



The Separationist

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

December 2009

Winter Solstice Party 2009!

Sunday, December 20, 2009, 5 p.m., Carolina Cove, 415 Parkdale Drive, Charleston

SHL's annual Winter Solstice Potluck will be held December 20, 2009 at 5PM at the clubhouse at Carolina Cove. Please bring an appetizer, salad, main dish, side dish or dessert to share. If you aren't into cooking, wine, beer and soft drinks are always welcome.

Also, bring books, CDs or DVDs for our annual book auction. Proceeds will be donated to the Trident Literary Association. Herb of the Silver Tongue will be our auctioneer.

The SHL Book Group will meet before the Potluck at 4PM in the Carolina Cove Clubhouse to discuss Steven Pinker's *Words and Rules: The Ingredients of Language*.

Carolina Cove is located at 415 Parkdale Drive, Charleston SC 29414 for those of you who Google or use Map Quest for your directions. For those who don't – if you are coming from downtown or West Ashley – cross the Ashley River Bridge and stay on 17S. After you pass the sign for Costco, begin to get into the left lane. Immediately past the Hess gas station on your left, there is a left turn lane onto Parkdale Drive. Stay on Parkdale for about 0.7 miles. You will see two entrances for Carolina Cove on your right.

Take the second entrance. The first building on your right is the Clubhouse. If you are coming from Mt. Pleasant and want to take 526W, go to the end of 526, turn right on Sam Rittenberg which will merge onto 17S near the Costco sign. begin to get into the left lane. Immediately past the Hess gas station on your left, there is a left turn lane onto Parkdale Drive. Stay on Parkdale for about 0.7 miles. You will see two entrances for Carolina Cove on your right.

Take the second entrance. The first building on your right is the Clubhouse. There is limited parking in front of the clubhouse. However, there is a visitor's parking lot. Go past the clubhouse and take the first right – on your left is visitor's parking. If visitors' parking fills, park anywhere in the complex. However, try to avoid parking directly in front of one of the condos. It makes the owners grouchy.

We hope to see you there, and we would like to extend a special invitation to people on our mailing list

who rarely come to meetings, as well as past speakers who are not members. There will be no meeting at Gage Hall this month but we will return to our regular meeting format in January.

- Nancy Worley



Contrary to common belief, witches actually stopped dancing naked around the fire on winter solstice with the advent of woolly turtleneck pullovers.

Family Corner

by Amy Monsky

It's the most wonderful time of the year, and we have some wonderful activities scheduled. If you haven't been to any of our family functions before, you'll have several opportunities this month. Come out and meet other like-minded families! If you would like more information or to RSVP to any of the activities below, please email me at SecularCharlestonMom@gmail.com.

On Wednesday 12/2, we are having a Moms/Ladies Night Out at Bottles 'n Brushes in Mount Pleasant where we will become fabulous artists for the night. Don't worry, though - no experience is needed. Bottles and Brushes provides your paint, 16 x 20 canvas and brushes and you'll have a fun evening with friends while you enjoy BYO beer, wine and appetizers! Their local artist will teach you step-by-step how to paint the painting and at the end of the night you will have your own masterpiece! The class lasts from 6:30-8:30pm and costs \$35/person. If you are interested, please email me or contact Bottles and Brushes directly at 345-7365 to sign up.

SHL will have a family-friendly holiday gathering Sunday 12/6 from noon-4pm at Wassamassaw Park in Summerville. There is an enclosed playground as

well as walking trails and green space for playing ball. A potluck lunch will be served at 1pm at the picnic shelter. Admission is free. To make this gathering more festive, we will have an optional cookie exchange where you can share your favorite cookies or treats and then go home with a variety as well. Here's how it works: Each participating family will bring 6 cookies for every other participating family, and in turn will receive the same. Sound good? If so, please email me by Thursday 12/4 to let me know if you'd like to swap cookies, and I will email everyone the final family count by Friday 12/5 so you can plan accordingly.

