



The Separationist

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

February 2010

Nate and Di Fulmer

Atheism in Podcasting and New Media

Sunday, February 21, 2010, 4 pm, Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston

Our speakers for February are Nate and Di Fulmer who will give us an informational overview of atheism in podcasting and new media and relate their experiences in these areas. They will focus on how and why they got involved in podcasting, what podcasts are and why they are unique (targeted audience and pull vs. push media), how anyone can distribute or subscribe to podcasts and blogs, tips on how to promote productions to increase traffic, the many varieties of positive and negative feedback they have received, and privacy and free speech concerns for people who are considering becoming content producers.

Nate and Di began podcasting in 2006 from Mount Pleasant, where Nate worked in the accounting department of a local laboratory supply company and Di at a self storage facility. One of their first episodes of the "Nate & Di Show" was devoted to their disenchantment with organized religion and recorded somewhat clandestinely in a downtown Charleston church during a service.



Photo courtesy of Charleston City Paper

After about fifteen minutes of whispered commentary, suppressed laughter and mock "Amens" on their part, an usher approached them and escorted them out of the building. But there was another unfortunate repercussion. Shortly thereafter, Nate received a pink slip from his conservative Christian boss. The lesson he drew from this incident, which came to be known among podcasters as the 'church episode' and is related in the book *Speechless: The Erosion of Expression in the American Workplace* by Bruce Barry, was: "If you live in a place like South Carolina, be careful what you say." The incident had a chilling effect in the amateur podcasting community, but also had a positive effect. "For about three months afterward", said Di, "the church episode and Nate getting fired was the main topic of conversation coming from our listeners ... and helped to create a huge buzz around our show at a time when the podcast community was first starting to get on its feet."

Adopt-A-Highway

Saturday, February 6 is our next scheduled trash pick up. We will meet at the parking lot of the First Federal of Charleston Bank on Harbor View Rd on James Island. It's right next to the Piggly Wiggly. Meeting time is 8:50 am. The pick up usually takes about an hour and a half and provides some exercise and a chance to get to know other SHL members. Call Roger at 224-9360 if you have any questions.

SHL Letters to the Editor

The recent election of a lesbian to assistant bishop in the Episcopal Church raises several questions.

Clergy, they say, have a calling from God. Homosexual clergy believe they have received such a calling. If true, it's an indication that God is not ill-disposed toward them. If false, then they are mistaken; God didn't speak to them, the apparent conservative position. But if that's the case, how does anyone know if he truly has been called, let alone his fellows. Perhaps they are all deluded; or mountebanks. Elmer Gantry was not made out of whole cloth.

Bearing on the church's position is a recent study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (DOI:10.1073/pnas.0908374106) that concluded: "Intuiting God's beliefs on important issues may not produce an independent guide, but may instead serve as an echo chamber to validate and justify [a Christian's] own beliefs." In bumper sticker phraseology: "I said it; God believes it; that settles it."

This phenomenon contributes to a nasty situation when the individual's physical rejection of homosexuality or abortion -- to name two -- become, as the eminent philosopher Martha Nussbaum puts it, projective disgust toward others. This leads to regarding a group of people as inferior or evil, even to the point of wanting to kill or maim them.

The first in the Bible to have ascribed to God his own feeling of ickiness was the priestly writer of Leviticus. The Episcopalians and other like-minded Christians should shun his example in these matters.

David D. Peterson

Editor's note: This letter appeared on December 20th in the Beaufort Gazette.

The Episcopalians voting to convert their churches to "traditional" Anglican parishes because of the ordination of homosexual clergy say they are doing so to keep closer to the teachings of Jesus. It seems that they have not read the Gospels.

Jesus has not a single word to say on the subject of homosexuality, but he makes very clear that to grant a divorce -- the very reason for which the Anglican church was founded -- is a grievous sin and forbidden. Forgive me, but I'm confused.

Laura Kasman

Editor's note: This letter appeared on January 1st in the Charleston Post & Courier.

SHL Book Group

by Matt Dean

We'll meet on February 28th at 4 pm, upstairs in Gage Hall. Our book will be "I'm Perfect, You're Doomed: Tales from a Jehovah's Witness Upbringing," by Kyria Abrahams.

