



# The Separationist

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

March 2010

## Cecil Bothwell

City Councilman, Asheville, North Carolina

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

Our speaker for March is Cecil Bothwell, a journalist, author and builder from Asheville, North Carolina. In addition to publishing works of poetry and music, he has written the city's best-selling guide book *Finding Your Way in Asheville* as well as *The Prince of War: Billy Graham's Crusade for a Wholly Christian Empire*, which focused on the famous preacher's efforts to use his access to U.S. presidents to push a theocratic agenda.

In 2009 Cecil ran for a nonpartisan seat on the Asheville City Council on a progressive platform in support of environmentalism, campaign finance reform and ending capital punishment. Following a strong grassroots campaign, he won the election with the third highest number of votes in the city election and in spite of a negative campaign against him that featured flyers mailed to voters accusing him of atheism. He made no attempt to deny the charge, saying that his spiritual beliefs were based on the Golden Rule instead of a deity.

Most of his constituents don't care about his personal spiritual views, Cecil says. When he was sworn into office, he used an alternative

oath that doesn't require swearing on a Bible or making any reference to God.

However, his election has riled conservative and religious activists who are trying to overturn it on the basis of a provision of the North Carolina constitution that disqualifies officeholders "who shall deny the being of Almighty god". Six other states, including South Carolina, have similar provisions barring atheist officeholders. Even though these provisions are unenforceable because the U.S. Constitution prohibits religious tests for public office, they remain on the books due to the inaction of state



legislatures to remove them.

### Myrtle Beach Humanists and Freethinkers

Charleston writer and SHL member Will Moredock will address the MBHF in a talk on South Carolina politics titled "Living in Fear".

Date: Sunday March 7, 2010, 5 pm

Place: Chapin Library (rear entrance),  
14th Ave. N., Myrtle Beach, SC

Free to public. For more information, visit:  
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/humanistsMB/>

## Volunteering update

by Nancy Worley

Our next volunteering opportunity will be with the Charleston Area Children's Garden Project. We will be meeting at 10AM, March 6 at Stono Elementary School, 1699 Garden Street, West Ashley. We will be helping to move some donated raised beds from several locations to the school, and reassemble them. If anyone has a pick-up truck that we could use on this project, it would be much appreciated. I know this is short notice but plans were just finalized.. Depending on the interest among SHL members, this could be an ongoing project. If you would like to read more about the Children's Garden Project, their website is [childrensgardenproject.org](http://childrensgardenproject.org). If you would like to volunteer, please contact me at [worley@bellsouth.net](mailto:worley@bellsouth.net) or call me at 763-4044.



On January 30, 2010 a group of volunteers from the SHL helped out at Pet Helpers on James Island. We cleaned up, sorted donations, filled a van with things that needy people can use more than pets to be taken to Goodwill, and found time to visit some of the homeless cats and dogs!

## SHL Book Group

by Matt Dean

On March 28th, the book group will meet to discuss *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe* by Greg M. Epstein, an inspiring and provocative exploration of an alternative to traditional religion by the Humanist chaplain at Harvard University.

Epstein highlights humanity's potential for goodness and the ways in which Humanists lead lives of purpose and compassion. Humanism can offer the sense of community we want and often need in good times and bad. In short, Humanism teaches us that we can lead good and moral lives without supernaturalism, without higher powers . . . without God.

The book group will meet at the West Ashley Barnes & Noble, 1812 Sam Rittenberg Blvd, from 4 pm to 5:30 pm. We usually go out to dinner afterward.

## From the President

Many thanks to everyone who made a donation to Trident Literacy Association during January or February. Between the individual donations and the proceeds from the December Book Auction, we raised a total of \$900! During the months of March and April, we are collecting donations for the American Cancer Society's Hope Lodge. Each Hope Lodge offers cancer patients and their families a free, temporary place to stay when their best hope for effective treatment may be in another city. Not having to worry about where to stay or how to pay for lodging allows Hope Lodge guests to focus on the most important thing: getting well.

Jonathan

*"We live over 100 miles away and there was no way we could have afforded my treatments, plus hotel, gas, and food expenses. My wife and I made it through this battle because Hope Lodge and the American Cancer Society were there for me."*

*- A cancer survivor*

Hope Lodge is funded entirely by donations, so please be generous and bring a check to the next meeting or donate on our website with credit/debit card.

## Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

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### Officers

President: Jonathan Lamb

Vice President: Herb Silverman

Treasurer: Sharon Fratepietro

Secretary: David Brown

## Adam, Eve AND Steve

by Herb Silverman

**Q:** *Top U.S. defense officials say they will repeal the decades-old "don't ask, don't tell" policy, which requires gay soldiers to keep their sexual orientation secret. Homosexuality is often cast as a religious issue. Should religious views of homosexuality be a factor in such military decisions? Should the U.S. military repeal its 'don't ask, don't tell' policy?*

Religious fundamentalists often justify their homophobia with the sound bite, "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." The Middle East writers of this Adam and Eve fable quite understandably placed the happy first couple in a paradise located in a land they knew. Today we have incontrovertible evidence that the first humans emerged from Africa, not the Middle East, and we have a common ancestor that makes all our citizens African Americans. Had we known this in the 1940's, perhaps there would have been less opposition to black African Americans serving in the military alongside white African Americans. Then again, scientific evidence is rarely sufficient to sway racists or religious fundamentalists.

If evidence matters, we should look at other militaries. In more than 30 countries, including allies like Canada, Israel, and the United Kingdom, gay Steves and Samanthas serve openly and effectively alongside straight Adams and Eves. The question for me is not whether "Don't ask, don't tell" should be repealed, but why it's taking so long. If the United States can't be a

leader in civil rights, it should at least not follow so far behind.

Politicians on both the right and left praise our military as America's finest men and women, who are fighting to preserve our precious freedoms. So how can we deny freedom of speech to gays and lesbians in the military? And how can we insult America's finest by insinuating that they "can't handle the truth," as Jack Nicholson famously said in the military movie *A Few Good Men*? Because of over-commitments to wars, the Army had to lower its recruitment standards and allow high school dropouts and felons convicted of minor crimes to sign up. Yet at the same time, we have deemed unworthy those otherwise well qualified and educated openly gay men and women. Our country would be better served were we to strive for more, rather than just a few, good men and women.

I don't think sexual orientation should be a factor in determining individual rights, whether inside or outside the military. So for those who believe our current military policy is working well, I have this proposal: Extend "Don't ask, don't tell" to all members of the military, heterosexual as well as homosexual. If that sounds ridiculous to you, and it should, ask yourself why our current policy is not ridiculous.

Check out Herb's other commentaries at:  
[http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/herb\\_silverman/](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/herb_silverman/)

## Family Corner: Guided Nature Walk

by Amy Monsky

On Saturday, March 27, we are going on a guided nature walk at Francis Beidler Forest. We will enjoy the benefit of a trained naturalist who will explain and interpret life in the swamp and help us spot the many kinds of wildlife that call Four Holes Swamp home. The entire walk will be over the boardwalk, and so is stroller friendly. The cost is \$7 per



person, but children under six are admitted free. Please arrive early as the walk will begin promptly at 2pm.

Also, there are several picnic tables if you would like to bring lunch and eat before the walk. For more information and directions, please visit their website:  
[www.sc.audubon.org/Centers\\_FBF.html](http://www.sc.audubon.org/Centers_FBF.html)

# Does thinking about the origins of the universe necessarily lead to belief in the supernatural?

by Alex Kasman

When religious people inquire about my atheism, they often begin by challenging me to explain things that they view as evidence for their own beliefs. This certainly makes sense, and is also the way I frequently interact with people whose views are very different from my own. In my case, the goal is not so much to show the other person how they are wrong as it is merely to understand how they can see things so differently than I do. Hoping that others have the same intentions, I do try to explain my viewpoint as clearly and simply as possible when challenged in this way. More often than not, I think such discussions lead to an increased mutual understanding even if not agreement.

However, some of the ideas we are talking about here are very big and complicated, and not well suited for such a casual conversation. In this essay, I'm hoping to do a somewhat more formal job of explaining my viewpoint on one specific issue. In particular, I'd like to address the question of whether the very existence of the universe -- not any particular feature of it such as the religious texts or the beauty of a sunrise -- is evidence that there is a God. For many believers I talk to, it seems, this is one piece of the reason that they believe. I have thought about the philosophical and scientific questions involved and, to the contrary, do not see it as evidence of a divine creator at all. Below I will explain how I view it. There are, of course, many other questions to consider when trying to determine whether there is or is not a God, but to keep this at a manageable size, only this one question will be addressed here. (Perhaps I can address other important questions in the same manner if this effort turns out to be either useful or interesting to anyone.)

To simplify the discussion, I would like to start by introducing some non-standard terminology. I am going to take the ordinary words "eternal", "spontaneous" and "consequential" and give them a special technical meaning just for the sake of this discussion.

Let us say that some thing is *eternal* if it has always existed, that it is *spontaneous* if it came into existence without cause at some instant and *consequential* if there was some previously existing thing which at some time caused it to come into existence. Note that these categories are disjoint in that nothing can fall into more than one: if it is eternal, then it is not spontaneous or consequential and so on.

