



The Separationist

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

April 2010

Hugh T. Wilder, Ph.D.

Professor of Philosophy, College of Charleston

Animal Minds & Animal Rights

Sunday, April 18, 2010, 4 pm, Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston

Our speaker for April received his Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Western Ontario in 1973. He taught at Miami University from 1972 to 1981 before joining the faculty at the College of Charleston in 1981. He served as Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies from 1991 to 2000 and Speaker of the Faculty of the College from 2001 to 2004, in addition to serving two six-month terms as Interim Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences in 1996 and 2006. Professor Wilder held a year-long National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship at Princeton University (1976-77) and participated in several NEH summer Seminars and Institutes. He was also a member of the School of Criticism and Theory at Northwestern University in 1985.

Professor Wilder's area of research is philosophy of mind, with a specialization in philosophical questions about animal minds: What mental capacities do different animals have, and how can we (humans) understand



those capacities of other animals? He has published many scholarly articles on these and other topics, and edited a collection of scholarly papers on the topic of "language in primates". He teaches a course on "Animal Minds & Animal Rights", the subject of his talk to the SHL.

Hugh is a competitive masters swimmer, has been married to Pana Wilder for over forty years and has two sons. He is looking forward to his retirement at the end of the current academic year.

Myrtle Beach Humanists and Freethinkers

Charleston SHL member Alex Kasman will speak to the MBHF about "How the name of God completely changed my reading of the Old Testament".

Date: Sunday April 4, 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

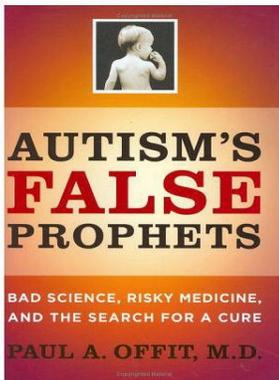


SHL volunteers will be again helping with the Charleston Area Children's Garden Project. We will meet at Jenkins Orphanage on April 10 from 10:30 AM to 12 noon. The Orphanage is on Azalea Drive in North Charleston. From W. Ashley, take 171 past Charleston Landing , go over

the Northbridge to the stop light at Azalea Drive. Turn left on Azalea, go 3 miles and look for the the orphanage on the left. Turn into the property and drive back to the office. The garden is within a closed white fence area that is next to a white dormitory building. If you are interested in volunteering on this project, please call Nancy Worley at 763-4044 or email her at worley@bellsouth.net.

SHL Book Group

by Matt Dean



The book group will meet on April 25th at the West Ashley Barnes & Noble, 1812 Sam Rittenberg Blvd to discuss "Autism's False Prophets: Bad Science, Risky Medicine, and the Search for a Cure" by Paul Offit, MD.

Attempting to answer the enormous frustration and unhappiness of parents "tired of watching their autistic children

improve at rates so slow it's hard to tell if they are improving at all," pediatrics professor and vaccine researcher Offit explores purported causes and cures. Examining false approaches like facilitated communication ("a massive, nationwide delusion") and secretin injections ("no better than salt water"), and mistaken theories of origin (the MMR vaccine, thimerosal), Offit pleads with journalists to resist the lure of "dramatic headlines, advertising dollars, and ratings" rather than report an unconfirmed or untrustworthy study. The only worthwhile studies, Offit purports, are those meeting three criteria: "transparency of the funding source, internal consistency of the data, and reproducibility of the findings."

There are many copies of this book in local libraries. The paperback edition will be released on April 1st.

From the President

We were very pleased with our collection of \$900 in support of Trident Literacy during the January and February charitable fund drive. We're hoping to build on that momentum as we raise money for Hope Lodge, a non-profit associated with the American Cancer Society that provides free temporary housing to cancer patients whose best hope for effective treatment is in another city. Since Charleston undoubtedly has one of the best hospital systems in SC, there is a substantial need for funding in the local area. Our charity drive is especially good for those of you who would like to represent SHL at a volunteer activity but can't due to time or physical constraints. The easiest way to donate is to visit our website and click on the link in the main news section which will allow you to pay securely with credit or debit card. Your contributions are tax-deductible. Thank you!

Jonathan

In Memory of Don Cowie

Donald Cowie, 82, of Mt. Pleasant died peacefully on Sunday, March 7, 2010, at the Hospice Center of Charleston. Don was a tall, quiet gentleman who regularly attended our meetings. He was a life-long Unitarian Universalist and was a member of the Charleston UU Church for more than 20 years. I spoke with him at church on several occasions and he always kept me up to date on the improvements he was making to his house. He is survived by his wife of seventeen years, Nancy Waters. Memorials may be made to the Alzheimer's Association SC Chapter, or to the Secular Coalition for America.

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

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Chief exorcist says Devil is in the Vatican

by Richard Owen

Sex abuse scandals in the Roman Catholic Church are proof that that "the Devil is at work inside the Vatican", according to the Holy See's chief exorcist.