When Abrahams was growing up, her world was neatly divided between those who would live forever in a paradise on earth and all the "worldly" people her Jehovah's Witness family prayed for. Her congregation forbade Christmas and Halloween, aggressively shunned anyone who left the fold and taught children that birthday parties were of the devil. This acerbic, witty memoir chronicles the first 23 years of Abraham's life with candor and a good dose of comedy.

Unfortunately, there's only one copy available in the local library system, but the hardcover is bargain-priced on Amazon at \$10. Cheaper copies are available on Amazon from private sellers.

From the President

Thanks to those of you who have paid your dues for 2010. If you have not yet paid, you may do so on our website with a credit or debit card, or bring a check to the February meeting.

We are still seeking donations for Trident Literacy Association. Our goal is \$500, including proceeds from the book auction and individual contributions during January and February. We are still more than \$200 short of our goal. Please make a contribution, large or small, at our website, or at the next meeting. Thanks for your generosity.

Jonathan

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

Contact information

Phone: (843) 556-4490

Email: shl@lowcountryhumanists.org

Web: lowcountryhumanists.org

Mail: P.O. Box 32256, Charleston, SC 29417

Officers

President: Jonathan Lamb

Vice President: Herb Silverman

Treasurer: Sharon Fratepietro

Secretary: David Brown

Some thoughts about Sue Metzger and SHL

by Sharon Fratepietro

I am sorry to think that Sue Metzger died unexpectedly after heart surgery, and I won't see her anymore at SHL meetings. Sue, and her dear friend and housemate, Ellie Garvin (who died a couple of years ago), were members of SHL and came to our meetings for many years. You might not have known either of them, since they did not participate in other SHL activities, but they were good people, retired from their respective professions (Sue in administration at MUSC), and I liked both of them for their friendliness and astute observations.

I heard today at Sue's memorial service at the Unitarian Church, where she had been a member, that she refused to let the UU minister visit her in the hospital during her last days. She did not want to offend him, but she kept putting him off, finally asking her nurse to tell the minister that she was taking a bath. The minister, himself, told this story. I knew, if the minister did not, why she rejected his ministrations.

The first time I heard (or, better said, read) Sue's name was in response to a letter I'd written to the Post and Courier, maybe 18 years ago, protesting the policy at ETV that prohibited showing any programs involving gay people. This actually was a policy, believe it or not, because ETV's management thought that showing gays on TV would infuriate the South Carolina legislators who funded the station. (I also wrote to Bill Moyers about this, since he'd done several fundraisers for the station.) It was not

easy for gay people then to be open about their sexual orientation.

When I wrote a few outraged letters to the Post and Courier about it, each time one was published I got a thank you note in the mail from Sue, whom I didn't know at the time, and who had not yet joined SHL. Well, I think that bad policy at ETV must have changed some time ago, since I've not heard anything lately about it. (ETV also used to juxtapose a program about religion with every broadcast on evolution, and I know this is not true anymore.)

So this is progress. And the SHL billboard last year that drew many favorable comments and few protests showed definite progress, too, when you think that it was only in 2003 that half the Charleston City Council members walked out on Herb Silverman's invocation because he was an atheist. I feel encouraged.

I was reminded about all this last week in Big Sky, Montana, where Herb and I went skiing, when I got into a casual conversation on a bus with a nice couple from a small city in North Dakota. They happened to mention that their son is transsexual, and that this is a big problem for their family in their conservative hometown. No progress there yet. Still, when I think of what's happened in South Carolina, though not perfect yet, I have to believe the day will come when most people will understand what transsexuality is and accept it without bias. As with gays and atheists, coming out of the closet will be a big help toward creating that progress.

Family Corner: Fins, Feathers and Fur

by Amy Monsky

Inspired by "Darwin Day", and just because kids love to learn about animals, we're going to meet at 2 pm on Saturday, February 6, for a special program entitled: *Fins, feathers and fur--what kinds of coats do animals wear?* This is a special educational program just for our group in which kids (and any adults who are young at heart) will use mounted animals and jarred specimens to compare, contrast and understand the animal kingdom.

