



The Separationist

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

November 2010

Ron Cooper Why Religion Won't Go Away (But It's High Time It Paid Half the Rent)

Sunday, November 21, 2010, 4 pm, Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston, SC

Ron Cooper was born and raised in Berkeley County. He holds a BA from the College of Charleston, an MA from the University of South Carolina, and a PhD in philosophy from Rutgers University. He is Professor of Philosophy and Humanities at College of Central Florida where he has taught since 1995. Ron is a past president of the Florida Philosophical Association, a former board member of the Florida Historical Society, and a member of the editorial board of the Florida Philosophical Review. He lectures on environmental ethics, religion, and pseudoscience. Ron is also an amateur bluegrass musician who delights in embarrassing his children with his horrible singing.

He has published philosophical works, novels, and short stories. Cooper's newest novel, *Purple Jesus*, set in the Lowcountry, was just released by Bancroft Press. Ron is



currently working on a third novel, a fictionalized story of Jesus' brother. His fiction has also appeared in publications such as *Yalobusha Review*, *Apostrophe*, *Timber Creek Review*, and *The Blotter*.

At SHL's November meeting, Ron will discuss recent work in evolutionary psychology about our (perhaps necessary) tendency to attribute agency to natural events and how it is related to other perceptual and cognitive patterns.

Myrtle Beach Humanists and Freethinkers

Date: Sunday November 7, 5 pm

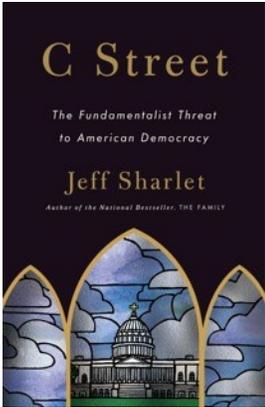
Place: Chapin Library

14th Ave. N., Myrtle Beach, SC 29577

Speaker: Michael Werner, Past President of the American Humanist Association

Topic: "An Idea That Counts"

SHL Book Group



The SHL Book Group will meet on **November 28** to discuss *C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy*, by Jeff Sharlet.

Sharlet is the only journalist to have reported from inside the C Street House, the Fellowship residence known simply by its Washington, DC, address. The house has lately been the

scene of notorious political scandal, but more crucially it is home to efforts to transform the very fabric of American democracy. And now, after laying bare its tenants' past in *The Family*, Sharlet reports from deep within fundamentalism in today's world, revealing that the previous efforts of religious fundamentalists in America pale in comparison with their long-term ambitions.

Most Americans have never heard of the elitist fundamentalist C Street. That this heavily financed, multilayered organization has been operating for decades—and today is actively implanted within the U.S. military—makes this well-documented, probing investigation even more mind-bending.

When the affairs of Fellowship members Senator John Ensign R-Nev. and South Carolina governor Mark Sanford broke, Sharlet's other book, *The Family*, became a best-seller.

C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy has just been released and is available in multiple formats at Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

The Separationist

Newsletter of the
Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

Editor: Daniel O'Neal

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No More Bullies

Coming Soon

"I was only teasing. Can't you take a joke?"

There's a difference between teasing and taunting. Verbal abuse is the most common kind of bullying, accounting for more than 70 percent of reported bullying.

"If you just acted like everyone else you wouldn't get picked on."

Some kids may lack certain social skills or may exhibit off-putting habits, but the truth is that these traits are merely serve as excuses for bullying. No one ever deserves to be bullied.

"They're just trying to get a reaction. Act as if it doesn't bother you. Or fight back and they'll leave you alone."

Unfortunately, ignoring a bully often just makes him try harder. And escalating a situation to physical violence opens up a whole other set of problems.

What can we do?

This four-hour presentation and discussion will look at bullying in depth — where it comes from and what it's really about. And we'll talk about how to teach kids to stand up to bullies, how to correct the actions of our kids when they're the ones doing the bullying, and how we can raise good citizens who refuse to be innocent bystanders when bullying is going on.

The date and location of this event have not yet been determined. If you're interested in this event or you'd like to help us put it together, please email president@lowcountryhumanists.org.

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

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Officers

President: Matt Dean

Vice President: Herb Silverman

Treasurer: Jonathan Lamb

Secretary: Laura Kasman

Family Corner

by Amy Monsky



Doggie Playdate

Saturday

November 20 at 11 am

Riverfront Park

North Charleston

This playdate has gone to the dogs! Bring your favorite canine companion to the park to play with all the other dogs and to make new doggie friends. The enclosed dog play area is right next to the playground. If you don't have a dog, don't worry! Bring your kids or just bring yourself.

