meeting February 26th at the West Ashley Barnes and Noble from 3:00-5:00 p.m. to discuss C.S. Lewis's book "Mere Christianity." The book is a compilation of radio addresses given by the late Lewis in the 1940's. As Oxford professor, scholar, author, and Christian apologist, he presents the reader with a case for orthodox Christianity employing logical arguments and a conversational style. He emphasizes those doctrines that the four major denominations in Britain (Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic) have in common, e.g., original sin, the transcendent Creator God, and the divinity of Jesus as well as his atonement and bodily resurrection. Bill Upshur 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 Prosperity Gospel

Preachers of all religions ask for donations from their faithful, but the motivations for giving usually have to do with self-sacrifice, showing gratitude to a god, or an offering to receive forgiveness for a transgression. Reverend Creflo A. Dollar Jr. of the World Changers Church based in Atlanta preaches a different reason to give to his church: to get rich. His followers, some of them reliant on public assistance or hand-outs from neighbors and friends, believe Rev. Dollar's (his real name) teaching about the offering time in his church: "It's opportunity for prosperity." Mr. Dollar is a leading apostle of what is known as the "prosperity gospel."

Many Christian circles disparage the theology. Connecting religious faithfulness, especially in giving, to material riches has caused some Christians, including other evangelicals, to accuse prosperity teachers of verging on heresy. Mr. Dollar and other prosperity preachers say they take their message straight from the Bible, noting that figures like Solomon and David were wealthy. Mr. Dollar's Rolls-Royces, private jets, million-dollar Atlanta home and \$2.5 million Manhattan apartment, furnish proof to his followers of the validity of his teachings.

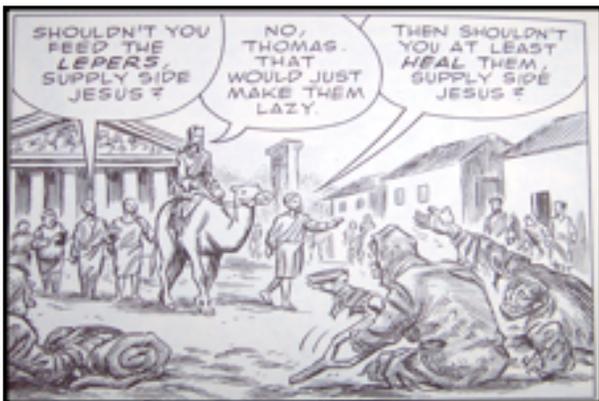
Prosperity preachers aren't new. The Rev. Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter II, known as "Reverend Ike," was a religious broadcasting pioneer who favored gaudy suits, fancy cars and aphorisms like, "the lack of money is the root of all Evil." He had a show on 1,500 television and radio stations in the 1970's. Yet, despite the rash of scandals involving religious broadcasters in the late 1980's, there is a boom in the television ministries of new prosperity preachers like Joyce Meyer, Benny Hinn and Mr.

Dollar. Some believe that the theology taps into the country's self-help culture, and a church that tells you "God wants you to be rich" is appealing to many Americans. The World Changers church boasts over 25,000 members. The Faith Exchange Fellowship started by Dan Stratton, a former commodities trader and author of, "Divine ProVition: Positioning God's Kings for Financial Conquest." also boasts thousands of congregants. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, is a Pentecostal prosperity church that originated in Brazil and is popular in the Latino community.

Mr. Dollar's mantra is to preach the Bible with "simplicity and understanding." And many of his followers say they appreciate most his ability to "decode" the Bible and offer advice for daily living. Although most of the congregants have limited finances, including some interviewed by the New York Times that tithed despite having too little money for groceries, they see food and cash donations by neighbors and friends to be proof that God is providing for them.