And finally, on Wednesday 12/9 at 3:30pm, we have a free behind-the-scenes guided tour scheduled at the Charleston County Recycling Center. This will be a great opportunity for kids to see what happens to recyclables after they leave their house. There is a limit of 20 people per tour, so you must RSVP if you're interested. All ages are welcome, but because of the "after-school" time, school-aged children and their siblings will be given first priority. If there is sufficient interest, a second tour can be scheduled. If you'd like to go, please email me by Sunday, 12/6.

Life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved.

-Søren Kierkegaard

Submitted by
SHL member
Christine Winter

Secular Judaism: A Viable Alternative Sunday Brunch with Herb Silverman Sunday, December 6, 2009 at 10:00 am Arnold Hall, Jewish Studies Center

Questioning is a central tenet of Judaism, and Jewish disputation is as common as Jewish theology or Jewish creeds. American Jews are far more likely to be secular in their beliefs and actions than Orthodox, observant, or traditional. Herb will speak to that reality and maintain that Humanistic Judaism is a viable and growing alternative and that the Jewish organizational structure should reflect that growing reality.

This presentation is free and open to the public.

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

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Holidays for Everyone

by Herb Silverman

Q: *What do you think of the American Humanist Association's new "Godless Holiday" campaign? The ads will say: "No God? . . . No Problem! Be good for goodness' sake. Humanism is the idea that you can be good without a belief in God.*

Full disclosure: I'm a member of the American Humanist Association Board of Directors. But even if I weren't, I would strongly favor campaigns that show what everybody should know, that we can certainly be good without God. My main regret is that these kinds of messages haven't been promoted decades ago. For too long, humanists and atheists have been marginalized, ignored, or demonized in what many refer to as a "Christian country" or a "Judeo-Christian country."

The goals of such ads are to show that there is a humanist community for like-minded people, that we represent about 16% of the population, that our perspectives should become part of the fabric of public opinion, and that we are open to dialog with those whose views are different.

There undoubtedly will be some Christians who perceive this humanist holiday celebration as part of the "war on Christmas," perhaps even more sacrilegious than wishing someone "Happy Holidays." Paranoids will be paranoids. Should we desist from promoting our viewpoint to spare their feelings? Of course not. They'll likely hate us and our philosophy no matter what we do, so we should just be ourselves.

Saying you don't believe in God is no more anti-Christian or anti-religious than saying you are black is anti-white, saying you are female is anti-male, or saying you are gay is anti-straight. In the words of that great philosopher, Popeye the Sailor Man: "I yam what I yam."

I was a member of the first media outreach committee of the American Humanist Association, and we struggled over the best kinds of ads that would both promote our worldview and would not be perceived as anti-religious. I tended to be edgier than most, which is why the committee rejected my suggested billboard: "Have You Found Jesus? Neither Have We."

Many Americans will give thanks as they sit down to their Thanksgiving meals. Religious people are free to thank God for the food they are about to eat. Humanists are free to thank those who grew and prepared the food. And we are even free to recite Bart Simpson's Thanksgiving prayer, "Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing." And perhaps that's the real point of what we can be thankful for in this and every season. We live in a free country with freedom of speech, with freedom to practice any religion or no religion, and the freedom to promote and advertise our beliefs.

Check out Herb's other commentaries at:
http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/herb_silverman/

Letter to the Editor: Religious liberty

by Herb Silverman

As a private citizen, Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer is free to promote Christianity any way he sees fit. But he may not enlist the government to do it for him. A federal district court correctly ruled that a proposed S.C. license plate picturing a cross set against a stained-glass window and saying "I Believe" violated the constitutional separation of church and state.

Bauer, however, viewed this ruling as "another attack on Christianity." What he doesn't seem to understand is that government neutrality toward religion is not government hostility.

One of our most cherished freedoms is the freedom from state-sponsored religion. We each get to choose the sort of religion we prefer. Who would want the government to make those choices for us? There is

only one "religious liberty" we lack. We cannot enlist the government to force others to acknowledge or support our own religious ideas. Religious liberty is threatened by government endorsement of any religious view.