Volunteer Corner

by Nancy Worley

Our next volunteer event will be on Saturday, **December 4** from 1 – 3 pm. We will be assisting the Teachers Supply Closet with their annual inventory. Many of you have donated funds as well as supplies to this organization and might be interested in seeing the store and the ways in which it helps teachers and students. The store is located off Sam Rittenberg in the Ashley Landing Shopping Center which contains Publix, Burlington Coat Factory, and Big Lots. The store is next to West Wings and near Legacy Church. The address is 1401 Sam Rittenberg. However, all of the stores in Ashley Landing have the same address so the address is not very helpful in locating the exact building. If you get into the Ashley Landing parking lot and have difficulty locating the Teachers Supply Closet, call the store at 225-9895 and someone will direct you. Remember that we will continue to collect school supplies for the Teachers Supply Closet and used towels, washcloths, washable throw rugs, toys and pill bottles for the Charleston Animal Society at the monthly meetings.

Adopt-a-Highway

by Roger Prevost



The Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry are active in the South Carolina Adopt-a-Highway program. We pick up litter from a two mile stretch of Harbor View Road on James Island four times a year. Our official SC Department of Transportation sign is on the corner of Harbor

View and Fort Johnson Roads and lets the community know that SHL participates in this program.

Our next trash pick up will be on Saturday, **November 6**. We will meet at 8:50 am in the parking lot of the First Federal of Charleston Bank on Harbor View Rd, James Island. It's right next to the Piggly Wiggly. The pick up usually last about an hour and a half. Please join us if you can. Call Roger Prevost at 224-9360 if you have any questions.

Charity of the Quarter

by Jonathan Lamb

During November and December we are raising money for the newly formed "Camp Quest SC", an organization whose aim is to begin hosting a local/regional secular summer camp. Camp Quest is a national organization that helps local groups start their own versions of the camp. Initial funds must first be collected for a local camp to be offered due to numerous up-front costs. Amy Monsky, one of our board members, is heading up this project.

Please support this outstanding initiative so the SC Lowcountry can become the first Camp Quest destination in the Southeast United States. More information about Camp Quest South Carolina can be found at <http://www.campquestsc.org> or send an email to CQSouthCarolina@gmail.com.

Atheists Without Borders Conference in Montreal

by Cornelia Carrier

What are we willing to risk? What do we call ourselves? Where do we gather and what do we do at our meetings? These were some of the questions posed at the bi-lingual Atheists Without Borders conference in Montreal October 1-3.

P.Z. Myers, a biology professor at the University of Minnesota, whose website *Pharyngula* is promoted as “Evolution, development and random biological ejaculations from a godless liberal,” spoke in spite of the fact that a stalker who had sent him threatening e-mails showed up at the conference.

“Nothing can prove the existence of gods, and religious claims defy established facts about reality,” Myers said. He pointed out that the trinity was dreamed up at the Council of Nicea in 325 CE; transubstantiation at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 CE and papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council in 1870 CE. There is not one primary source for Jesus, he said.

Canadian Christopher DiCarlo, author of *How to become a Really Good Pain in the Ass: A Practical Guide to Thinking Critically*, told rather harrowing stories of his car being vandalized and his wife run off the road. He showed slides of his son hosing eggs off his car with its the Darwin fish and Jesus is Borg symbols. The “veneer of tolerance is thin,” DiCarlo said. “Supernaturalists fear coming to grips with atheists for fear of losing their memetic equilibrium.” While atheists have won the rational argument, they have not won the emotional one, and there is still blatant discrimination against atheists in such areas as denied tenure.

Many attendees asked questions about terminology. Some deplored the term “atheist” because it defines in terms of god. Yet others favored it. The term “bright” was considered by some to be too hubristic and off-putting. One attendee who called herself a “secular humanist,” recounted being asked if she volunteered for the Humane Society.

August Berkshire, a Minnesota atheist radio personality, gave a light-hearted look at atheism.

He said:

– The reason people do god’s work is because he isn’t doing it.

– Why are “acts of god” always disasters in insurance policies?

– The invisible and the non-existent look very much alike.

But Berkshire had the best insight into the terminology dispute. He said that if you call yourself a secular humanist, a free thinker, a bright or whatever, your interlocutor will eventually conclude: “So what you’re saying is you’re an atheist.” Better, in a very friendly tone, to just come right out and say, “I am an atheist.”

