



The Separationist

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

January 2010

David Driscoll Atheist Alliance International

Our speaker for January is David Driscoll, the Atheist Alliance International Ambassador for the Southeastern U.S. He is going to discuss the AAI Ambassador program and some of the latest happenings of AAI.

Atheist Alliance International is an umbrella organization of groups and individuals in the United States and around the world committed to promoting and defending reason and the atheist worldview. Its mission is to develop and provide educational, advocacy, and community-building programs for the atheist community that assist towards fulfilling its vision.

David Driscoll grew up in Northern Maine in an environment where he felt free from religious bigotry. He also lived in several cities as an adult, most recently Los Angeles. He would have been content to live and let live if he had not experienced “in your face” religion when he landed in Atlanta, Georgia. David decided to get involved in the movement to promote reason over

righteousness when the Governor of his adopted state held a prayer vigil for rain on the capitol steps. David helped organize the placement of the Freedom From Religion Foundation’s “Imagine no Religion” billboard in Atlanta, and started the American

Freethought Podcast with co-host John C. Snider. David also hosts AAI's popular interview based podcast, Secular Nation. He has recently expanded his involvement with Atheist Alliance International by becoming an AAI Ambassador. In this position he meets with AAI Affiliate groups to help them expand their membership and to



educate them about AAI.

David lives in the newly incorporated John’s Creek, Georgia with his wife Vonda and their two extremely furry Persian Cats, Tucker and Savannah.

When: Sunday, January 17, 2010, 4 pm

Where: Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston

SHL Letters to the Editor

What does it mean to call the USA a Christian nation? Does having the 10 Commandments on the courthouse door or having 'In God We Trust' on our coins make this a Christian nation?

There is no doubt that the USA has been dominated by Christians; but if that means (as a recent letter writer put it) 'if God offends you, then I suggest you consider another part of the world as your new home,' then what happens to liberty and justice for all?

Such a position reminds me of the country that wanted to claim it was an Aryan nation and proceeded to eliminate the Jews and others who did not fit the mold. Is this what Christians want? If not, then why don't they speak out in opposition to the above mentioned letter writer and those who think the way he does?

Frank S. Hay Jr.

Editor's note: This letter appeared on December 24th in the Charleston Post & Courier.

Regarding Brian Hicks' suggestion that Charleston Fire Station 12 ship its Nativity scene to the Freedom From Religion Foundation: I have no problem with that, but not because Wisconsin "could use a few wise men up there." Surely that bit of sarcasm could apply to South Carolina (and every other state) as well.

But at least it would remove a religious display from public property. As an alternative, however, I would suggest that the display be transferred to the front yard of the fire chief or any other firefighter willing to accept it.

On a personal note, as the son of a fire chief myself, I would like to wish Happy Holidays to all local firefighters, of any faith or of no faith, and to express my gratitude for their service in keeping our homes safe from fire.

Daniel O'Neal

Editor's note: This letter appeared on December 25th in the Charleston Post & Courier.

As has become a December tradition, 'tis the season for religious misunderstandings and conflict. We all have the constitutional right to practice religion and worship as we choose, without government interference.

However, politicians, public school teachers and firefighters wear two different hats: their private citizen hat gives them the right to exhibit religious displays on their private property; their public official hat prohibits them from favoring one religion over another, or religion in general over non-religion. Government neutrality toward religion is not government hostility.

Unlike conservative broadcasters, secularists don't manufacture a "war on Christmas."

So I wish all of you a Happy Holiday, whichever and however you celebrate. I do hope your celebrations will include something about good will and peace on earth.

Herb Silverman

Editor's note: This letter appeared on December 25th in the Charleston Post & Courier.

Annual membership dues for 2010 are due!

The easiest way to renew is on our website by clicking the "Join" link at the top or bring your cash or check to the January meeting. New members who joined between September and December 2009 are paid through the end of 2010.

