



# The Separationist



## Spring Potluck Celebration 5PM Sunday May 14, 2006 (NOTE: 2nd Sunday in May) at Roger Prevost's Home on Folly Beach

One does not have to be religious to celebrate annually according to an old tradition. The Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry will prove this once again by celebrating another year with a Potluck Party on **May 14th**. We will meet at **5PM**, at Roger's house (**see directions on page 2**) for a short business meeting followed by a party featuring good food and good company.

This is a chance to get together for a social exchange with folks you never have time to chat with at the regular meetings. SHL members on the mailing list but who never or seldom attend a meeting are doubly welcome at this friendly gathering.

One important item on the brief business meeting agenda will be elections for SHL board members. Please come pre-

pared to nominate yourself or someone else who has agreed to be nominated. It would be wonderful to have some new

volunteers for this influential and prestigious role.

*Don't forget to bring food and/or drink along, too.* Some of you may wonder what to contribute. As is our custom established years ago by Herb Silverman: "Atheists will bring only food whose ingredients they can see, agnostics are not sure what they will bring or whether there really is food, skeptics will argue whether we really should have a potluck supper at all, pagans will bring wine, anarchists may



bring whatever they damn well please, and humanists optimistically believe they will help to complement the meal and make it a wonderful experience for all."

## Directions to the Potluck Party

- The address is 313 West Hudson Avenue on Folly Beach.
- To get there, take Folly Road through James Island.
- When you go over the last bridge and are on Folly Island, take the third right turn onto West Hudson Avenue.
- Roger's house is three blocks down on the left side and his phone number is 588-9367.

**Please Note:** The monthly meeting will be at a special time and location this month. There is no Humanist Book Group Discussion in May. The next monthly meeting and issue of this newsletter will be in September, after our “summer break”. Please visit our website and use the discussion board in the mean time if you find yourself in need of some interaction with other “freethinkers”.

### **Book Review: “The Best of Robert Ingersoll - edited by Roger E. Greeley”**

I don't believe I ever heard the name Robert Ingersoll before becoming a humanist. How strange then to learn that during his lifetime (1833-1899) this openly agnostic man was one of the most, if not *the* most famous public orator in America. After his death, Colonel Ingersoll's speeches were published in a 12 volume set, re-issued several times. He also wrote “Some Mistakes of Moses”, and at least seven biographies were written by others about his life. He was revered by his (still) famous contemporaries Clara Barton, Mark Twain, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Frederick Douglas, Oscar Wilde, Margaret Sanger, Thomas Edison and Walt Whitman as not only a beautiful speaker, but also as a man of unblemished personal character. What did he say, I wondered, that could inspire such adoration in his audiences and cause even believers to listen to him for hours despite their disagreement with his content? And how then could this man have sunk into relative obscurity in only a little over 100 years? A bit daunted by 12 volumes, I bought “The Best of Robert Ingersoll”, edited by R.E. Greeley, hoping to learn these things. Although I now know much more about Ingersoll and his times than I did before I read this

book, I wish that I had perhaps chosen to read “Some Mistakes of Moses” instead. This slim, 171 page volume contains approximately 100 pages of very brief quotations of the Colonel arranged according to topic, followed by five eulogies he gave, including a touching one for a child. There is also a brief biography, which was helpful, and 20 pages of things notables of his times said about him at his death. Although Ingersoll is now known mostly to freethinkers, in his life he apparently spoke on a vast array of subjects. Ironically, given the politics of today, he was a tireless campaigner for the GOP, speaking even at their national conventions, although according to Greeley not a single GOP politician acknowledged him in their memoirs. Consequently, Greeley's collection has only a little of Ingersoll's humanist views in it, and those are mostly in the form of “sound bites.” When I finished the book, Ingersoll as a popular, public humanist was still a mystery to me. Perhaps charisma doesn't preserve well on paper. However, “Some Mistakes of Moses” is still on my reading list. -LK

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## Johnson and Silverman Dine, Talk and Agree

by Herb Silverman

*Editor's Note: Recently, the Post and Courier published Skip Johnson's response to Herb Silverman's challenge regarding the absence of "God" in the US Constitution. In one of his responses, Herb invited Johnson to dinner for further discussion. The following account of their meeting was published in the April 23 issue of the P&C:*

After a passionate and sometimes heated exchange in The Post and Courier about whether God could be found in the U.S. Constitution, we decided to have dinner together so we could learn more about issues we agreed on. Our wives joined us, which helped create the proper balance between issue-oriented and social conversation. We got to know each other better and had an enjoyable meal at Five Loaves Restaurant on Cannon Street.

