



The Separationist



Islam in Brief

a talk by Imam Mohammed Melhem
4PM Sunday April 15, 2007
at Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston SC

Although Islam is one of the world's leading religions and closely tied to many current events, it is something that few of us know much about. So, the April 2007 meeting of the SHL will be timely and important as our guest, Mohammed Melhem, will present a talk entitled "Islam in Brief".



Islamic Center and Mosque of Greenville, SC for five years and has lived in South Carolina for more than 25 years. He hopes to help us to better understand our Islamic neighbors and to eliminate suspicions based in ignorance.

Join us for the meeting which begins at 4PM at Gage Hall of the Unitarian Church on Archdale Street. As is our

M o h a m m e d
Melhem is imam of the Central Mosque of Charleston which opened in 2006 at 1082 King Street. Although he is new to Charleston, Melhem was imam of the

tradition, following the guest's presentation we will break for refreshments and then have an opportunity to ask questions and make comments.

Not All Charlestonians are Christian!

At our last SHL meeting, Janet Segal told us about a public meeting of the Charleston Planning Commission which she attended last August. She tells us that Jerome Murray, the commission chairman, began the meeting with the statement "We are all Christians here..."

Of course this is blatantly untrue. As this month's SHL meeting demonstrates, Charleston's citizens include Muslims and atheists (not to

mention Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and many others). It does not matter whether he made this comment because he is honestly naive and thinks all Charlestonians share his religious beliefs or because he intentionally wished to disenfranchise the non-Christians at the meeting. He needs to correct this mistake. That will involve both avoiding such insulting behavior in the future and

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Meet-A-Member

Name: Sharon E. Strong

What words do you use to describe your current beliefs?:

"Atheist" (when I'm explaining what I **don't** believe in), "secular humanist" (when I'm emphasizing what I **do** believe in), and "not religious" (when I'm being diplomatic).



Were you raised in a religion?:

As a child, I was a devout, pious Lutheran (mainstream German style) but was gradually exposed to different denominations and, later, different concepts of the divine (including its nonexistence).

How did you arrive at your current belief stance?:

It was a gradual process of awakening to the peculiarities of the Christian faith I was raised in. When I was about four years old and digging around in our backyard, I came upon some buried blackened bits of charcoal and was convinced I had come upon the outermost regions of hell. (I quickly covered up my little hole so that the devil wouldn't break through and nab me.) Over time my religious concepts became less literal, and I came to appreciate that other people of very different religious faiths (even—gasp—those wacky Baptists) can hold their beliefs just as fervently as I did. Eventually, intellectual honesty forced me to bid farewell to the traditional faith of my ancestors (traceable back 400 years to a small town in southwestern Germany) and admit that the evidence for a divine being is just not that good. I did not self-identify as an atheist until 2000 when I joined SHL, though.

Occupation: Program Coordinator for the International Primate Protection League, a non-profit gibbon ape sanctuary and advocacy organization in Summerville.

Special person in your life: My husband, Tom Ivey, first introduced me to Charleston's thriving free-thought community when he took a position at the CofC's math department and started hearing stories about Herb.

Causes: Environmentalism/vegetarianism/animal welfare and women's rights/reproductive rights.

Anything else?: I'm six feet tall. (Admit it: you wanted to ask!)

What is the meaning of life?: Our task—as conscious, rational, and creative beings—is to **create** meaning in our lives.

Scriptural Violence Can Foster Aggression, Especially in Believers

By TERRY SANDERSON

From National Secular Society Newsline (Mar. 14, 2007)

Psychologists studying religion have tended, until recently, to focus on its role in psychological healing. But no longer: now they are beginning to investigate some of its less benign aspects.

A study published in this month's Psychological Science looks at the relation between aggression and recent exposure to accounts of Biblical violence. Students were asked to read a story about the torture and murder of a man's concubine and his tribe's measured response: they assembled an army and razed several cities, killing every man, woman, child and animal they could find.

