



The Separationist



Brighter than Thou?

Mediating Religious Belief from a Secular Perspective

a talk by Wendy Kaminer

4PM Sunday November 19, 2006

Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street

At our November meeting, Wendy Kaminer will present a critique of categorical secularist disdain for religious belief. Examples of the attitude she will argue against include former Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura's condemnation of religion as "a sham and a crutch for weak minded people" and the effort to re-christen non-theists "brights." In contrast, she will argue for a more nuanced, sympathetic approach to belief, acknowledging the human needs that religious and irreligious people share.

Wendy Kaminer, a lawyer and social critic, writes about law, liberty, feminism, religion, and popular culture. Her latest book is *Free for All: Defending Liberty in America Today*. A former Guggenheim fellow, she is the author of six previous



books, including *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism and Perils of Piety*; *True Love Waits: Essays and Criticism*; *It's All the Rage: Crime and Culture*; *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional: The Recovery Movement & Other Self-Help Fashions*; and *A Fearful Freedom: Women's Flight from Equality*. Her articles and reviews have appeared in numerous publications including *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The American Prospect*,

Dissent, *The Nation*, *Newsweek*, and *Free Inquiry*. She is currently working (slowly) on a book about ethics for Beacon Press.

(FYI Kaminer will also be speaking in Charleston on November 18th on the subject of authoritarianism at an ACLU banquet.)



Wired Considers the "New Atheists"

The cover story of the November 2006 issue of techno-cool magazine, *Wired*, analyzes the "new atheism" of Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett. According to the article, the feature that makes their common philosophy new is not only a lack of belief in gods but an intolerance of belief. Though the *Separationist* questions how new this really is, it is interesting that this month's guest speaker argues exactly the opposite viewpoint and the book group will be reading Dennett. Courtesy to theists is clearly the question of the month!

Meet a Member



Name:
Jane Norgard

Member of the SHL for:
I've been a member of the SHL for several years but really only active for 2-3 years (especially after Bush was re-elected.)

Current philosophical or religious beliefs:
I fluctuate between agnostic and atheist depending on how the day is going.

Raised in a religion?
I was raised a Lutheran in Minnesota. Ya, for sure.

Occupation:
Employed as an Investment Representative with Edward Jones; volunteer as a veterinarian.

Special people in my life:
My husband is Marc Regnier who teaches music at the College of Charleston. We only have three cats now (down from the nine we brought from San Francisco 12 years ago.)

Hobbies:
My hobby is triathlon. It doesn't leave much time for anything else.

Favorite books or movies:
Well I'm probably supposed to say something more intellectual here but what I really like is the old musicals. I enjoyed the James Herriot books (*All Creatures Great and Small*) and more recently *The DaVinci Code*. I'm also a Trekkie.

Apart from church-state separation, are there any political or humanitarian causes dear to your heart?

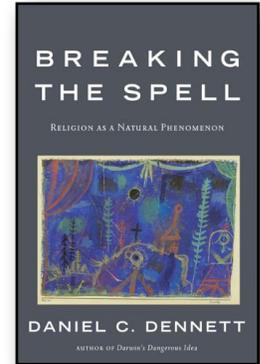
Even though I live in West Ashley I work with the Berkeley Co SPCA (we need more board members - hint hint). I also try to support other animal welfare groups/causes.

What is the meaning of life?
Just what we make of it.

SHL Book Discussion Group

The Humanist Book Club will be meeting on Sunday November 26th at the West Ashley *Barnes and Noble* bookstore from 3:00-5:00 p.m. to discuss *Breaking the Spell* by Daniel Dennett.

In this controversial book, Dennett, director of Tufts University's Cognitive Studies Center, argues that it is time for a consideration of the role that religion plays in society, looking at both the positive and negative aspects from the point of view of social evolution.



The ABC's of Dorchester Two School Board Elections

by Clayton Seufert

I'd like to publicly thank the South Carolina Coalition for Black Voter Participation for hosting a 10 October forum with the Dorchester Two School Board candidates. I talked with Marion Welch of the Coalition and understand they're planning some more events and would recommend voters take the opportunity to see and question the candidates before making choices on 7 November.