Father Gabriele Amorth, 85, who has been the Vatican's chief exorcist for 25 years and says he has dealt with 70,000 cases of demonic possession, said that the consequences of satanic infiltration included power struggles at the Vatican as well as "cardinals who do not believe in Jesus, and bishops who are linked to the Demon".

He added: "When one speaks of 'the smoke of Satan' [a phrase coined by Pope Paul VI in 1972] in the holy rooms, it is all true – including these latest stories of violence and paedophilia."

He claimed that another example of satanic behaviour was the Vatican "cover-up" over the deaths in 1998 of Alois Estermann, the then commander of the Swiss Guard, his wife and Corporal Cedric Tornay, a Swiss Guard, who were all found shot dead. "They covered up everything immediately," he said. "Here one sees the rot".

A remarkably swift Vatican investigation concluded that Corporal Tornay had shot the commander and his wife and then turned his gun on himself after being passed over for a medal. However Tornay's relatives have challenged this. There have been unconfirmed reports of a homosexual background to the tragedy and the involvement of a fourth person who was never identified.

Father Amorth, who has just published *Memoirs of an Exorcist*, a series of interviews with the Vatican journalist Marco Tosatti, said that the attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II in 1981 had been the work of the Devil, as had an incident last Christmas when a mentally disturbed woman threw herself at Pope Benedict XVI at the start of Midnight Mass, pulling him to the ground.

Father José Antonio Fortea Cucurull, a Rome-based exorcist, said that Father Amorth had "gone well beyond the evidence" in claiming that Satan had infiltrated the Vatican corridors.

"Cardinals might be better or worse, but all have

upright intentions and seek the glory of God," he said. Some Vatican officials were more pious than others, "but from there to affirm that some cardinals are members of satanic sects is an unacceptable distance."

Father Amorth told *La Repubblica* that the devil was "pure spirit, invisible. But he manifests himself with blasphemies and afflictions in the person he possesses. He can remain hidden, or speak in different languages, transform himself or appear to be agreeable. At times he makes fun of me."

He said it sometimes took six or seven of his assistants to hold down a possessed person. Those possessed often yelled and screamed and spat out nails or pieces of glass, which he kept in a bag. "Anything can come out of their mouths – finger-length pieces of iron, but also rose petals."

He said that hoped every diocese would eventually have a resident exorcist. Under Church Canon Law any priest can perform exorcisms, but in practice they are carried out by a chosen few trained in the rites.

Father Amorth was ordained in 1954 and became an official exorcist in 1986. In the past he has suggested that Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin were possessed by the Devil. He was among Vatican officials who warned that J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels made a "false distinction between black and white magic".

He approves, however, of the 1973 film *The Exorcist*, which although "exaggerated" offered a "substantially exact" picture of possession.

In 2001 he objected to the introduction of a new version of the exorcism rite, complaining that it dropped centuries-old prayers and was "a blunt sword" about which exorcists themselves had not been consulted. The Vatican said later that he and other exorcists could continue to use the old ritual.

He is the president of honor of the Association of Exorcists.

This article appeared in the U.K. Times Online on March 11, 2010.

Family Corner: Hummingbird Program at Old Santee Canal Park

by Amy Monsky

On Saturday, April 10 from 2-4pm, Old Santee Canal Park is having a hummingbird program. From the different varieties to the safe way to attract them to you house, this class is sure to be both informative and entertaining. The program ends with the opportunity for you to make your very own hummingbird feeder from an old soda bottle. Fun for all ages! The fee is \$5 per person



and includes admission to the park. The deadline for registration is Friday, April 9. Class size is limited, though, so please call OSCP at 899-5200 early to ensure a spot. This program is open to the public, but SHL members can gather earlier at 1pm for lunch and conversation at the picnic tables near the Children's Garden.

Why Atheists Don't Turn to Religion When Faced with Death or Disaster

by Greta Christina

Sure, you deny God now. But when you're looking death in the face – when you're sick or in an accident or staring down the barrel of a gun – you'll change your mind. You'll beg for God then. There are no atheists in foxholes.

This is one of the most common accusations that gets leveled against atheists. The idea seems to be that our atheism isn't sincere. It's naive at best, shallow at worst. We haven't really thought through what atheism means; it's somehow never occurred to us that atheism – and its philosophical companion, naturalism – means that death is forever. As soon as the harsh reality of what atheism means gets shoved in our faces, we'll drop it like a hot potato.

Now, the most common atheist response to this accusation is to point out that it's simply and flatly not true. And it's one of the arguments I'm going to make myself, right now. This accusation is simply and flatly not true.