Half the students were told that this was based on an ancient scroll recently discovered by archaeologists. The other half were told that it was from the Book of Judges in the Old Testament (which it is). In addition to the scriptural distinction, half of the students from both the Bible and the ancient scroll groups read an adjusted version that included a sentence in which God commanded his followers to take up arms against the others "and chasten them before the LORD."

After reading this edifying tale, the students were then given a standard test for measuring aggression. Pairs of them were set a simple reaction task and the winner was allowed to blast the loser with whatever level of noise he chose, up to the volume of a fire alarm.

The result? Higher levels of aggression were measured in two groups of students: in those who were told that the passage was from the Bible and in those who had read that the violence was sanctioned by God. Unsurprisingly, this effect was greater in believers than in atheists. A particularly unsettling result, however, was that even non-believers were found to be not completely immune to the "official sanction" imparted by someone else's sacred book and someone else's deity.

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Congressman Holds No God-Belief

Rep. Pete Stark is first Congress member in history to acknowledge his nontheism

Secular Coalition for America Press Release (March 12, 2007)

There is only one member of Congress who is on record as not holding a god-belief.

Rep. Pete Stark (D-Calif.), a member of Congress since 1973, acknowledged his nontheism in response to an inquiry by the Secular Coalition for America. Rep. Stark is a senior member of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee and is Chair of the Health Subcommittee.

Although the Constitution prohibits religious tests for public office, the Coalition's research reveals that Rep. Stark is the first open nontheist in the history of the Congress. Recent polls show that Americans without a god-belief are, as a group, more distrusted than any other minority in America. Surveys show that the majority of Americans would not vote for an atheist for president even if he or she were the most qualified for the office.

Herb Silverman, president of the Secular Coalition for America, attributes these attitudes to the demonization of people who don't believe in God. "The truth is," says Silverman, "the vast majority of us follow the Golden Rule and are as likely to be good citizens, just like Rep. Stark with over 30 years of exemplary public service. The only way to counter the prejudice against nontheists is for more people to publicly identify as nontheists. Rep. Stark shows remarkable courage in being the first member of Congress to do so."

In October, 2006 the Secular Coalition for America, a national lobby representing the interests of atheists, humanists, freethinkers, and other nontheists, announced a contest. At the time, few if any elected officials, even at the lowest level, would self-identify as a nontheist. So the Coalition offered \$1,000 to the person who could identify the highest level atheist, agnostic, humanist or any other kind of nontheist currently holding elected public office in the United States.

In addition to Rep. Stark only three other elected officials agreed to do so: Terry S. Doran, president of the School Board in Berkeley, Calif.; Nancy Glista on the School Committee in Franklin, Maine; and Michael Cerone, a Town Meeting Member from Arlington, Mass.

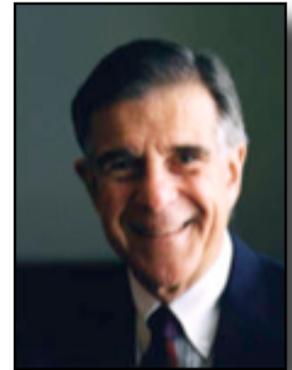
Surveys vary in the percentage of atheists, humanists, freethinkers and other nontheists in the U.S, with about 10% (30 million people) a fair middle point. "If the number of nontheists in Congress reflected the percentage of nontheists in the population," Lori Lipman Brown, director of the Secular Coalition, observes, "there would be 53-54 nontheistic Congress members instead of one."

Excerpted from the San Francisco Chronicle (March 17, 2007)

In town hall meetings in Newark and San Leandro today, the 35-year congressional veteran received only cheers and applause when a speaker brought up a survey this week that named Stark as the highest-ranking politician in America who was willing to admit he doesn't believe in God.

Since the survey results were released, Stark has been bombarded by letters, phone calls and e-mails, and almost all thanked him for making his position public.

The response astounded the 75-year-old Stark, a dyed-in-the-wool liberal who's received plenty of nasty mail over the years. "The attention is amazing," he said. "I don't know what the guys who put out the press release did, but I'd like to hire their PR person to run my next campaign. I have been inundated (with responses) from literally all over the world."