Besides acknowledging that our wives are more socially adept than either of us, we found that there are more substantive issues on which we agree than disagree. This article is about what we, a theist and an atheist, have in common.

We share the following viewpoints, whether we consider them part of the "social gospel" or "secular humanism":

- We are concerned with securing justice and fairness in an open, pluralistic and democratic society.
- We want to eliminate discrimination and intolerance based on race, religion, gender, nationality, class, sexual orientation or ethnicity, and we think it important to personally contribute to the common good of humanity.
- We believe in helping the disadvantaged and disabled so they will be better able to help themselves.
- We are committed to the application of reason, science and experience, among other things, to better understand the universe and to solve human problems.
- We respect the right to privacy and believe in the right to sexual and reproductive freedom commensurate with the acceptance of sexual and reproductive responsibility.
- We want to protect and enhance the Earth, to preserve it for future generations and to avoid inflicting needless suffering on other living beings.
- We are committed to the separation of religion and government and consider the intolerance of the Christian Right's leadership in this country a threat to the freedom of conscience for all people. We must never enlist the government to force others to acknowledge or support anyone's religious ideas.
- We find much wisdom in the Bible, but agree that many of its stories should not be taken as literally true. It is unreasonable to

hold ancient writers to modern journalistic standards. Personal theology is not as important to either of us as is our behavior - the need to love our neighbor. Our actions are not based on rewards or punishments in an expected afterlife. We believe that doing good is its own reward.

--We agree that the church at its best does wonderful things, and the church at its worst causes great harm. At its best, it builds and maintains universities and hospitals throughout the world. It is often among the first to arrive at disasters, and it feeds and clothes hungry people at home and abroad. It has been the catalyst for much of the world's greatest music. But the church at its worst has caused wars and inflicted death, suffering and fear on vast numbers of people.

--We believe negotiation and compromise are more effective than war in resolving differences. We oppose any preventive war and think the U.S. should never have attacked and occupied Iraq. War is absolutely the last resort to settle differences, with no exceptions.

--We think the "War on Drugs" is a misguided and failed policy, just as alcohol prohibition once was. The sale of drugs to adults should be legalized and states should control their distribution, and more money should be put into prevention and rehabilitation programs.

--The U.S. policy toward Cuba is wrong and futile. Had we ended the boycott decades ago, the citizens of Cuba and the United States would both have been better off.

--We are opposed to constitutional amendments that would weaken our Bill of Rights. Examples include prohibitions on flag burning and permitting government-sponsored Bible reading in public schools.

In summary, we both follow a progressive and naturalistic life stance that affirms our ability and responsibility to lead meaningful, ethical, joyful and hope-filled lives capable of adding to the greater good of humanity.

We think this exercise has been a wonderful experience for both of us.

People spend too little time communicating in a positive way with those who have different points of view.

It is easier simply to stereotype and demonize those who are different.

We have both learned a lot from talking to each other. And, yes, as an added bonus, we have become friends.

### Herb Silverman to Speak at ACLU Forum on Religious Freedom

May 8, 7PM

68 Calhoun St

The Charleston Chapter of the ACLU will hold a public forum on religious freedom on Monday, May 8th. The forum will be held in the downtown branch of the Charleston County Public Library (68 Calhoun St.). At 7PM a short ACLU video on Religious Freedom will be shown. Then Dr. Silverman will speak, followed by a comment and question period with the audience.

