



# The Separationist



## Open Discussion

an interactive forum hosted by Roger Prevost and Dave Brown

4PM Sunday April 9, 2006

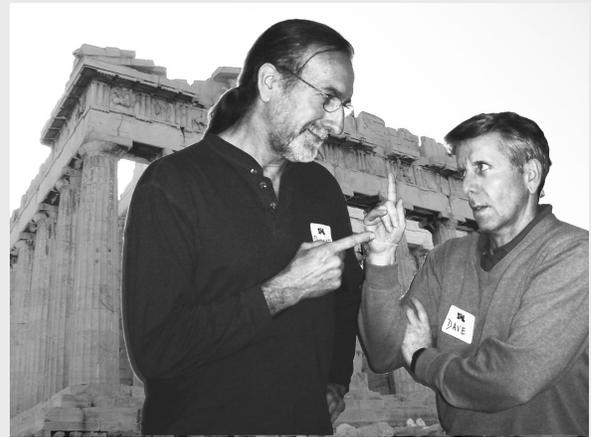
at Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston SC

In what is now a tradition of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, our next monthly meeting will feature an open discussion on controversial topics hosted by our own Dave Brown and Roger Prevost.

The purpose of these events is to allow members of our group to discuss issues on which we may not be in total agreement. Ideally, we will debate, we will hear alternative viewpoints, and though some people may find their views changed, we will be satisfied to become aware of the diversity of opinions within our own organization without needing or expecting any one viewpoint to be selected as "correct".

So that you can be better prepared for the discussion, Roger and Dave are offering the following preview of the questions to be discussed:

- Torture: In the post 9/11 era, can the use of torture by our government against our enemies ever be justified? Even if the information at stake could conceivably prevent the loss of thousands of lives? Millions? What is your definition of "torture"?
- Globalization: Which is more important, what is good for America or what is best for the world? Does globalization provide a higher standard of living to developed countries by reducing the cost of imported manufactured goods? Does it provide an opportunity for developing countries to raise their standard of living by bringing in investors and jobs? Or does globalization outsource our jobs in the U.S. and exploit the working poor in third world countries?
- Genocide! Darfur! The Holocaust. "Never again!" But it is happening again. As citizens of the human race, as humanists, what is our role here?



Roger and Dave are very serious about this responsibility. As you can see, they went all the way to Athens, Greece to hone their debating skills in the land of Plato and Aristotle.

- Men's Rights in Paternity: If a woman gets pregnant, she not only carries the fetus but has the full decision-making power whether to carry it to full term or to have an abortion. If the man decides he is not ready for fatherhood and the woman wants a child, she can make the father financially responsible for support. If the woman decides she wants an abortion, she can do so without consulting the father. If the father knows about the pregnancy and wants a child, he has no legal rights with regard to this fetus. Is this fair?

Please note the special date of this month's meeting (we will be meeting on the *second* Sunday of the month rather than at the usual time) and come prepared for a stimulating and thought provoking discussion among interesting company.

## Letters to Editors from SHL Members

### Sent to *New Scientist* Magazine

In his new book, Daniel Dennett considers the question of whether the evolution of religion might sometimes be driven by things which are beneficial to the religion itself but not to the believers. Since not much has been written on this question, we cannot expect Dennett's book to have all of the answers, but asking an interesting question should always be encouraged.

The review by Francisco Ayala (*New Scientist*, 4 March 2006) says "Dennett seems to have a tin ear for religion. He queers his pitch by focusing on the negative consequences of belief." Has Ayala missed the point of the book? Considering the question Dennett is addressing, it is entirely to be expected that the book will spend a good deal of

time discussing these aspects of religion.

It is somewhat sad to see this review criticize the book without pointing out any problems with the writing or errors in the conclusions the author reaches. Rather, it seems, he thinks the fact that Dennett is not himself religious and has unpleasant things to say should themselves be grounds for criticism. In science, we generally consider it an advantage for researchers to avoid personal emotional involvement with their subjects of study and applaud the bravery necessary to point out unpleasant truths. By analogy, one could conclude that Ayala believes that no articles pointing out negative aspects of tobacco usage should ever have been published, and certainly not any written by non-smokers. Like religious readers of Dennett's book, I

am sure that smokers would prefer to read about the positive social aspects and that good feeling they get from smoking.

Ayala's review demonstrates one of the defenses that religion has evolved: the strong desire in believers to attack those who do not conform or dare to voice their alternative viewpoints. The interesting question raised by Dennett's book is whether this is actually to Ayala's personal benefit, or whether he is merely being used by the religion to perpetuate itself like the lancet fluke uses an ant. The review would have been interesting if Ayala had anything useful to add to the analysis, but instead he merely informs us that he does not want to even see this question discussed.