"When the Secular Coalition asked me to complete a survey on my religious beliefs, I indicated I am a Unitarian who does not believe in a supreme being," Stark said. "Like our nation's founders, I strongly support the separation of church and state. I look forward to working with the Secular Coalition to stop the promotion of narrow religious beliefs in science, marriage contracts, the military and the provision of social services."

-Rep. Pete Stark

Not All Charlestonians are Christian!

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apologizing for what he has already done.

*Janet Segal sent him a letter (which is reproduced below) and so far has received no reply, not even an acknowledgment. If you find this upsetting, as we do, then please consider writing to him yourself and letting him know that there are many Charlestonians who will not tolerate government officials whose ignorance or prejudice keeps them from serving **all** of Charleston's citizens.*

You can write to him at:

*Jerome Murray, Chair, Planning Commission
Charleston County Council Office
Lonnie Hamilton, III Public Service Building
4045 Bridge View Drive
North Charleston, SC 29405*

August 29, 2006

Dear Chairman Murray:

I was in attendance at yesterday's (August 28th) Planning Commission meeting as a citizen of Charleston. By way of credentialing, I am a homeowner, taxpayer, voter, community volunteer, former staff person of Mayor Riley's re-election campaign, recent graduate of the Charleston County Citizen's Academy and all-around good citizen.

I am writing because I am appalled and horrified by your opening remarks. I fully understand your need to voice your expectation of civility among the large group of attendees who were there in opposition to the Long Savannah project.

However, when you admonished the crowd with "we are all Christians here" and "I expect you to all behave as Christians", my jaw dropped.

Then, when Mr. Southard gave the prayer, he ended his prayer with "in Jesus' name."

I thought that Charleston County is home to Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, atheists, agnostics and probably many other faith groups. You are chairing a publicly funded commission in a publicly funded building attended by citizens who are paying for this and expect that their constitutional right of "no establishment of religion" will be not only respected but also protected.

Were you implying that only Christians have a right to be at public meetings? Were you implying that the rest of us are not welcome? Were you implying that religion

actually belongs in a taxpayer funded building at a taxpayer funded meeting? Have you never been told that prayer does not belong in a publicly funded meeting?

I have heard every possible excuse for this type of behavior – "I wasn't thinking", "I didn't realize there would be people of other religions there", "Oh, you know, this is the south and this is how we do things", "I really didn't mean to hurt your feelings", etc.

Mr. Murray, it is 2006 and it is time to recognize that South Carolina is home to a huge, diverse population and it is incumbent upon all public officials ...elected, appointed or hired... to be the leaders in protecting and defending all citizens from any kind of discrimination, bias or disrespect.

Please send me copies of any written policies regarding religion in public speech at public events by public officials in Charleston County. If there are no policies, it is time to adopt them. If they already exist, please send me assurances of how they will be implemented in the future. Also, I await an apology.

Yours,
Janet Segal

Letter to the Editor by an SHL Member Published in Post and Courier March 16, 2007

A writer is in error regarding the oath all entrants to military service recite. "Wholeheartedly" is not a required word for us who have served or are serving our nation.

While one may join the armed services without being a citizen, no citizen gives up their rights to speak out against the current or past occupants of the White House. True patriotism is resisting our country when it is wrong, not blind obedience.

As a US Navy veteran, I swore to uphold the Constitution & follow "All lawful orders of the Commander In Chief and those subordinate to the President." Perhaps the writer would call everyone traitors for not being religious? I'm one of those millions of Atheists in a proverbial foxhole.

George Walker Bush was not elected by the people because the US Supreme Court stopped Florida vote counting, thus deposing President Gore. Hayes, too, deposed President Tilden by circumventing the Electoral College system and a congressional committee "decided" when the states were evenly split and the electors were in doubt.

Ford was the only legal, non-elected president when Nixon was forced to resign as my commander in chief. Bush has helped war profiteers exploit the lies that led to the "pre-emptive" invasion of Iraq. True patriots say so.

The writer exercised his citizenship right to speak on who might be "traitors". He needs more facts, not blind faith in a theocratic, non-elected "president".