## “If humans evolved from apes, why are there still apes?”

In the past few weeks, as the intelligent design debate heated up in South Carolina, I read or heard this question several times, including from people I normally consider intelligent and sensible. I endeavor here to give a concise explanation of why this question is not at all a meaningful challenge to evolution.



First, and foremost, evolutionary theory does not and never has suggested that modern humans evolved from modern apes. It postulates, and overwhelming evidence demonstrates, that modern humans and modern apes had a common ape-like ancestor. This ancestor is now extinct. However, and this leads to the second part of the answer, if the common ancestor were still alive

that would still pose no contradiction with an evolutionary origin for human beings! It is quite possible for one species to evolve from another without the first one becoming extinct, in the same way that British colonists became Americans without British people becoming extinct. One population can split into two groups that become genetically isolated from one another. One is subjected to new selection pressures and evolves over many generations into a new species. The other does

not experience new selection pressures and remains relatively unchanged.

### Why aren't we (humans) still evolving?

This is a second common question of evolution doubters. I suspect it is based on the mistaken idea that individuals evolve. They don't. Populations evolve, not individuals. The definition of evolution is, simply, a change in gene frequencies in a population over time. And the answer to this question, of course, is we still are evolving. Several studies reported in popular press recently have proven this by genetic tests made possible by the human genome project. We now know, for example that the European trait of being able to digest lactose as an adult appeared only in the last few thousand years. And that the lighter skin color of Asians relative to Africans evolved by a different set of mutations than the ones that produced lighter skin in Europeans. In fact all human ethnic groups not currently from Africa - every native American tribe, every pacific island group, Scottish highlanders to Japanese samurai- all descended from one small band of East Africans that left the African continent only 50,000-70,000 years ago. If such diversity can appear in humanity over such a short period of time, how is it conceivable that we could have stopped changing now? In fact it can be safely assumed that HIV resistance is being selected for throughout the world, as is the ability to resist diabetes on a high carb diet. Perhaps in a few years, heat tolerance will be the next big thing, but no change? No way. -LK

## Commentary: Ohio Ten Commandments Monument

Following the precedent set by a recent Supreme Court decision, a federal district judge ruled on April 19th that a monument depicting the Ten Commandments outside a Toledo courthouse can stay where it is. Despite an argument by the ACLU, the judge concluded that the monument had a “secular purpose” and did not “promote one religious sect over another”.

We at the Separationist have trouble seeing how anyone could make either of these claims. Placing the Ten Commandments outside a court house *most definitely* promotes one religious sect over another. It promotes any one of the Jewish or Christian sects (and arguably also Islam) over any other religious belief. Perhaps the judge and the justices are not aware of the existence of Americans who are not members of these Abrahamic religions? More likely is that they simply meant that the monument does not promote one *Christian* sect over another. However, this really is not sufficient, as we will explain.

When rules are posted somewhere it is generally because the reader is expected or required to follow them.

For example, consider rules about washing your hands posted in public bathrooms or rules about loitering posted outside a store. The placement of this monument in front of a courthouse clearly suggests that the government expects you to follow the Commandments. Though it is true that three of the Commandments *are* laws of the land (prohibitions on killing, perjury and stealing), the others are religious laws that Americans are free to follow or ignore as they choose depending on their own personal religious beliefs

What is the secular purpose of suggesting otherwise? To us, posting Yahweh's decree “You should have no gods before me” at a courthouse seems to be a rather blatant attempt by the government to deny Americans with other religious beliefs of their freedom of religion and to “establish religion” in direct violation of the US Constitution. -AK

## BBC Goes where PBS Dare Not Follow

We (patiently) look forward to the first American broadcast of a three-part documentary that was made by the BBC and aired in England entitled "Jonathan Miller's 'A Brief History of Disbelief'". Looking at the history of non-religious thought in Europe and America from Ancient Greece until 9/11, and peppered with quotes from historical figures such as Thomas Paine, the show also featured interviews with some of today's most prominent atheists. These interviews were so interesting that the BBC made them available separately so as not to lose the portions that had to be edited out to fit in the three hour time limit.