If you go to an atheist blog or forum, and you make this accusation, you'll be inundated with stories of atheists who have faced death: their own, and that of people they love. You'll hear stories of people who have been mugged, who have been in terrible accidents, who have faced life-threatening illnesses. You'll hear stories of people who have suffered the illness and death of dearly beloved friends and family members. I'm one of those people.

And we didn't stop being atheists.

This is even true of people who face death professionally, on a regular basis. Contrary to the common canard, there are, in fact, atheists in foxholes. There are atheist soldiers. Atheist police officers. Atheist firefighters. There are even entire organizations of them. (For a while, there was actually a group of military atheists with the waggish name, "Atheists In Foxholes.")

Atheist responses to death and imminent death vary, of course, what with us being human and all. Some of us feel a desire to return to religion, a wish that we could believe in God and the afterlife and take comfort from that belief. Others are even more confirmed in our atheism than before: finding little comfort in the idea that death and tragedy were created deliberately by the hand of God, and finding great comfort in our humanist philosophies of life and death. But deathbed/foxhole conversions to

religion are really pretty rare. (If you've heard stories about them, know that many of these stories are made up by religious believers to bolster their case.)

When you think about it, the whole argument is completely absurd. Do people really think that, out of the millions of atheists around the country and around the world, none of us have ever been deathly ill, or suffered the loss of someone we loved? Does that even make sense?

But let's move on. Let's pretend, for the sake of argument, that this accusation is true. Let's suppose that every single atheist who's ever faced death has converted to religion.

How would that be an argument for religion being true?

If anything, it's the opposite. It's been clearly demonstrated that when we're strongly motivated to believe something, we're much more likely to believe it: we amplify the importance of evidence that seems to support this belief, filter out evidence that contradicts it, etc. When we really, really want to believe something, that's when we have to be extra-cautious about concluding that it's true ... since the chances that we're just trying to talk ourselves into it have shot through the roof. The human mind's capacity to persuade itself of things it wants to believe is damn near limitless.

And the desire to believe in immortality is the mother of all wishful thinking. Especially when we're immediately confronted by death.

So if atheists only converted to religion when they were on their deathbed ... that wouldn't be an argument for religion being a true and accurate perception of something in the real world. That'd actually be a strong argument for religion just being something people made up to make themselves feel better.

OK. Those are the most common, most obvious defenses against the "atheists in foxholes" accusation. But I want to add something more – something that often gets left out of the conversation about foxholes and deathbed conversions.

I want to point out what an ugly argument this is.

What would you think if someone made this argument to a person of a different faith? "Sure, you believe in Judaism now – but when your plane is

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going down, you'll turn to your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Is that an appropriate thing to say? Or is it religious bigotry, pure and simple? Regardless of what you personally believe about Jesus Christ and his ability to comfort people during plane crashes ... would you renounce this argument as insensitive and tone-deaf at best, callous and inhumane at worst?

So how it is any different to make this argument to atheists?

The "You'll change your tune when you're looking death in the face" trope has a Schadenfreude quality to it that is truly ugly. It takes a sadistic, "I told you so" glee in the potential suffering of others. It has an almost hopeful quality that's deeply unsettling. "Someday, you'll be sick and dying with a terrible illness, or you'll be in a terrifying accident, or the person you love most in the world will be gone from your life forever ... and then I'll be proven right! Then you'll know the glory and majesty of the Lord! In your face!"

People will shamelessly and unhesitatingly say things about atheists they would cringe from saying about people of different religions. Many believers -- even progressive, ecumenical, "all religions have

some truth and are all worshiping God in their own way" believers -- will happily say that atheists are immoral, that atheists have no meaning or joy in our lives, that atheists are just being trendy or rebellious, that atheists have no right to express our views in the public forum. And even the most zealous hard-core believers will usually approach diverse religious beliefs with more understanding and tolerance than they show to atheism. Atheism seems to unsettle many believers, to a degree that different religious beliefs generally don't ... and those believers seem perfectly willing to take out that unsettled feeling on atheists.

The "no atheists in foxholes" trope is a classic example of this. It's not just a lie. It's not even just an ignorant, absurd, colossally stupid lie. It's a bigoted lie. It's a lie that denies our most basic humanity: the fact that atheists love life, that we're deeply attached to the people we love, and that we experience fear and grief in the face of death. It's a lie that tries to depict us, as not just callow and naive, but as something less than human.

Please know that it's a lie.

And please don't tell it.

Read more of Greta at [Greta Christina's Blog](http://gretachristina.typepad.com/greta_christinas_weblog)
(http://gretachristina.typepad.com/greta_christinas_weblog)

Westboro Baptists Come to Charleston



This was the loud but peaceful scene outside Charleston Air Force Base on March 22 as three adults and a child from the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas put their hate on display. A large contingent of sheriff's deputies and motorcycle cops looked on as about forty counter-demonstrators waved signs of their own, such as "God Hates Figs", "I Support My Husband and Other Troops" and "Love -- Not Ignorance".

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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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