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

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Charleston Fire Station 12

by Sue Edward

If you witnessed a crime being committed, would you report it or would you ignore it? I'm sure most of us would, of course, report it. So when I witnessed the Constitution being violated, I worked to rectify it.

By now most of you have seen and read news accounts of the request to the city by the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to remove the crèche and crucifix from Charleston Fire Station 12 on Old Towne Road in West Ashley. This station has been putting up these displays since at least 2000, and probably much, much earlier.

I moved to the adjoining neighborhood in 2004, and drive past the station twice daily on my commute to/from work plus pass it when running other errands such as grocery shopping. It is impossible to miss the overtly Christian display which sends out the message that these firemen, and ultimately the City of Charleston, not only support but openly promote, Christianity.

Previous efforts by local citizens, including the Reverend Dr. Monty Knight, president of the Charleston chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, to get these removed were ignored. It was only after contacting FFRF last year that I successfully got the crucifix removed from the station's roof! This year the crèche and crucifix again appeared so I again contacted FFRF; it was their letter to the

mayor and fire chief that touched off a media storm.

As of this writing, the crèche has been removed and then returned, joined by a menorah, tree, Kwanzaa display, Santa, and reindeer. Each night the firemen bring it inside (do they fear I will steal it!?) Apparently not all of the firemen care that much, as the crew working on Christmas day and the following weekend failed to bother setting it

up.

The city refuses to remove the cross, claiming it is part of the memorial to the fallen fire fighters. I see this as a great big excuse, invented at the last minute. The cross had been set up and removed



along with the crèche for many years prior to the fire. Curiously, they failed to set up the cross in 2007, the year of the fire. And this year they painted "Charleston 9 6/18/07" on the cross, but only several days after the demand from FFRF to remove it. As Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of FFRF stated, "What does a lighted cross on a lawn in the South conjure up? What a message!"

This is far from over. Lawyers are investigating next steps. I have been encouraged by friends and discouraged by others. One told me that "this is the South, there are some things you just have to ignore." The last time I checked, this is the United States. And the United States is bound by the US Constitution - even in the South.

Let's go ice skating! Saturday, January 16

Everyone is welcome! We'll meet for the 3-5PM public skating session at the Carolina Ice Palace.

Visit www.CarolinaIcePalace.com for directions and regular admission prices. However, you can get free admission and skate rental with the Be A Tourist pass which is on sale for a limited time at www.BeATourist.net. And don't be afraid to bring small children - you can rent one of their great little pushers that will allow even 3-year-olds to "skate" by themselves.

Book Review: Karen Armstrong's *The Case for God*

by Mark Sumner

If you open Karen Armstrong's new book, *The Case for God*, expecting to find a list of mysterious cures, scientific curiosities, or certified miracles all pointing toward the physical presence of a divine influence in the world, you will be sorely disappointed. Armstrong has no interest in, and is in fact completely antithetical to, trying to prove God's existence. Despite this, her book is positioned – both in marketing and from its opening pages – as a direct challenge to books like Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, Sam Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. How can you make a defense of God if you've no interest in the existence of God? Quite well, actually, and if you do it as sharply as Armstrong, you can make hundreds of pages of what is basically theological analysis both entertaining and informative.

Armstrong argues for an idea very similar to the "non-overlapping magisteria" that were put forward by evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould (and in fact, Gould gets several nice mentions in *The Case for God*). She refers frequently to the idea that, in the past, people tended to break arguments into two groups for which she uses the Greek terms *logos* and *mythos*. *Logos* reflects practical, immediate reasoning – how do we build that aqueduct, what can we make from this wood, which crop would grow best in that field? *Mythos* is more aimed at the why – what does it mean that my friend has died, how can I recapture the joy I felt in a moment of pure experience, how can I find meaning and peace among the world's noise and violence? This sort of approach could easily fall into a gooey cheer for "being spiritual," but Armstrong is not talking about having a nice little breathing session now and then. She focuses on the 3000 year history of monotheism and the great effort that was put into building flexible, thoughtful religions, on how those religions continue to have a meaningful role in the life of millions, and how the recent history of those religions has led to unfortunate developments that are unique over those three millennia.