Two of these categories, *eternal* and *spontaneous* have in common that the existence of the thing was not caused, so I'll use the word *uncaused* to mean either eternal or spontaneous.

Now, having made these definitions, I'm ready to state a surprising claim: *There either is an infinite chain of consequential objects, each caused by the one before it, or there is something that is uncaused.*

To me, this claim follows from the basic notions of time and causality. In particular, we can trace each consequential thing back to the prior things that caused it, and if they too are consequential repeat the same procedure. If there is an infinite chain of causality, this can go on forever without reaching a first cause. On the other hand, if it stops at some point, the object at which it stops cannot be consequential, and so it must be uncaused!

I hope that the reader can see how this makes sense to me, even if it may not be precisely how you would think about it. It is probably not a coincidence that this reads a bit like a mathematical proof, as

I am a mathematician by training. Moreover, just like a mathematical proof, its conclusion is only as valid as the axioms (assumptions) with which it began. In this case, those are the "basic notions of time and causality" that I refer to. If in reality time and physics are very different than what we normally consider them to be, then we may not be able to reach the same conclusions. But, my plan is to return to this consideration later in the essay and for now to see what more can be said about the origins of the universe from this starting point.

I would like to point out that in my discussion above, I am not drawing any distinctions between the natural and the supernatural. When I say that "there must be an infinite chain of consequential objects or an uncaused object", some of those objects could be gods or other supernatural things. Personally, I do not believe in those things, but based on what has been said so far there is no way to exclude them.

I know that those who believe in the "Argument of First Causes" somehow reach the conclusion that something supernatural is *necessarily* involved. They apparently rule out the possibility of an infinite chain of consequential events (though I cannot remember ever seeing any explanation of why that isn't possible) and accept that there must be an uncaused thing, which they call "God". But, I can conceive of many completely natural (as opposed to supernatural) hypotheses.

It could be, for instance, that the universe itself is eternal. Perhaps it has always existed with the same laws forever and ever. As I will explain below, this hypothesis is not ruled out by the scientific evidence for the event known as "The Big Bang." It is also conceivable that the universe sprung into existence suddenly and without prior cause. This is conceivable because the laws of quantum physics, which it must be admitted are *incredibly* successful at making predictions about the behavior of sub-atomic particles and so has at least some aspect of truth to it, also predicts that these sub-atomic particles will occasionally pop into existence (in the form of a particle/anti-particle pair) for no particular reason at all other than that the laws allow it. In fact, some models do demonstrate that an empty vacuum could erupt into a universe with matter from just such quantum fluctuations.

Finally, although the possibility of a consequential universe caused by some sort of deity is not at this point being ruled out, there are also completely natural consequential explanations that need to be considered. Consider, for example, that our universe might be just one of many physical universes and that those caused ours. String Theorists find in their research that the collision of two other universes under the physical laws of their mathematically intriguing (but as yet not well supported) model would explain the existence of ours. A more entertaining and fantastical possibility is to speculate that our universe might have been created intentionally (but naively) by a perfectly physical being in some other universe. I imagine an engineer who has invented a new method for generating energy to run factories and cars in his universe, not realizing that what he has really done is created our universe so that he can harvest the energy of its suns through black holes. The engineer in this bit of science fiction is not a god, as I would define them, because he has no knowledge of or interest in us, because he is neither omniscient nor omnipotent, and because his existence has no immediate moral implications for people here. Moreover,

(Continued on page 5)

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each of the other universes might also have been caused in some similarly natural way by other physical universes before it.

Again, in addition to these natural hypotheses, we need to also consider the possibility that the universe was created by a supernatural deity who cares (depending on your religion) on the diet, gratefulness, sexual practices and or spiritual well-being of humanity. But, just to make sure this key point is not missed, let me emphasize that this does not appear to be the *only* explanation. This already is enough to explain why I do not consider the mere existence of the universe to be a serious challenge to my atheism.

Perhaps the next thing to do is to assess the relative likelihoods of these different scenarios. What arguments can be offered to suggest that one of these explanations is more or less likely than the others?

One criterion that I might suggest, one which is a cornerstone of the scientific method, is to look first for the *simplest* explanation, the one that requires the fewest assumptions beyond what we already know to be the case. I would argue that the idea that the universe itself is eternal is the obvious winner by this standard. Most of us accept the physical universe as being a reality. What then could be simpler and more elegant than assuming that it has always existed? It does not require us to speculate about the existence of other universes, deities, engineer creators getting energy from our suns, or anything else we do not already know about. Although the thought that something could be infinitely old is difficult to swallow, it seems as *likely* as that anything else is eternal, spontaneous or the result of an infinite chain of causality, and we know that one of those must be the case. Now, some might object on the grounds that cosmologists tell us “the universe began with the Big Bang” and so even scientists do not believe the universe is eternal. However, I do not agree with this conclusion. Among those who model the Big Bang, there are some who consider it to have followed a “big crunch” in which all of the matter and energy of the universe collapsed to a tiny size before exploding again into the expanding space we see around us today. If that is the case, and the universe simply keeps collapsing and expanding repeatedly forever, then it seems to me it would be the case that the universe is eternal. Moreover, although the majority of the evidence does now suggest that the Big Bang was a historical fact, I do consider it to be a hypothesis requiring further evidence and consider it conceivable that the universe is actually in a steady state which merely appears to be expanding because of our misinterpretation of the red shift of light from distant galaxies and the microwave background radiation.