The cost is \$7 per child and \$4 for non-member adults. The fee includes the program as well as a self guided tour afterwards.

The museum requires that we get a headcount to them 10 days prior to the event. Even though that deadline has already passed, please email me at SecularCharlestonMom@gmail.com if you are interested in going. There may still be space.

If you go, consider joining the SHL group for lunch at Juanita Greenberg's (www.juanitagreenbergs.com) at 12:30 pm before heading over to the museum.

Mark the Date

Saturday, March 27 at 2pm
Guided Nature Walk at Francis Biedler Forest

Why I Love the Bible

by Herb Silverman

The “Good Book” really is a good book. Maybe not great, but good. Many atheists attack the Bible because of its believers. Christians often use the cliché, “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” In practice, lots of them have trouble making that distinction and wind up hating both. Atheists, however, should distinguish between the quality of a book and the attributes of its adherents.

Recently, after a series of false alarms at a hotel, I jokingly said to a friend while waiting outside for the all-clear, “One of these times, we’ll ignore the alarm when there is a real fire—just like in the biblical story of the boy who cried wolf.” Of course my friend pointed out that the story was from Aesop, not the Bible, to which I responded that Aesop wrote the better book. Stories in both Aesop and the Bible feature talking animals, and attempt to bring moral education to children and universal truths to adults. Leaving aside which book offers better advice, one advantage to Aesop is that his stories are called fables. Nobody, not even young children, takes Aesop’s tales literally. The same can be said about readers today of the Iliad and the Odyssey, though they may originally have been religious texts for some.

The Bible is great literature in the sense that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are called the three great monotheistic religions. For better or worse, the Bible and the religions it spawned have deeply influenced our culture and the world. To be educated, I think we need to know the Bible, understand why so many people love it, and learn how to better communicate with those who do.

The Bible certainly contains many boring, violent, silly, and repetitive sections. My public elementary school began each day with a passage from the Bible. When one of my teachers had her students take turns reading, I selected a portion with an endless array of “begats,” much to the amusement of my classmates. State law required that the Bible be read without comment, but my teacher’s facial expression conveyed her displeasure. When I am now invited to say “grace,” usually in jest by people who know my theology, I happily choose a passage like, “If a woman gives birth to a male, she will be unclean for 7 days. If a girl, she is unclean for 2 weeks.” (Lev. 12) Or, right before a nice meal, I shout, “Behold I will corrupt your seed, and spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your solemn feasts.” (Malachi 2)

Many atheists have written books making fun of such quotes, or describing political and social conditions that led humans to include or exclude certain parts from the Bible. Even more theists have written books trying to justify the Bible as the inerrant word of God. The book I’ve not seen is the biblical equivalent of Aesop’s fables, a book with rather different yet positive moral lessons from the same biblical stories. So, to inspire someone to write a complete Biblical Fables book, I’ll start off with ten from Genesis, which is the 1st of 66 books in the Bible.

1. The Matchmaker Fable.

God notices that the first man he created is lonely. He parades a bunch of animals in front of Adam, but Adam remains lonely. God then decides to fashion another human from Adam’s rib, with similar but not identical body parts. Adam cheers up because he clearly prefers Eve to the other animals.

The Moral: Humans and most other species are social animals. Solitude has its rewards, but so does the company of others. It is good to associate and cooperate with people whose values you

share. Learn about other kinds, but recognize those with whom you can communicate well and trust.

2. The Adam, Eve, and Snake Fable.

God tells Adam he may eat anything in a garden but the fruit from one tree, saying he will die on the day he eats it. A cunning snake convinces Eve that her eyes will open after eating the forbidden fruit, and she will know good and evil. Eve eats, likes what she sees, and encourages Adam to partake. They discover many things, including sex, and so God banishes Adam and Eve from the garden and tells them they need to work for a living.

The Moral: God tries to make blind obedience the supreme virtue, assuming ignorance is bliss. The truthful snake proves God wrong, since the humans did not die on the day they received knowledge. So don’t believe everything someone tells you, even if you have to pay a price for insisting on truth. It is better to have freedom without a guarantee of security than to have security without freedom.