Alex Kasman

"Suppose you believe that stem-cell research is wrong because God told you so. Even if you are right - that is, even if God does exist and has personally told you that stem cell research is wrong - you cannot reasonably expect others who do not share your faith or experience to accept that as a reason. The fact that your faith is so strong that you cannot do otherwise just shows (if you really can't) that you are disabled for moral persuasion, a sort of robotic slave to a meme that you are unable to evaluate. And if you reply that you can, but you won't consider reasons for and against your conviction (because it is God's word, and it would be sacrilegious even to consider whether it might be in error), you avow your willful refusal to abide by the minimal conditions of rational discussion. Either way, your declarations of your deeply held views are posturings that are out of place, part of the problem, not part of the solution, and we others will just have to work around you as best we can.

"Notice that my stand involves no disrespect and no prejudging of the possibility that God has told you. If God has told you, then part of your problem is convincing others, to whom God has not (yet) spoken. If you refuse or are unable to attempt that, you are actually letting Your God down, in the guise of demonstrating your helpless love. You can withdraw from the discussion if you must - that is your right - but then don't blame us if we don't 'get it.'"

Excerpt from *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, a new book by Daniel C. Dennett, Professor and Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University and published by Viking.

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## Letters to Editors from SHL Members

**Published in *Summerville Journal Scene* on 3/22/06**

In your 3/3/06 issue a local pastor, who was dismayed by the "Juvenile Crime," advocated that "God and prayer and sound Biblical moral instruction" be "brought back into our institutions of learning." This thrust distracts from the real natural processes that are involved in juvenile and adult crime and would damage our country. He suggests that lack of a reliance on the power of prayer and the supernatural Christian God are responsible for our criminal situation today. Crime statistics do not support this claim. The modern countries with a low percentage of people who claim belief in Christianity have a lower crime rate. In this country, many of the states that claim a higher Christian church attendance also have a higher crime rate.

The environmental factors of poor or marginal education, poverty or low income, violent environment in home and neighborhood which is exacerbated by the criminalization of drugs, and using a punishing technique of child rearing are some of the real factors involved in violent behavior. These are the areas where our attention is needed. The most important need is to teach our children, in school and by example, to have a deep respect for other people. This is where the local pastor goes astray. He does not respect students and parents that have different religious views from his own. This is the reason Biblical moral instruction and pressure for children to pray at

certain times and in special ways was taken out of the public education. This is not just public space, it is governmental space and governmental rules direct what students must endure or enjoy there. The restriction is on the governmental imposition of special prayer or special religious faith on our children. The laws at this time, though not the local pastor, have respect for the individual religious differences of our people and they should continue to do so.

Bill Upshur

### **Sent to Post and Courier**

A March 25 editorial in the Post and Courier properly expressed outrage, as had all media outlets in this country, at a possible death sentence for Abdul Rahman in Afghanistan. His "crime" was converting from Islam to Christianity. Your editorial quoted South Carolina Sen. Jim DeMint about the negative consequences for Afghanistan if persecution of Christians there persisted. The following day, an Afghan court dismissed the case, paving the way for Rahman's release.

My question for Sen. DeMint and others is: How engaged would you be if minorities other than Christians were persecuted for their religious views?

Compare this with the case of Pakistani medical doctor Younis Shaikh. He had been a member of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, took part in the Pakistan-India Forum for Peace and Democracy, and started a Humanist organization called "The

Enlightenment." In October 2000, he was sentenced to death for the "crime" of blasphemy because he allegedly said that the Prophet Muhammad was a non-Muslim before the age of 40 and the Prophet's parents were non-Muslims because they died before Islam existed.

Despite efforts by Humanist groups to publicize this disgraceful sentence, most mainstream media and the U.S. Government all but ignored Dr. Shaikh's plight. After suffering in jail for over three years, Dr. Shaikh was finally freed primarily through the efforts of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, Amnesty International, and a few other human rights organizations.

The Islamic world appears slow to learn the lessons of history—that religious beliefs should never be used to justify injustice and cruelty. When people become too religious to care about hurting others, it is time to stop respecting their beliefs and work to protect the progress in human rights we have achieved.

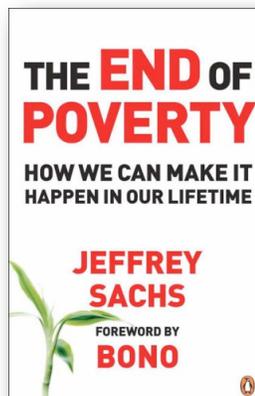
Though most countries have a dominant religion, it is easier to live in harmony and peace when governments do not favor one religion over another, or religion over non-religion. We must work for freedom of conscience for all people. Toward this end, building and helping to maintain secular institutions may be more important in the long term than any military intervention the U.S. may launch.