Unfortunately, we have found no indication that PBS will be showing this series anytime soon. Perhaps this is not surprising in the current political climate. Since we may not have an opportunity to see the documentary anytime soon, you may be interested to learn more about it from visiting various websites. The BBC's official site for the series is a good place to start:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/atheism.shtml>

Then you can also read transcripts of the six contemporary interviews by going to

<http://cotimotb.siteburg.com/wiki/index.php?wiki=AtheismTapesXXX>

Actually, you need to make a small change in the address above. For the interview with Colin McGinn, replace the XXX with "One". The interview with Nobel prize winning physicist Steven Weinberg is found if you replace XXX with "Two". Similarly, use "Three" for Arthur Miller, "Four" for Richard Dawkins, and "Six" for Daniel Dennet. For another viewpoint, you might also want to try "Five" for the theologian Denys Turner.

Religion is [the] only area of our discourse in which people are systematically protected from the demand to give evidence in defense of their strongly held beliefs. And yet these beliefs often determine what they live for, what they will die for, and – all too often – what they will kill for. This is a problem, because when the stakes are high, human beings have a simple choice between conversation and violence. Only a fundamental willingness to be reasonable – to have our beliefs about the world revised by new evidence and new arguments – can guarantee that we will keep talking to one another. Certainty without evidence is necessarily divisive and dehumanizing. While there is no guarantee that rational people will always agree, the irrational are certain to be divided by their dogmas.

from Sam Harris' "Atheist Manifesto" / Reprinted in NYT Week in Review, April 9, 2006

## Two New Gospels: Judas and Flying Spaghetti Monster

Experts on the history of Christianity have long known of the existence of an early text known as "The Gospel of Judas", since other documents mention it. However, until recently, we did not have a copy of the Gospel itself. Or, rather, we simply did not know that we had a copy. As it turns out, a copy was discovered and has been sitting untranslated for 16 years in a safe deposit box in Hicksville, NY. The recent announcement of its discovery and the release of its translation has been generating headlines around the world. As expected, the version of the story of Jesus as portrayed by this Gnostic gospel includes Jesus praising Judas as the greatest of his disciples. Although it is certainly interesting to finally have a copy of this document, its discovery is not likely to have any dramatic consequences. To those of us who think the Jesus story is...well...just a story, the existence of yet another early variation is not Earth shattering. And to those who believe that the gospels incorporated into the New Testament are true records of history, this alternative version can easily be disregarded as simply flawed and false, even if it is very old.

Perhaps more interesting, therefore, is the gospel that nobody saw coming: The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. The

world first learned of the FSM when FSM Church Founder Bobby Henderson wrote to various school boards around the US urging them to consider teaching this alternative to the theory of evolution as a concrete example of an Intelligent Design theory. It is true that, like other religious Intelligent Design theories, many of its claims are untestable. (For instance, how can we check whether the FSM really uses "His Noodly Appendage" to alter the experiments of scientists according to his whims?). However, some of it revolves around hard scientific facts. For instance, much of the FSM belief system involves pirates. (Their religious ceremonies are even conducted in pirate-talk... "Arrr".) Followers of FSM reject the idea that humans evolved from apes, pointing out that while humans may share 95% of their DNA with chimpanzees, they share 99.9% with pirates!

After starting with just a letter (epistle?) the Church of FSM has grown into a huge religious movement, with many, many followers hoping to survive death and enjoy the "beer volcano" promised to them in the afterlife. And now, finally, the Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster has been published and is available for purchase from any reasonable bookseller. -AK

**The Separationist  
Newsletter of the  
Secular Humanists  
of the Lowcountry**

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Laura and Alex  
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**SHL Calendar:**

**May 6 Movie Club -**  
Meets every 1st Saturday. Write  
weatherfeller@comcast.net

**May 14 at 5PM**  
**SHL Potluck Party** at the home of  
Roger Prevost (see page 2 for driving  
directions)

**May 11-14 American Humanist As-  
sociation Convention** Tampa, FL  
<http://www.americanhumanist.org>

**June 20-21**  
**Defending Secularism Conference**  
**University of Benin, Nigeria**  
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**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.