3. The Cain and Abel Fable

Adam and Eve’s two sons bring an offering to God, and God gives no reason for accepting Abel’s and rejecting Cain’s. Cain becomes angry and kills Abel. When God asks Cain where Abel is, Cain responds, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” God discovers that Cain killed Abel and curses him. God tells Cain he must now wander the earth, and places a protective mark on him.

The Moral: The first worship ceremony is followed immediately by the first murder, which shows we must not put our love and worship of a God above our love for human beings, especially when God’s favoritism is so arbitrary. Cain belatedly learns that humans should look out for one another, making each of us our brother’s and sister’s keeper. God recognizes his culpability in the first murder and puts a mark on Cain as a sign to those he meets that they must not do to Cain what Cain did to Abel.

4. The Flood Fable:

God decides to destroy almost all earth’s inhabitants in a flood because humans are wicked. He instructs an obedient 600 year old Noah to build an Ark for his family and pairs of all species in the world. When the genocide is complete and the waters recede, those inside leave the Ark and Noah offers a sacrifice to appease God’s wrath. God likes this sweet odor of burnt animal flesh and decides never again to destroy the earth by flood. Noah gets drunk, one of his sons takes sexual advantage of him, and humans become just as wicked as before.

The Moral: God learns his expectations for humans were inappropriate, and genocide solves no problems. One should never indiscriminately destroy human beings or other animals, the guilty along with the innocent. God should have known things would turn out poorly when a compliant Noah showed no concern for the lives of others. Older doesn’t necessarily mean wiser, even with 600 years of experience.

5. The Tower of Babel Fable

Men decide to build a tower to heaven so they can be like God. But God thwarts this activity by confusing their language. The men are then scattered throughout the world. The city where the

(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 4)

tower is built is called Babel, meaning “to confuse or confound.”

The Moral: Leaders must not become as insecure as God, who prevented others from cooperating and moving upward together. Also, there is value in diversity. Each of us must decide when to go along with the crowd and when to set out on a road not taken.

6. The Sodom and Gomorrah Fable

God tells Abraham he plans to destroy the city of Sodom because of its wickedness. Abraham convinces God to reconsider if 50 (then 45, 30, 20, down to 10) righteous people can be found. Since Abraham’s nephew Lot is the lone righteous person identified, God spares only Lot and his family from the fire and brimstone that obliterate Sodom and Gomorrah. God tells them not to look back, but Lot’s wife peeks and turns into a pillar of salt as punishment. Lot and his two daughters flee and live in a cave. Lot’s daughters want children but there are no eligible men around. So they take turns getting their father drunk and having sex with him.

The Moral: By trying to talk God out of killing so many humans, Abraham is morally superior to Noah in Fable 2. It takes courage to stand up to authority, especially one bent on genocide. We learn from God the value of looking forward to a fresh start without dwelling on the past. However, what he did to Lot’s wife for a brief look backward was, shall we say, overkill. When we find ourselves in a new and frightening environment, we are likely to act in ways formerly unthinkable. Lot’s motherless daughters, believing all other men were dead, chose what they thought to be the most practical path for the survival of the species—make love, not war.

7. The Binding of Isaac Fable

God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the son he loves. Abraham acquiesces, but God stops Abraham as he lifts his knife. God provides a lamb to take Isaac’s place

The Moral: God tests Abraham, who fails the test. Nobody should commit an obvious atrocity, no matter who makes the request. Abraham’s willingness to commit a frightful act leads to a dysfunctional family. The Bible never indicates that either his son Isaac or his wife Sarah ever speak to Abraham again. It is better to do good than to have faith.

8. The Jacob and Esau Fable

A “birthright” normally passes from father to oldest son. Jacob talks his tired and hungry older brother Esau into trading his birthright for a meal. Years later, a blind and faltering Isaac plans to give his best blessing to his favorite son, Esau. However, Isaac’s wife Rachael tricks him into mistakenly blessing Jacob, Rachael’s favorite son. When Esau learns of the deception, he vows to take revenge. Jacob flees to the home of his mother’s brother. Eventually, Jacob wants to return and sends gifts to his brother. Esau forgives Jacob, and the brothers reconcile.