The forum was surprising. The news lately has covered the "fireworks" of the Charleston County School Board, but I'd heard nothing about the Dorchester Two district; so I expected to be a bored conscientious parent and voter when I entered the meeting. I was wrong.

The candidates consist of three incumbents and four new challengers seeking a total of four seats. Three of the challengers (Crosby, Hughes, and Stoudenmire) have joined together to form a "slate" they call the "ABC Team" that their handouts say stands for Accountability, Back to the basics, and Children are our priority.

But since they spent most of the time discussing how they didn't believe in evolution and felt Bible classes in the public schools were needed, I think the ABC really means "Anti-evolution, Bible class in public schools, and Creationism instead of science".

Besides being somewhat extreme positions for people that'll be setting policy for public schools, I feel they'd be more forthright if the ABC Team updated their business cards.

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SHL at “Bring ‘Em Home” Rally on Marion Square

The SHL participated in a rally organized by Charleston Peace on October 7, 2006 at Marion Square. We had a table which was visited by many people who were interested in learning about our organization (see photo). Moreover, a speech (written by Laura and Alex Kasman) was delivered by Laura and very well received by the religiously diverse audience. Here is the text of that speech:

In some ways, I am not certain that I belong up here with these other speakers. My life has not been directly touched by the war. The group I am here to represent, the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry is not officially a pacifist organization. But, I think that some of our guiding principles can be usefully applied to the present conflict.

For instance, one principle says:

We are committed to the application of reason, science, and experience to solve human problems.

One popular definition of irrational behavior is “Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.” Unfortunately, this seems to be an accurate description of our current plan of action in Iraq.

Another one of our principles is that:

We welcome new ideas, but we are skeptical of unverifiable claims to knowledge.

Many of us were skeptical of claims made prior to the invasion and which never found any support, that Iraq posed an immediate threat to our country. Moreover, hundreds of people are now in prisons, many tortured, on charges that are unverifiable, and skeptics can be concerned about the reliability of the system that placed them there without verifiable evidence.

Humanists aim to eliminate discrimination and intolerance based on race, religion, gender, nationality, class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity

Our invasion of Iraq seems to be acceptable to much of the American public because the people in Iraq are Arab, and a group of Arab men (from another country) did something bad to us. In other words, it is being justified by racial and religious prejudice.

We encourage negotiation and compromise to resolve differences and achieve mutual understanding.

Despite the claims of the Bush administration, it does not seem that war is a “last resort” for this country, but rather a goal in itself.

We believe in helping the disadvantaged and disabled so they will be better able to help themselves.

Therefore, it is difficult for us as humanists not to think of the good that could have been achieved with the vast amounts of money spent on this war, if it instead had been spent on humanitarian projects.

We believe in guiding our lives by reason, compassion, responsibility, integrity, altruism, and unselfishness. We do not accept moral authority based on the supernatural.

As in so many wars, those fighting on both sides insist that they are fighting for what God wants, and are therefore justified in doing whatever is necessary. But to those who do not believe in the supernatural, such claims are nothing more than an avoidance of moral responsibility.

Humanist ethics are derived from critical reasoning and their moral principles are tested by their consequences.

The true consequences of the invasion of Iraq have been a great deal of pain and suffering for people in that country and ours, that greatly outweighs any positive outcomes we may have achieved.

I would argue that reason and humanist principles both show that it was a terrible mistake for us to have invaded Iraq in the first place. Denying a mistake once it has been made is not a virtue. It is time to acknowledge that our continued presence in Iraq does more harm than good. The United States Military is certainly a very fine hammer, but it is clear from evidence and experience, that international terrorism is not a nail.

SHL Table at “Bring ‘Em Home” rally, with Sue Edwards, Larry Carter Center, Laura Kasman, Amanda Kasman and our new table cover.