Wall Watchers, an evangelical organization that monitors the finances of Christian ministries, gave Mr. Dollar's organization an "F" grade for financial transparency in its yearly report and urged donors not to give to it and similar groups. Mr. Dollar has not made his salary public, and won't say how much of his fees he donates back to the church, except to say that he is one of the church's biggest givers. As for many of his followers, they are confident that material rewards are on the way for them. They have already grown tremendously in other areas, they say. It is just a matter of time before the blessing spills over.

Excerpt from "The Gospel of Supply Side Jesus" by Al Franken



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Toward a Kinder Gentler Atheism

by Cynthia Egli, President of Minnesota Atheists



[Following is a slightly edited version of the speech given by Minnesota Atheists president Cynthia

Egli at their Atheist Pride Celebration, October 23, 2005. reprinted with permission from The Minnesota Atheist, Vol. 15, No. 6, pg 9]

Today we speak of atheist pride. Today we invite all those who have freed their minds from the shackles of theistic definitions of who and what we are, to stand up and say, “my thoughts are free.”

Today I stand up to ask each of you to take heart in a climate of increasing religiosity and hold in yourselves the quiet yet firm self-confidence and resolve of knowing what it is to be human in a universe in which we may be no more than an accident of chemistry. I ask you to have the compassion that comes from strength and from the knowledge that what we do have is each other.

The history of atheism has been filled with fear and anger. Even as our constitution was drafted and our forefathers fought for separation of state and church there were those among them who stated that this did not apply to laws against “drunkenness, profane swearing, blasphemy and professed atheism.”

For hundreds of years those who did not believe simply did not speak of it, for the risk of being burned at the stake. We have come a long way since then.

Today, however, the political tides are turning against us, and we must respond. Powerful forces seek to teach our children religion in the guise of science; our rights to

privacy and personal autonomy are restricted based on the precepts of an ancient book. Hard-won rights are being eroded. Many of us have reacted with anger and fear.

It is tempting to stand back and be uninvolved. It is tempting to use ridicule and dismiss religious belief as stupid. It is easy to become involved in long fruitless arguments and finally give in to name-calling and bitterness. But we must not fall into that trap.

I believe that we are the future; that humankind will shed its reliance on myth and prayer. But I do not believe it will be soon. Right now, our rights are inextricably bound with the rights of millions of religious and semi-religious people who do not seek to force their beliefs on others and do not want the religious right to control their lives any more than we do. People in groups such as the Interfaith Alliance, members and leaders in the GLBT and women’s rights movements, and many others fight for important principles that we share: freedom of conscience, personal autonomy, the right to privacy, the right to love whom we will, the right to speak out for an unpopular opinion.

I am a professed atheist, but I believe that these rights are ultimately more important to most of us, believers and non-believers alike, than the answer to the question, “Is There a God?” I believe that the importance of assuring that the dominionists do not obtain sufficient power to start a world war in the hope of initiating apocalypse is more important than whether or not a fellow activist goes to church on Sunday.

I call for a kinder, gentler atheism. The word alone strikes fear into the religious heart. We have no need to add our own anger or bitterness to the word. I suggest

that we open our hearts and our minds to some of those who still need the reassurance of a special place in the universe. We cannot and will not agree, but we can listen. We have no need to fear that they will convert us. Many of them are afraid of losing their faith. Perhaps we can ease the fear that some believers confront when they discover that we really exist. And perhaps we can become a friendlier destination for those who are losing their faith and beginning their own journey to atheism.

I suggest that we spend more of our energy building alliances with those who share our commitment to freedom of conscience and less time frustrating ourselves wrestling fruitlessly with confirmed literalists who have no ears to hear. They are *not* the majority and we do *not* need their approval or their vote.

I suggest that we stand up and do what the Christians fail to do – practice the good moral principles that they preach. That is, I suggest we live up to and demonstrate our principles, that we show compassion and respect to each other within our community as well as outside it. I suggest that we demonstrate the golden rule, but do it with quiet competence and pride.

No one should be allowed to trample on our rights. Take a stand, vote, write letters to the editor and to our representatives, and get to know our legislators. Let them know, respectfully, who we are. Participate in other groups with which we share common cause and look for opportunities for our groups to work together.

To paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King: I have a dream that one day we will live in a nation where we will not be judged by the church we attend or don’t attend, but by the content of our character.

Fellow professed atheists, let us rise to the challenge!

Homo sapiens v2.0

by Laura Kasman

It's popular these days to say that the universe, and particularly human beings, are so perfectly designed that their existence must be the work of a super-intelligence. As I have no personal experience being space dust, or a star, I don't have much to say on the intelligent design of those parts of the universe. However, having lived as a human and with humans for more than four decades now, it isn't hard at all to come up with some reasonable improvements to the human body. What follows is a list of features I would include if I was an all-powerful, intelligent designer of Homo Sapiens, v2.0.

1) Photosynthesizing skin. Huge amounts of energy fall on the earth's surface every daylight hour and yet thousands of humans die every day from starvation because we can't convert the sun's energy into glucose like plants do. If a lowly plankton can do it, surely a mammal can as well. It probably wouldn't provide enough energy for hard work, but at least if there was a food shortage, with a glass of water and a lay in the sun, we could get by.

2) A maximum pain threshold. I think we can all agree that pain beyond a certain degree of intensity serves no purpose. We do need enough pain sensation to cause us to protect our bodies from injury and tell us we have an infection, but what possible use does excruciating pain serve? My design for humans (and animals too!) would include a limit that no pain could exceed. Awful pain would simply be out of range, like high pitched sound is to our ears. Things would still hurt for the reasons above, but more at something like bee sting intensity, not burning at the stake intensity.

3) Reproduction overhaul. Menstruation? Intelligently designed? Come now! The vast majority of mammals manage to reproduce perfectly well without menstruating. If there was an original intelligent designer, menstruation is proof it was not a she! But for that matter, why have two sexes at all? What's so great about sexual dimorphism? Why not let everyone be a hermaphrodite? Equal opportunity parenting (and sex) would be better for everybody. And the marsupial system of giving birth to very immature young the size of peanuts, that then mature the rest of the way in a pouch where it's easy to check up on them - that's a great system when it comes to giving birth. Birth injuries and death in childbirth, both killers and disablers of millions throughout history, would cease for humans. Infertile couples could adopt offspring at the immature stage and surrogate parenting would no longer be much of an ethical dilemma. And who knows what other uses we would come up with for pouches if we had them? They would probably be really handy.

5) Speaking of sex, "uncontrollable" sexual urges are another unnecessary accouterment of the current human body that causes much misery. Maybe they were neces-

sary back in the caves when life expectancy was 30, infant mortality was 50%, and starvation was the main thing on our minds, but at 6 billion plus people on this planet, it's time to put a cap on it, just like pain.

6) Gills. Drowning has always seemed liked one of the worst ways to go to me. Is there any reason we can't have a set of gills? Lungfish manage to breathe in both water and air. At the very least we should be able to hold our breath for an hour like our seal and whale relatives.

7) Regeneration. Starfish and rock crabs can grow back arms. Lizards and salamanders can grow back tails and toes. We can grow back part of our liver. Why can't we regrow hands, feet, eyes, lungs, spinal cords? Research says it probably has to do with a quirk in our immune system. Mice with certain immune defects can regenerate parts of their ears and they don't form scars. But lizards have robust immune systems. It must be possible for mammals to regenerate body parts and have reasonable immunity. The only thing I don't want regenerating is hair follicles. Fashion currently requires the continual plucking of hairs here or there. On my human bodies, if you pluck a hair three times, it would stay plucked forever!

8) Extra set of teeth. By the time we are six we have our first full set of teeth. But we only keep them about 6 years before getting all new ones, which we then have to make do with for the next 60-plus years! Improvements in life expectancy have really not kept up with design. If my experience is any judge, most people could really do with a new set around age 45-50. If I designed humans, we'd all have 40-year molars, and incisors and bicuspids. And they would come in straight too.