The Moral: We should not prey on the weaknesses of family members, as Jacob and Rachael did. On the other hand, a future leader should be a thinker and planner like Jacob, rather than prone to foolish choices, as Esau was. Esau makes the wise decision to forgive his brother, rather than seek revenge.

9. The Joseph and Coat Fable:

Of his twelve sons, Jacob favors Joseph. He gives Joseph a coat of many colors and Joseph tells the family of his dream that his brothers will one day serve him. Joseph’s envious brothers plot to kill him, but one of the brothers, Judah, persuades them, instead, to sell Joseph into slavery. Joseph becomes a slave in Egypt and improves his lot by interpreting the Pharaoh’s dreams. Joseph and the Pharaoh conspire to buy and hoard grain before a famine, after

which they sell the grain back to starving inhabitants for enormous profit. Joseph’s brothers no longer recognize him when they beg Joseph to sell them food. Joseph accuses his brothers of being spies, holds them hostage for several days, and later falsely blames one for theft. Finally, Joseph reveals who he is and they reconcile.

The Moral: As often occurs in families, Jacob picks up some of the bad habits of his father, and suffers for openly favoring one child over another. We learn about degrees of horrendous behavior, with Judah appearing the most reasonable brother because he favors selling Joseph into slavery instead of killing him. Joseph, similarly, feels the need to torment his brothers before eventually disclosing his identity and dropping the trumped up charges. One learns in this fable not to over-react from envy, as Joseph’s brothers do, and not to flaunt a favored status, as Joseph does.

10. The Onanism Fable.

Judah, Joseph’s named brother in the previous fable, has three sons—Er, Onan, and Shelah. Er marries Tamar, but God kills Er. As is the tradition, Judah tells Onan, the son next in line, to have sex with Tamar and produce offspring who will then inherit Er’s property. Onan willingly has sex with Tamar, but pulls out just in time to ejaculate on the ground and remain Er’s heir. So God kills Onan. Fearing that Tamar is jinxed, Judah sends her out of the household instead of bringing her to his remaining son. Still wanting an heir, Tamar dresses as a prostitute at the side of a road and offers her services to a willing and unsuspecting Judah. When Judah sees a pregnant Tamar several months later, he calls her a whore and condemns her to be burned to death. After Tamar gives Judah incontrovertible evidence that he is the father, Judah repents and says, “She is more righteous than I, since I refused to give her to my son Shelah.”

The Moral: Marriages arranged by authority figures for the sole purpose of property augmentation can lead to death and destruction. Couples should be honest with each other about their sexual relationship, which Onan is not. Judah, at least, is willing to admit his error when confronted with proof. Tamar displays the best character because she is not a hypocrite and attains her goal the only way possible in a culture ruled by men.

My ten fables are abridged because of space limitations, and there are many more fables in Genesis alone. Atheists almost never put the character “God” in a good light, and God’s behavior is particularly egregious in Genesis. But God does learn from some of his early mistakes, and in later fables we can give the God his due. We can even “praise God” on those rare occasions when it is warranted. Such praise might even dispel the ludicrous myth that atheists hate God anymore than they hate Zeus.

Here is why I think a Biblical Fables book could benefit both children and adults. Students are required to write book reports not only to provide evidence that they have read the book, but because it helps them focus on key parts from which to draw inferences. Ideally, a discussion follows among teacher and students about disparate or contradictory understandings of the same passage. This is why I think one of the best ways to read the Bible is by identifying and writing about its fables. An atheist’s insights would be different from those of either liberal or conservative religionists. But if we start with the assumption that the Bible is a good and important book to read, this common bond may earn atheists more respect within the religious community, and help atheists communicate their differences more effectively with at least some theists.

The Separationist

Newsletter of the
Secular Humanists of
the Lowcountry

Editor:

Daniel O'Neal

newsletter@lowcountryhumanists.org

<http://lowcountryhumanists.org>

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:

newsletter@lowcountryhumanists.org

Secular Humanists of the
Lowcountry

P.O. Box 32256

Charleston, SC 29417