October Surprise by Herb Silverman

Roberta Combs, President of the Christian Coalition of America, had been the scheduled speaker for our October meeting. In June, I called their main headquarters here in Charleston and spoke with Michelle Combs, director of communications and daughter of Roberta. She accepted the invitation and put it on their calendar. I asked for a title and abstract of the talk, and Michelle told me to call back in August. I called numerous times, and was promised the information would come shortly. By mid-September, the receptionist continually said that Michelle was unavailable at the time and to leave a message on her answering machine. I did this repeatedly, on office and cell numbers, with no response. The newsletter deadline passed, so Laura and Alex could not supply a title for the Roberta Combs talk. Finally, three days before the scheduled talk, I asked the receptionist if she could confirm that Roberta would be speaking. She said she didn't handle those arrangements and again told me to contact Michelle. I told the receptionist about my attempts and that the talk had been publicized in our newsletter and twice

in the Charleston Post and Courier, and that it would be embarrassing for all concerned if Roberta simply did not show up. Later that day, the receptionist called to say that Roberta would not be speaking in Gage Hall. No reason or apology was given.

This is the first time in our 12 years of inviting speakers that we have experienced such inconsiderate behavior. We have had numerous speakers who represented a variety of faith-based communities. Though some of their ideas may have been challenged at our meetings, they have always come away feeling they were treated with respect. I emailed those on our membership list as soon as I found out about the change in plans. Several people, including some Christians, attended because they expected to hear Roberta Combs. I apologized to them for the mixup, and invited them to stay. Most did, and I am pleased that they later said how much they enjoyed the program by Laura and me.

M-Atheists by Gill Krebs

One of the benefits of being a member of Mensa is the opportunity to meet with, both personally and via the Internet, people with common interests. There are Special Interest Groups (SIG) covering all sorts of personal interests from health, computers, travel, music, lifestyle and too many to list in this article. I was disappointed that under Religion/Philosophy there was no SIG for Atheists, Agnostics or Humanists.

However, this past July I got wind of a Yahoo Group called M-Atheists (Mensan Atheists) and promptly got info and then joined. The main page stated, "This e-SIG is for members (and friends) of Mensa who freely admit to being atheists (or something close to it--we do have a few who call themselves 'agnostics') and wish to share their ideas and experiences with other Mensan atheists."

I discovered about 70 people on the list and the daily postings were interesting, especially to hear other points of view and why one was an Atheist or Agnostic. I also questioned the group owner why this SIG was not listed in the Mensa magazine as an "official" Mensa recognized SIG. This list is published twice a year and lists all SIGs. Mensa does not control the SIG. In fact, there is a Mensa disclaimer that states that SIGs are voluntary associations of Mensa members that operate independently of Mensa. The list owner said she had never thought of becoming "official".

To cut to the quick she polled the members of the group and with my prodding, the group became official. One of the criteria of a Mensa recognized SIG is to have a Moderator as well as an Owner. Since I had been so insistent in being a Mensa recognized SIG, she asked me if I would take the job. "You won't have to do anything,"

she said, "but you will get various postings and perhaps requests to join. Just ignore them. I'll handle it." Right.

One of the items filled out when you join Mensa is a Personal Data Questionnaire (PDQ) on which you answer many questions. Religious preference is one item. All the major (and minor) religions are covered including Agnostic, Atheist and Humanist among the 31 others.

Once M-Atheists became a Mensa recognized SIG, unbeknownst to us, the Director of Operations of Mensa went through all the PDQs in their database and sent out a notice to those who had checked Humanist on their PDQ announcing this new SIG. We were told that 78 notices were sent out and the group was listed under Philosophy. There had originally been a heading Religion/Philosophy in the Mensa magazine and the heading was modified. Inquiries started to increase.

Then the bombshell dropped. We were told that in going through the PDQs, there were over 3,000 Mensans who had checked either Atheist or Agnostic and suddenly requests to join this e-SIG jumped unbelievably. This morning there were 204 messages in my inbox, 198 of them from people wishing to join M-Atheists. So far, there are 178 new members and many more pending. There are about 49,000 current Mensa members in the U.S., which means about six percent of them might join.