Herb Silverman

## Humanist Book Group

Does Columbia economics professor Jeffrey Sachs really have a realistic and workable solution to eliminate poverty in the world today as his supporters (including U2 lead singer Bono) believe? Or, are his critics correct when they accuse him of being naive and overly simplistic?

Find out by joining the Book Club of the SHL when they meet at 3PM on April 23, 2006 at the West Ashley Barnes & Noble on



Sam Rittenberg Boulevard to discuss his book "The End of Poverty: How we can make it happen in our lifetime".

Everyone is encouraged to attend and participate in the discussion regardless of whether or not they have read the book.

## Information from Groups Around the Nation

### Camp Quest 2006

Camp Quest started in 1996 as the first residential summer camp in the history of the United States for the children of Atheists, Freethinkers, Humanists, Brights, or whatever other terms might be applied to those who hold to a naturalistic, not supernatural world view. Camp Quest is for children ages 8-17.

At Camp Quest campers learn about science and engage in critical thinking in the midst of a well-rounded camp experience filled with horseback riding, swimming, crafts, singing around the campfire and more. Camp Quest will be running at the following dates and locations this summer:

- Camp Quest of the Smoky Mountains June 4-11  
[www.rationalists.org/cq/](http://www.rationalists.org/cq/)
- Camp Quest Ohio: July 15-22  
[www.camp-quest.org](http://www.camp-quest.org)
- Camp Quest West (Calif.): July 15-21  
[www.campquestwest.org](http://www.campquestwest.org)
- Camp Quest Minnesota: July 23-30 [www.campquest.org](http://www.campquest.org)
- Camp Quest Michigan: August 13-20  
[www.michigan.camp-quest.com](http://www.michigan.camp-quest.com)

**Reminder: Don't forget that this month's meeting will not be held on the third Sunday of the month as it usually is. Due to various conflicts, we will be meeting on April 9th, the *second* Sunday of April.**

### Counter "Day of Prayer" w/Positive Action Secular Groups Nationwide Invited to Donate Blood on May 4

#### Life-Saving Action, Not Passive Prayer, Is Our Message

If you decry the so-called "National Day of Prayer" as a forced encroachment of religion into our official calendar, join us, the Center For Atheism (CFA) in celebrating the supremacy of reason by donating blood on May 4, 2006 in a nationwide program. In 2005, we in CFA sought a way to celebrate the newly renamed (by secularists) "Day of Reason." We wanted to make a public statement about how non-religious people might observe the day and at the same time let America know that there are millions of us who do not pray. We were looking for a positive alternative to prayer, something that would reflect the life-affirming ideas of nonbelievers.

Someone suggested the idea of donating blood as a group. It seemed to fit the idea of "positive protest": It is a gift that gives life to others.

Blood donation proved to be a simple way that any secular person can observe the Day of Reason in a positive way. Everyone can take part: There is no marching or picketing, no placards to make or carry, no permit is necessary, there is no confrontation with authorities or the religious community.

We called our blood donation program B.L.O.O.D., an acronym for Benefiting Lives Of Others Donations, and we intend to do it every year on the Day of Reason.

To start your own B.L.O.O.D. program, it's simple. Here's what you do:

- 1) Find your local blood bank by accessing [www.americasblood.org](http://www.americasblood.org)
- 2) Phone the blood bank to make arrangements for a group donation. You will find them amazingly supportive and accommodating.
- 3) Notify your local newspaper, TV and other media that your group is doing this and why.

It's simple, it's positive, it's effective. Come on, AGNOSTICS, ATHEISTS, FREETHINKERS, HUMANISTS, NON BELIEVERS, SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE ADVOCATES, join us in our Positive Protest against the Day of Prayer!

For further information, contact Ken Bronstein at [FIREBELL1@AOL.COM](mailto:FIREBELL1@AOL.COM)

### National Atheist Conferences

April 14-16, 2006 is a busy weekend for sociable, mobile atheists; they have two big conferences to attend in two different parts of the country! The Atheist Alliance conference in

Kansas City, Missouri will feature guests including SNL's Julia Sweeney and Lori Lipman Brown, Washington DC's first freethought lobbyist. For more information, visit their website at:

<http://www.atheistalliance.org>

The same weekend, you can also elect to attend the 32nd National American Atheists Convention in San Antonio, Texas. This conference will feature a lecture from Michael Shermer and a debate on the existence or non-existence of God between Edwin Kagin and Bob Siegel. Again, you can learn more using the internet:

<http://www.atheists.org>

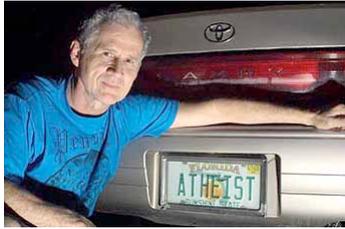
In case you you need more advance notice or want to stay closer to home, perhaps you could plan ahead and join the American Humanist Association at *their* May 11-14 conference in Tampa, Florida:

<http://www.americanhumanist.org>

## News Briefs

### Florida Atheist Plate "too offensive"

Steven Miles, a 55 year old electrical engineer at the University of Florida, is vice-president of "Atheists of Florida" and has an official Florida vanity plate reading "ATHEIST" on his car.