To Bauer and others who wish to promote religious views while driving, I have a two-word response: "bumper stickers." Individuals can have bumper stickers that say, "I believe," or "I don't believe" or "I believe Andre Bauer is a political panderer." Just don't expect the government to endorse your personal religious or political views.

Editor's note: This letter appeared on November 20th in the Charleston Post & Courier .

Plate Histrionics: South Carolina's Bauer Rails Against 'Christian' Car-Tag Decision

by Sandhya Bathija

When it comes to church-state separation, South Carolina Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer just doesn't have a clue.

After a federal judge ruled against a legislature-mandated "Christian" license plate, Bauer carried on in a way that made me think he not only failed to read the court's opinion, but that he also doesn't understand the principle of basic fairness.

While Americans United was celebrating our victory in this case, Bauer held a press conference and released a statement that was full of misconceptions and false allegations.

Bauer claimed that our lawsuit, and the court's decision, "clearly discriminates against persons of faith." He said he will ask the state attorney general to appeal this ruling because "it is time that people stand up for their beliefs. Enough is enough."

Bauer's statement is almost laughable. This lawsuit actually prevents discrimination against persons of faith, and that's more than evident.

When State Sen. Yance McGill was asked by the Associated Press in May 2009 whether he would support a Wiccan tag, he said, "Well, that's not what I consider to be a religion."

When asked about a Buddhist tag, he said "I'd have to look at the individual situation. But I'm telling you, I firmly believe in this [Christian] tag."

Rep. Bill Sandifer also backed the "Christian" plate, but emphatically asserted that he would never do the same for a plate featuring Islamic symbols and language.

"Absolutely and positively no," he said.

And, let's not forget, Bauer himself also said no to the same question.

"I would not [support a tag for Islam] because that is not the group I support," he said.

So, Lt. Gov. Bauer, who is the one discriminating against people of faith? The passage of this license plate made adherents of other faiths feel like second-class citizens. The judge ruled against this yesterday, and rightfully so.

But Bauer doesn't just stop there. He continues in his criticism of the court's decision, saying the judge's ruling was "another attack on Christianity" and that he is "not going to sit by and watch this happen."

Obviously, Bauer has also failed to realize that two of

the plaintiffs in our lawsuit – the Rev. Tom Summers and the Rev. Monty Knight – are Christians themselves.

"It is vital as a Christian minister I speak out and be involved in matters like this that are discriminatory and unfair," Summers told *Church & State* in January 2009. (Summers is a retired United Methodist minister who serves as lead plaintiff in the Summers v. Adams lawsuit.)

"I received some emails that asked how I, as a Christian minister, could be involved with this," he said. "But what I told them is that it is very Christian to be involved in a matter like this. One of the core values of Christianity is equality and fairness. This case is wrapped up on a human level on the issue of fairness. For a license plate to be displayed that is government sanctioned only for one faith group, it makes other faith groups in our state feel very isolated."

And finally, Bauer makes his last misguided plea: that this is simply a matter of choice.

"I believe," he said, "that every South Carolinian has the right to go to the Department of Motor Vehicles and choose among dozens and dozens of license plates the one particular tag that they want to share with the rest of the world about their personality and beliefs."

Except for those of faiths that Bauer and his friends in the legislature did not want to see have a license plate. They don't have that "choice." If this "Christian" license plate had not been stopped, it would have been the only religious plate made available to South Carolinians by the legislature. That's not a choice, that's an imposition.

So, to sum it up, Bauer is wrong. Judge Cameron McGowan Currie saw through his tactics.

"Whether motivated by sincerely held Christian beliefs or an effort to purchase political capital with religious coin, the result is the same," Currie wrote. "The statute is clearly unconstitutional and defense of its implementation has embroiled the state in unnecessary (and expensive) litigation."

In the end, Bauer claims he is "offended" that Americans United was rewarded attorneys' fees in this case. Well, here's some advice to him and the South Carolina legislature on how to avoid that in the future: stop violating the Constitution.