No civilization of the past thought it could get by without *logos*. Pyramids were built with extensive use of mathematics and the most advanced technology of the time. The same could be said of the Acropolis and of medieval cathedrals. When we see those past societies as ignorant and driven out of unreasoning "myths" it's because we are the oddities of history. Having acquired so much new data to feed *logos* over such a short time, we've become completely centered in scientific reasoning and entirely dismissive of *mythos* – perversely, that's even true when we talk about fundamentalist religion. We look back on some ritual of the past and dismiss it as mindless following of tradition and superstition. You don't need to plant at midnight, or sacrifice a lamb, or ferry a statue

around the town to satisfy some dumb animal-headed deity. We search for the hint of reasoning that might be behind these rituals, and discount the idea that they served to establish *meaning* in lives that were just as busy, joyful, tragic, and brief as our own. We've turned "myth" into another word for fantasy, or lie. In doing so:

We lost the art of interpreting the old tales of gods walking the earth, dead men striding out of tombs, or seas parting miraculously. We began to understand concepts such as faith, revelation, myth, mystery, and dogma in a way that would have been very surprising to our ancestors.

In particular, the concept of faith comes in for a close examination. We understand faith today as a kind of blind acceptance – like Indiana Jones stepping off into space in his quest for the Holy Grail. Religious people cheer this kind of "faith" and many Christians tout this as the one and only qualification to be among Christ's chosen. But that's not what the word translated as "faith" meant in Biblical times. It's not even what it meant when the Bible was first translated into English.

The term used in most New Testament texts (the Greek word *pistis*) meant something closer to loyalty or commitment, than unreasoning belief. When Jesus chastised his followers for their lack of faith, or commended a non-Jew for having faith, he wasn't talking about some unspoken creed. He certainly wasn't praising them for seeing that he was divine. He was talking about follow-through, about living up to ideas of selflessness and humbleness. Even the word "belief" has changed from a Middle English sense of "prize" to our modern idea of "accept at face value." Imagine how different every Christian creed would sound today if we replace "believe in" with "value" and "have faith in" with "commit myself to."

Unquestioning acceptance doesn't figure into the vigorous ethical and theological debates that ran through street conversations and popular songs of previous centuries, and Armstrong sees it as an invention of modern religion. Unable to separate *logos* and *mythos*, and trying to view everything through a lens of the *logos*-based society in which they live, fundamentalists reacted not by rediscovering the transcendent ideas of the past, but by inventing something new. Instead of science and religion, they tried to build a scientific religion in which every aspect of the world must conform to a literal interpretation of scripture (one that ignores the inherent, and quite intentional, contradictions built into that text). Blind acceptance had to be inserted into the mix because only blind acceptance allows stepping around the wreck trying to force *mythos* to conform to *logos* makes of both. If you

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look for reviews of Armstrong's book, you'll find that that the harshest reviews are not from the general "secular" press, but from fundamentalists. "Demon inspired" is one of the milder phrases you'll encounter if you make a search for reactions from Christian fundamentalists.

Though the heart of the book is a lengthy examination of theology that starts with the paintings of Neolithic caves and ends with twenty-first century philosophers, don't get the impression that Armstrong asserts that the meaning of religion can be found in a text – whether that text is the Bible, the Torah, or her own book. *The Case for God* might as well be called *The Case for Religious Practice*. And by practice she doesn't mean doing something once, she means doing it over, and over, and over – like practicing piano – until you discover the passion at the end of all that rote, mechanical repetition.