American philosopher, Daniel Dennett, noted that since “no religion at all” is the fastest growing category in polls, we have to think about what will replace religions. As religious institutions fade away, we want to provide alternative structures to take on their valuable roles. Gone will be the guilt, superstition, xenophobic hatred and systematic hypocrisy. He envisions atheist homeless shelters, soup kitchens and tithing.

We have to “take back the word ‘spirit’, and celebrate hope, love, beauty, joy and moral teamwork in support of justice and freedom. He played a couple of Brian Felsen’s secular gospel tunes accompanied by claps and sways in the audience. Atheists (who don’t have a place like Gage Hall) should take over abandoned churches as their meeting places and develop secular marriage and baby-naming rituals.

Earl Doherty, author of *Jesus Neither God nor Man* said that most of the bible is allegory misunderstood as actual fact. It contains forgeries, insertions and amendments. He said the persecution of Christians was a “later fiction.” Paul was not talking about a “human Jesus, but a heavenly creature and agent of salvation.”

Sponsored by Atheist Alliance International and Humanist Canada, the conference had sessions in English and French with simultaneous translations. There was a sense of paranoia in the fact that there was no list of attendees. One

official explained that members don't want to appear on a list for fear of losing their jobs or other retribution. Although the Canadian constitution touts the "Supremacy of God and the rule of law," still one in four Canadians is an atheist.

Cornelia Carrier has been a resident of Charleston since 1994. She is a former journalist and also taught Italian at the College of Charleston for several years.

Cornelia received a \$250 SHL stipend to help defray the costs of attending this conference. If you would like to learn more about stipends, contact SHL President Matt Dean.

Faith and Reason

by Herb Silverman

Are "reason" and "sanity" the opposite of religious belief? Is taking religion out of the political debate the answer for restoring reason? Or do we need more faith?

Full disclosure: The United Coalition for Reason, sponsor of the godless bus ads, is an endorser of the mission statement of the Secular Coalition for America, www.secular.org, the organization for which I'm president.

The bus ads simply invite people to come out of the closet to their friends and neighbors about their lack of religious beliefs. Atheists and humanists don't fear a judging God, but many fear the judgments and the stigma placed on them by a mainly religious society. Some are concerned that their jobs as well as their relationships and good will of neighbors may be at stake, and unfortunately they sometimes are. Much as with the gay rights movement, the more that come out the easier it is for others to come out and find a sense of community. That's the essence of what these ads are about.

What we nontheists want, consistent with our founders, is freedom of conscience for all. Government should not be in the religion business, even if Glenn Beck believes God told him it should. Government should not favor one religion over another or religion in general over non-religion.

As an example, the legislature in my home state of South Carolina authorized the car license tag motto, "In God We Trust," available to all at no extra cost. My local secular humanist group applied for "In Reason We Trust" tags. It carried a fee, but our members and others, too, now have such tags. Frankly, I would rather my state promote reason than God, especially given the dismal state of education here. Individuals should be able to promote the god of their choice, but not the state.

I have trouble understanding why some people think secular Americans are insulting those with

religious beliefs when we mention we don't believe in any gods. A church-sponsored billboard near my house asks, "Got religion?" It certainly doesn't offend me to see this by the highway. Are Methodists insulted when Presbyterians promote their theological views?

We may have different views on religion, but I hope we can at least agree on one fundamental good—the marketplace of ideas. Some may think reason and sanity are the opposite of religion, and some may not. Let arguments be heard, not stifled. That, to me, is the most sane and reasonable way to act.

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



Jagged Little Pill

by Matt Dean

Tyler Clementi knew how to juggle. He could ride a unicycle. His friends say he was “bright, but self-effacing ... low-key, but cheerful.” They say he got genuine pleasure from helping others.

He was an accomplished violinist. One of his high school classmates says that “the way he played was not just technically stellar, he played with his soul. He added something to it from himself ... He made it real art.”

At 18, Tyler had already learned to play Mendelssohn’s violin concerto, one of the most difficult works in the repertoire. When he started college at Rutgers, he became the first freshman to make it into the Rutgers Symphony Orchestra as a non-music major.

By any measure, he had the brightest of futures ahead of him. But last month, on September 22nd, Tyler made the hour-long drive from New Brunswick to the George Washington Bridge. He walked halfway across, and “with the roar of traffic behind him and the taste of diesel fumes mingled with the” smell of the “brackish river, he climbed over a 4-foot-high iron fence and stepped off into the night, plummeting 20 stories into the cold gray waters of the Hudson.”