Larry Carter Center

New Book Rails Against Religious Illiteracy

Professor Stephen Prothero was appalled by what his students didn't know about religion in his classes at Boston University. For example, he found that nearly two-thirds of Americans polled believe that the Bible holds the answers to all or most of life's basic questions, yet only half of American adults can name even one of the four gospels and most Americans cannot name the first book of the Bible. In his new book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know -and Doesn't*, he delves into American religious ignorance and why he thinks it matters very much. He advocates the study of the Bible as literature and world religion courses in public schools as a remedy. As for a textbook everyone can agree on -hmmm -good luck with that. Test your religious literacy with Prothero's quiz (answers below, right):

- Which of the following is not one of the four Gospels?
Luke John Paul Mark
- Which of the following is not one of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)?
Leviticus Genesis
Job Numbers
- According to the Bible, where was Jesus born?
Nazareth Bethlehem
Jerusalem Jericho
- With which form of Islam is Al Qaeda most closely identified?
Sufi Sunni Shiite Ismailis
- Which of the following is a Mormon scripture?
the Upanishads the Bible
the Vedas The Book of Latter-day Saints
- Which of the following is not included in the most common versions of the Ten Commandments?
Do not murder or kill.
Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.
Honor your father and mother.
Do not engage in premarital sex.
- Which of the following is not one of Roman Catholicism's Seven Sacraments?
social service marriage
baptism reconciliation
- True or False. The Bhagavad Gita is a Buddhist scripture.
- True or False. The Bible says "God helps those who help themselves."

help themselves."

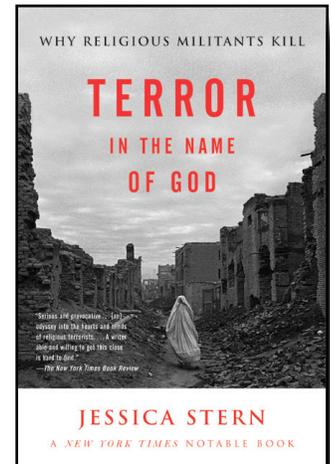
- True or False. The Qur'an is a Muslim scripture.
- True or False. Ramadan is a Jewish holiday.
- True or False. Polygamy is an official teaching of Mormonism.
- True or False. The Dalai Lama is a Hindu leader.
- True or False. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" is a quote from the Bible.
- True or False. According to the Hebrew Bible, Abraham led the Israelites on their Exodus out of Egypt.

Humanist Book Group

The next meeting of the Humanist Book Club Discussion Group will be held at 4PM on April 22, 2007 at the West Ashley Barnes and Noble. They will discuss *Terror in the Name of God* by Jessica Stern.

The book, whose subtitle is "Why Religious Militants Kill", began as an investigation into biological weapons. However, inspired by her conversations with people who believed their god wanted them to kill others, Stern ended up writing about the apparent paradox in the fact that although most of the world's religions "preach peace," most terrorists are religious fundamentalists.

According to The New Yorker: "Stern spent five years interviewing religious terrorists of all stripes, including anti-abortion crusaders, Hamas leaders, and militants in Pakistan and Indonesia. She found men and women who were driven not by nihilistic rage or lunacy but by a deep faith in the justice of their causes and in the possibility of transforming the world through violence."



Answers: Paul, Job, Bethlehem, Sunni, the Bible, Do not engage in premarital sex, social service, False (it's Hindu), False (that was Ben Franklin), True, False (it's Muslim), False (not for 200 years anyway), False (Buddhist), True, False (that was Moses).

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

**Editors:
Laura and Alex
Kasman**

SHL Calendar

Movie Club

April 7, 2007

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

SHL March Meeting

4:00 PM April 15, 2007

Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston

Imam Mohammed Melhem of the Central Mosque of Charleston will be our guest.

Book Discussion Group

4PM April 22, 2007

Meeting at West Ashley Barnes & Noble to discuss "Terror in the Name of God" by Jessica Stern.

Movie Club

May 5, 2007

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

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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