Although the only common bond in Mensa is that it is an international society in which the sole requirement for membership is a score at or above the 98th percentile on any number of standard IQ tests, six percent of them are smart enough to have another common bond in their beliefs.

Remembering Stella Shisko

By Sharon Fratepietro

We mourn the recent death of longtime member Stella Shisko. Together with her husband Joe, Stella was a predictable attendee in the front row at every meeting of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry. I first met Stella at least ten years ago when she moderated the Sunday Forums at the Unitarian Church. She and Joe were founding members of the Secular Humanist Book Discussion Group, starting from when we used to meet at my house. During her working life Stella had been a nurse, teacher and travel agent. She had a keen mind and persistent sense of humor that were gradually stolen by the cruelty of Alzheimer's disease. She and Joe were married 63 years. She was a good person with a good life and an exceptional husband. Many people besides me will miss Stella, and be glad to have had the chance to know her.

Secular Coalition Contest

by Lorí Lipman Brown, Director
Secular Coalition for America

We are excited to announce that the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) will award one thousand dollars (\$1,000) to the person who identifies the highest level atheist, humanist, freethinker or other nontheist currently holding elected public office in the U.S. (pursuant to the terms and conditions on our Web site).

Although our Constitution states, "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States," the religion of our

elected officials figures prominently in America, and nontheists are invisible in the electoral arena.

Help the Secular Coalition for America find the nontheist public servants who have been able to serve their communities in spite of the irrational bigotry against their religious perspective. For more information on the contest and its rules go to:

<http://www.secular.org/contest/>

We look forward to seeing your entry!

New York Times runs series on the new religious entitlements

The week of October 8, The New York Times ran a four part series about how religious organizations in America are increasingly exempted from laws and regulations applied to secular non-profit organizations. In addition to the well known and long-standing tax breaks afforded religious organizations and clergy, the NYT analysis identified more than 200 additional protections, exemptions or special arrangements that have become law since 1989. Many of these changes were added anonymously to unrelated legislation, and were bolstered by additional rule changes at numerous state and federal agencies that did not require congressional approval. The changes are also so far reaching, impacting even immigration, pension plans and land use, that it's not just secularists that are alarmed. Secular non-profits and businesses that must meet state and federal regulations as well as pay taxes are finding it impossible to compete with their unregulated religious counterparts. Meanwhile,

religious organizations are expanding into more and more forms of business, including bookstores, ice cream parlors, tanning booths, fitness centers and funeral homes.

Results of deregulating services provided by religious organizations have had more than just ominous economic consequences. When George Bush was governor of Texas he pushed through legislation allowing childcare and addiction treatment centers to operate without state licensing if "accredited" by religious organizations. Only four years later, the Texas legislature let this legislation lapse when it was shown that the the alternatively accredited centers had 10 times as many confirmed cases of abuse and neglect as state licensed facilities.

This excellent series of articles exposes a troubling shift in American politics, and it seems clear that in the next few years we will learn what happens in America when there is no longer a wall of separation between Church and State.

The Separationist

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

Editors:

Laura and Alex

Kasman

SHL Calendar

Movie Club

November 4, 2006

Contact Jonathan Lamb at
weatherfeller@gmail.com to join SHL mem-
bers at a movie and discussion over dinner.

Film: Color of Fear 3

6:00PM November 5, 2006

Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston

Former Charleston County Council member
Lonnie Hamilton will facilitate the discussion
after this film as part of UU Church's Social
Justice Film Series.

SHL Monthly Meeting

4:00 PM November 19, 2006

Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston

Wendy Kaminer speaks on "mediating religious
belief from a secular perspective".

Book Club

3-5:00PM November 26, 2006

West Ashley Barnes and Noble

Discussing *Breaking the Spell* by Daniel
Dennett.

Movie Club

December 2, 2006

(See Above)

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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