That this physical universe is a consequence of other physical universes does not seem too ridiculous to me. It does require us to suppose that there are other universes, but as they are not necessarily significantly different than this one (whose existence we have already accepted as a fact) this is not too much of a leap. (In fact, I question whether there is any point in separating this possibility from the case of the eternal universe. Is it not just a semantic difference to say that those are other universes and not part of this universe that we cannot presently see?)

Third most likely, in my scheme of assigning probabilities to these possibilities, is that the universe appeared spontaneously from nothingness. This would suggest that there was a “first moment” and that before it there was literally nothing. Again, it does not really require us to assume the existence of anything we do not already know about, especially since modern physics seems to include causeless events (like the collapse of a quantum wave function, which can take one state or another but according to the standard interpretation of the theory does so for no reason at all).

The God Hypothesis, that the universe is consequential and that the thing which caused it is a deity who is itself uncaused, seems the least likely. For one thing, it requires us to assume the existence of

something very different than what we already know to exist. It may strike us as unlikely that the universe is either eternal or spontaneous, but since God is presumably either eternal or spontaneous *and* far more amazing than the universe, his existence is necessarily even more miraculous (and therefore less probable).

In summary, it certainly does not seem to me that the existence of a deity is the *only* possible explanation for the existence of the universe. Above I have listed quite a few naturalistic ones that seem to me to be more plausible, and even if such judgments of relative probability are subjective and some other person weighs them differently, I do not see how these others can be ruled out *a priori*.

Now, we then come to questions beyond the scope of this article. For example, some view the existence of life (rather than the existence of the universe) as being proof that there is a God. Again, I do not find such arguments convincing. In fact, based on my knowledge of science and math, I am quite confident that given a universe like ours, life would develop much as it has without any sort of supernatural guidance. Some then view the fact that the universe is “like ours” as being proof of God (the so-called “Anthropic Principle”), but once more I do not find those arguments convincing and see plenty of room for a naturalistic explanation of all of this without resorting to such an *ad hoc* solution as positing the existence of a being who knows all and can do all and just happens to choose to make us. But, again, those are topics for another article and not for this one.

The one remaining thing I would like to address is the question of whether our own current understanding is so limited as to prevent any of the above arguments from being adequate. This sort of objection could come from either side. I have certainly had theists say to me that I cannot attempt to apply this sort of logic to questions of God who is so far beyond our comprehension that reason does not apply. Similarly, it is conceivable to me that our understanding of the concept of time is completely inaccurate and my claim that there is either an infinite chain of consequential objects or an uncaused object is invalid.

There is a common misconception that by calling myself a “humanist”, I am claiming some of the omniscience and omnipotence usually given to gods for humanity itself. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I think the human intellect has done some remarkable things, but it is not all-powerful. So, I think it is certainly possible that our understanding of God or time is confused, at least at present. If there is such a thing as God, then it would certainly seem to be beyond my understanding. (Although if that was the case I would argue that the Christian notion that this God will judge me based on my faith in things that are beyond my comprehension is entirely unfair.) Time also might be very different than what we think. Note that this does not necessarily imply that time will *always* be beyond our ability to understand, as there are things we understand well now that would have been beyond the comprehension of people a thousand years ago. We certainly know that time is not as simple as we usually think it is. (The theory of relativity, well supported by experiment and testable predictions, has demonstrated that time is affected by acceleration and gravity, and that it is interchangeable with space in the form of Lorentz transformations.)

But, in fact, this does not change my answer to the question we are addressing here, which is “Is the existence of the universe itself proof that God must exist?” If God and time are beyond my comprehension, then I must say the answer is “no”, because a proof cannot be convincing if we know that the subject is beyond our understanding. (If I offer an argument in a language that neither you nor I understand, how could we be certain of its validity?) On the other hand, if these are things I can think about rationally with my present understanding, then as I have explained above, I think the answer is “no” because I can conceive of explanations which do not involve anything supernatural. Either way, the answer is the same.

## *The Separationist*

### Newsletter of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

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<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:

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