9) Better water control. Speaking of water, how is it that a healthy human can fatally dehydrate in less than 3 days without liquid water? What a terrible design for a land creature. Plenty of desert animals, including mammals, live their entire lives without liquid water. Homo sapiens 2.0 would come with improved water conservation features.

10) Wings. Okay, this one is just for fun. Admit it, though, don't you wish you could fly? I'm not suggesting we give up our hands. We'll carry the wings on our backs the way angels supposedly do. I'm not sure about feathers though- they're messy. Bat-like wings would probably work better and they're more compact. Exercising would be such a joy if I could fly instead of jogging!

Well that's the first 10 upgrades. It's not hard to think of more. I'd like to hear your ideas. None of the first ten are miraculous - they are already found in nature. Why we don't already have many of these features is readily explained if we accept that we arose through natural selection. However, if we were designed, it's time for an upgrade, don't you think?

Gov. Mark Sanford on Intelligent Design

Following is the verbatim transcript of an interview Gov. Sanford did with David Stanton, host of the "Newswatch" program on WIS - TV, Columbia Channel 10. on Sunday, January 29, 2006. Please visit the SHL Discussion Forum at our Website (lowcountry.humanists.net) for a response from SHL members in which we address the governor's misunderstanding of basic physics.

DS: What do you think about the idea of teaching alternatives to Darwin's Theory of Evolution in public schools for instance Intelligent Design?

Gov. Sanford: I have no problem with it.

DS: Do you think it should be done that way? Rather than just teaching Evolution?

Gov. Sanford: Well I think that it's just, and science is more and more documenting this, is that there are real "chinks" in the armor of evolution being the only way we came about. The idea of there being a, you know, a little mud hole and two mosquitoes get together and the next thing you know you have a human being is completely at odds with, you know, one of the laws of thermodynamics which is the law of, of ... in essence, destruction.

Reminder! Our next Adopt-a-Highway litter clean-up is Saturday, March 11.



Our stretch of adopted highway is on Harbor View Road on James Island. We will meet at the parking lot of the First Federal Bank (next to the Piggly Wiggly)

at 8:50 AM. In exchange for our participation, the SHL gets a roadside sign that enhances our group's image through community involvement.

It's also good exercise! Please join us. If you have any questions, contact Roger Prevost at 224-9360.

deductible. See page 6 for membership rates. To renew your membership in the SHL for 2006, please send a check (along with the form or a note giving your name, mailing address and possibly also an e-mail address) to Doris Hoten, SHL Treasurer, 113 Lancer Drive, Summerville, SC 29485

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. In January, the SHL movie club saw *Syrianna*. For more information, check out our web-page or write to weatherfeller@comcast.net.

UU Social Justice Film Series continues

On Sunday, February 26, 6 p.m., the Unitarian Church will host a free viewing open to the public of the feature film "Crash." A discussion will follow, regarding what happens when racial worlds collide and other issues raised by the film. Those interested in engaging in a dialogue to better understand the experiences and feelings of the diverse groups making up our community are welcome to attend: Unitarian Church's Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street. Child care provided. Light refreshments.

For more information, contact Don Manning at (843)237-1125 or DonManning@sc.rr.com.

Last 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 and are tax

The Separationist

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

Editors:

**Laura and Alex
Kasman**

SHL Calendar:

February 19 4pm

SHL Meeting at Gage Hall

“Psychological views of governmental prayer”, a talk by Benjamin R. Stephens.

February 26 3pm

Humanist Book Discussion Group at Barnes and Noble in West Ashley

Discussing C.S. Lewis’s “ Mere Christianity”.

February 26 6PM

Film “Crash”at Gage Hall

UU Social Justice Film Series

March 4 Movie Club

Place and time to be determined.

March 11 Litter Pick-up

Harborview Rd. Federal Bank 8:50am

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 or use the contact information at the bottom of page 2.

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