Sandhya Bathija is Communications Associate for Americans United for Separation of Church and State

Book Review: Rebecca Newberger Goldstein's *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*

by Alex Kasman

Given the title of this book, you might be surprised to learn that I am recommending it to readers of the *Separationist*. Goldstein is a philosophy professor who has published some non-fiction (such as her recent biographies of Kurt Godel and Baruch Spinoza), but contrary to the impression one might get from the title, this is a novel, a work of fiction. Moreover, although it does contain arguments for the existence of God (in an appendix as well as embedded in the story), as a whole the book presents more of an atheistic viewpoint.

I should admit that I am already a fan of Goldstein's fiction. Not only do I see beauty in her prose, each paragraph being almost like a little poem, but the scenarios she imagines also appeal to me, portraying the world as a sad and complex but still beautiful place.

One thing which I particularly like about Goldstein's books, though it may not be to everyone's tastes, is how *academic* they are. The main character in "36 Arguments..." is Cass Seltzer, a professor at the fictional Frankfurter University whose new book "The Varieties of Religious Illusion" has the mainstream media declaring him one of the "New Atheists". In a charming scene, he sits at a conference next to Lucinda Mandelbaum, an extremely famous researcher in game theory, who mistakes him for someone else and so speaks to him as if they were old friends and confidants even though they have never met before. Just as different countries have unique cultures reflected in the way people communicate, so too does the academic world, and its unique culture is successfully parodied here.

Mathematics is a common theme in Goldstein's fiction. The subject of game theory, which Mandelbaum studies, is briefly but accurately described by Goldstein as "the attempt to use mathematics to capture the relative rationality of different strategies in various situations, where how well a person fares isn't just a matter of his own decisions but of the decisions of other players." An example, which appears later in the book, concerns the question of whether Cass should tell Mandelbaum that he loves her.

Judaism is also often a motif in her novels and short stories. Here, it is tied in through the mathematics by having Mandelbaum encounter a young

mathematical prodigy living in an isolated Hasidic community. The boy, the son of the community's rabbi, appears to have worked out for himself some interesting properties of whole numbers which, though examples of elementary number theory, are stunning discoveries for an untrained, six year old child. He re-enters the story later as a teenager, following Mandelbaum's advice to attend M.I.T., and discusses both his sense of obligation to his community and his own non-religious world view.

But, what about the "arguments" of the title of the book? The chapter titles have cute names like "The Argument from Dappled Things" and "The Argument from Strange Laughter" (or mathematical ones like "The Argument from Taking Differences"). A climactic moment in the novel occurs when Seltzer participates in a public debate on the existence of God. Unlike some similar debates I have attended, both participants in this fictional debate make some strong arguments, and each of the debaters justifiably can consider themselves to have won. However, the book really does conclude with an *appendix* describing exactly 36 arguments for the existence of God, and each of those arguments is then countered by an enumerated list of flaws.

The "New Atheists", a set which by some definitions includes Goldstein's husband, psychologist Steven Pinker, are often accused of being too aggressive. Perhaps this book is the author's attempt at another approach. It does actually contain the arguments promised in the title, as well as some discussion of the *emotional need* for religion even if it is based on falsehoods. However, some who buy the book after reading the title may be surprised by the alternative viewpoints presented as well. I would be very curious to know how such a reader would react. Would the non-religious viewpoint be more appealing or effective when tied to a character like Cass Seltzer that they could "get to know"? I am afraid I am unable to predict that, but do believe that many atheists, agnostics, Brights, and others will enjoy reading this book. Mixed in with some well thought out philosophical arguments one finds a little romance, a little humor, and a bit of math, all taking place in a fictional universe which, like the real one, is sad but beautiful.

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Newsletter of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

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Join the SHL

The Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry (SHL) is a group of freethinkers who believe in the humanist philosophy. Members come primarily from the greater Charleston, SC area. The SHL is affiliated with American Atheists, American Humanist Association, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, Atheist Alliance International, 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 an electronic copy of this newsletter. For more information on SHL membership and activities, consult our website at:

<http://lowcountryhumanists.org>

Contribute to The Separationist

Please contact the editor 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 welcome. You can contact the editor at:

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