Religion... was not primarily something that people thought, but something they did. Its truth was acquired by practical action. It is no use imagining that you will be able to drive a car if you simply read the manual or study the rules of the road. You cannot learn to dance, paint, or cook by perusing text or recipes. The rules of a board game sound obscure, unnecessarily complicated, and dull until you start to play, when everything falls into place. There are some things that can be learned only by constant, dedicated practice, but you find that you achieve something that seemed initially impossible. Instead of sinking to the bottom of the pool, you can float, you may learn to jump higher and with more grace than seems humanly possible, or to sing with unearthly beauty. You do not always understand how you achieved these feats, because your mind directs your body in a way that bypasses conscious logical deliberation, but somehow you learn to transcend your original capabilities. Some of these activities bring indescribable joy. A musician can lose herself in her music, a dancer becomes inseparable from the dance, and a skier feels entirely at one with himself and the external world as he speeds down the slope. It is a satisfaction that goes deeper than merely "feeling good." It is what the Greeks called *ekstasis*, which means a stepping outside the norm. Religion is a practical discipline that teaches us to discover new capacities of mind and heart. ... It is no use magisterially weighing up the teachings of religion to judge their truth of falsehood before embarking on a religious way of life. You will discover their truth -- or lack of it -- only if you translate those doctrines into ritual or ethical action. Like any skill, religion requires perseverance, hard work, and discipline.

Not only does Armstrong see the blind acceptance of doctrine as an impediment to religious practice, she discounts the idea that religious beliefs can have any value unless they are placed into a framework of daily practice, commitment, and ethical action.

If you're waiting for her to stop explaining where the fundamentalists went wrong and start her case against "Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens," you're going to be disappointed again – because Armstrong sees them as both as flip sides of the same coin.

Like all religious fundamentalists, the new atheists believe that they alone are in possession of the truth; like Christian fundamentalists they read scripture in an entirely literal manner and seem to never have heard of the long tradition of allegoric or Talmudic interpretation... Harris seems to imagine that biblical inspiration means that the Bible was actually "written by God." Hitchens assumes that faith is entirely dependent on a literal reading of the Bible, and that, for example, the discrepancies in the gospel infancy narratives prove the falseness of Christianity: "Either the gospels are in some sense literal truth, or the whole thing is a fraud and perhaps a moral one at that." Like Protestant fundamentalists, Dawkins has a simplistic view of the moral teaching of the Bible, taking it for granted that its chief purpose is to issue clear rules of conduct and provide us with "role models," which, not surprisingly, he finds lamentably inadequate. He also presumes that since the Bible claims to be inspired by God it must also provide scientific information. Dawkins' only point of disagreement with the Protestant fundamentalists is that he finds the Bible unreliable about science while they do not.

Armstrong is not worried about the claim that God can't be found in science. Which is, in fact, a very old claim.

In fact, the new atheists are not radical enough. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians have insisted for centuries that God does not exist and that there is "nothing" out there...

Her concern is that the Hitchens, Harris, Dawkins camp concern themselves only with tackling a theology that is itself "decidedly unorthodox" and limited – they want to knock down a sickly child and then proclaim they've won the heavyweight title.

By taking on fundamentalism at both ends of the scale, Armstrong has assured that her book will draw the ire of both camps. In the process she's written a book that's fascinating, packed with information about the history of religion and philosophy, and illuminating when it shows the paths we followed to end up where we find ourselves today (from a political point of view, it's very instructive to look at the origins of modern Christian fundamentalism and in particular to look at how mainstream Protestantism fanned the flames of a dying fundamentalist movement by heaping on ridicule). If nothing else, *The Case for God* is a terrific reference – and a splendid bit of long form argument. If you've read any of Karen Armstrong's books in the past – including her biography of the Buddha, or her personal account of losing faith as a young novice – you'll find some of the same points repeated here, but in new historical contexts. If you haven't read her works before... well, she warns you right in the introduction that this isn't exactly light reading. If you don't want to face detailed descriptions of theological conflicts and the development of religious frameworks, turn back now.

Whether anyone will find that argument convincing, in a world that's increasingly divided into extremes, is difficult to say. But at least it should inspire some good conversations.

Mark Sumner is the author of 32 novels, including "Devil's Tower", as well as the upcoming book "The Evolution of Everything".

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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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