He has had the plate for 16 years, but it was briefly taken away from him, at least officially. Last month the Bureau of Titles and Registrations in Tallahassee ruled that it was too offensive and recalled it. The decision followed a signed complaint by 12 residents who found the plate objectionable.

Miles planned to fight the decision. The ACLU, which had already threatened legal action, had good grounds for a case. Religious messages on license plates are considered acceptable in Florida. (For instance, one man has "GOD4ALL" and "ALL4GOD" as the vanity plates on his two cars.) The "ATHEIST" plate is no more offensive to religious Floridians than these plates would be to a non-religious one. Fortunately, after thinking it over, the state (which apparently has no official guidelines for determining what is offensive and what is not) has reversed its earlier decision and once again approved Miles' 16 year old plate.

### Survey Reveals Intolerance of Atheists

The results of a survey conducted by University of Minnesota professors Joseph Gerteis and Douglas Hartmann appear in this month's issue of "The American Sociological Review". It is a depressing look at Americans at our worst. The survey asked 2,000 people to describe their feelings towards people having a variety of characteristics: gender, sexual orientation, race, national origin, religion, etc. and sought to categorize the

of a survey con-

intolerance that each group encountered from society at large.

It confirms what many Separationist readers already know through personal experience: atheists are the least tolerated group in America today. Consistently, they received the lowest ratings from the participants in the survey. The study suggests that the non-religious are the least trusted, the least respected, the least likely to get a job, and the last choice for a neighbor, son-in-law or daughter-in-law.

### Speaking of Intolerance: UU Diversity Series Continues

The Unitarian Church's film/discussion series on Diversity and Tolerance met again last month for the penultimate time. Following previous meetings on race relations and gay rights, this meeting addressed the topic of religious tolerance. Since the SHL hosted this particular meeting, tolerance of non-religious people by religious people was one important focus of the discussion, but not the entire focus.

The group of people in attendance was quite diverse. There was a gentleman who had never before heard that there were people who do not believe in "God" and there was South Carolina's most famous atheist. There were people who argued that the controversial cartoons depicting Mohammed were themselves examples of intolerance, and there was a Danish woman who defended the work of her countrymen. There was a great deal of interesting dialogue, and half of a great movie. (Those in attendance watched the first 75 minutes of the film *Contact* starring Jodie Foster and based on the novel by atheist Carl Sagan.)

If you feel that you missed out by not being present at this event, be sure to join in at the second installment. On Sunday April 30 at 6:00PM in Gage Hall the series will meet one final time to see the rest of the movie and to continue the discussion, with the specific goal of determining some actions we can undertake to further promote religious tolerance.

### Well Said, Professor!

*On March 1, 2006, Jamie Raskin, professor of law at American University, testified at a hearing on the proposed amendment to prohibit gay marriage.*

*In response to questioning from Bible-thumping Senator Nancy Jacobs, Raskin replied: "Senator, when you took your oath of office, you placed your hand on the bible and swore to uphold the Constitution. You did not place your hand on the Constitution and swear to uphold the Bible!"*

## **The Separationist**

## **Newsletter of the**

## **Secular Humanists**

## **of the Lowcountry**

### **Editors:**

**Laura and Alex**

**Kasman**

### **SHL Calendar:**

#### **April 1 Movie Club -**

Meets every 1st Saturday. Write  
weatherfeller@comcast.net

#### **April 9 SHL April Meeting 4PM at Gage Hall**

An open discussion on controversial topics of  
interest organized by SHL members Dave  
Brown and Roger Prevost.

#### **April 14-16 Atheist Alliance International Convention Kansas City, Mo**

#### **April 14-16 American Atheists Conference. San Antonio, Texas**

#### **April 30 UU Diversity Series Finale.** Gage Hall, 6PM. *Contact*, pt. 2, a discussion on relig- ious tolerance, hosted by the SHL.

#### **April 23 SHL Book Club 3PM at Barnes and Noble**

Meeting to discuss *The End of Poverty* by  
economist Jeffrey Sachs.

#### **May 6 Movie Club -** (see April 1)

#### **May 11-14 American Humanist Association Convention. Tampa, FL**

### **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 Athe-  
ists, 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 (cou-  
ple 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>

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articles, news items, letters-to-the-  
editor or other information of interest  
to SHL members are always appreci-  
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[newsletter@lowcountry.humanists.net](mailto:newsletter@lowcountry.humanists.net)  
or use the contact information at the  
bottom of page 2.

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