Of course, we’ll never know the whole story. We’ll never truly understand what drove Tyler to the middle of the bridge that night. But it’s clear that it had much to do with the fact that he’d been abruptly outed by his roommate—that literally overnight his love life had become the talk of the Rutgers campus.

In the wake of Tyler Clementi’s suicide—and the suicides of too, too many other teenagers—there’s been an outpouring of support and love from LGBTs and their allies, a reaching-out to any other young people who may be living in isolation and shame. Unfortunately, we’ve also read and heard that depression and suicide are natural outcomes of resisting god’s plan, which calls for exactly two complementary genders and exactly one healthy expression of sexuality. Earlier this week, Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council wrote in the *Washington Post*: “Some homosexuals may recognize intuitively that their same-sex attractions are abnormal.... This—and not society’s disapproval—may create a sense of despair that can lead to suicide.”

Such is the power of a few verses from an ancient book. Such is the power of the word “abomination”—that it can dress intolerance in the clothing of moral authority and even turn the heart against itself.

For me, this is not terra incognita. When I was Tyler’s age, I was deeply involved in Campus Crusade for Christ—and deeply ashamed of being gay. I spent too many late nights walking the campus, chain-smoking, wishing I could end my life rather than spend another day fighting against feelings and thoughts that—I was

sure—were the blackest kinds of sins. At the time, dying seemed preferable to living on and on in the torment of my damaged sexuality.

Unlike Tyler, though, I waited out the dark nights. I asked for help. With the lovingkindness and advice of a radical nun—and *my* advice is that you should never underestimate the power of a radical nun—I took the first important steps on my journey from religion to spirituality to humanism.

I parted from my Christian beliefs in stages, each stage representing the loss of a particular fear—the fear of my friends’ disapproval, the fear of society’s disapproval, the fear of angering a vengeful god, the fear of death, the fear of hell, the fear of wandering into a moral wasteland where nothing is wrong and everything is permitted. Although I am now in no sense a theist, this process of separating from fear still continues. When I lose the fear of my *mother’s* disapproval, for example, I’ll let you know.

A couple of Sundays ago we heard about Theodore Parker and Martin Luther King and the notion that “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” Among the fundamentalist-leaning Christians of my childhood and adolescence, there isn’t so much an arc as a flat line—a straight and narrow line, one might say. The whole ethical system can fit onto a bumper sticker: “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” Or, more succinctly, “Boycott Hell—Repent.”

But as humanist and UU Steven D. Schafersman has pointed out, “The UU motto is ‘Deed, not Creed.’ [...] UU congregations have members with a diversity of theologies and philosophies, including theism, deism, pantheism, paganism, atheism, and humanism. All are engaged in a common search for meaning and values *without* the requirement to believe or accept any specific doctrine or creed.”

Still quoting Schafersman: “One small difference between Humanists and UUs in their shared moral inquiry [is that] Humanists would not be so ready to search for values and ethical insights within the writings of Judaism and Christianity as would UUs.”

Many—not all—of my humanist friends grew up in conservative churches, as I did, or had some kind of dalliance with Judeo-Christian beliefs. All of us have found those ideas wanting. Some may assume that we’ve abandoned our belief in god because we want fewer moral strictures. But I think the opposite is usually true—we’ve discovered that the Old Testament condones or prescribes some heinous brutality, and we’ve found ourselves in the middle of an uncomfortable tug-of-war, in which what we’re told we *must* do or *should* do

(Continued on page 7)

doesn't seem as if it could possibly be the *right* thing to do.

We might say that humanism means doing what's right, no matter what we're told, whereas dogma means doing what we're told, no matter what's right. Dogma tells us we're broken—unfixable, in fact. We can never hope to decide for ourselves what's right or good. Humanism, on the other hand, assures us that—in spite of all our flaws, in spite of the fact that we're capable of cruelty and ugliness—we are capable of being reasonable and good. We can decide for ourselves what's right and what's wrong, and we can learn by observing the results of our conduct whether our decisions are correct.

When our actions result in harm or fear, we do what is wrong. When we act to increase happiness and decrease suffering, we do what is right. When we act out of hatred or anger or ignorance, we are most likely doing what is wrong. When we act with compassion, we do what is right.

None of this will be a great revelation to anyone in this room. Clearly there are many Humanistic elements in UUism—or, actually, many UU elements in Humanism. And that's why I'm standing here today—both a UU and a humanist.

By the way, when I talk about increasing happiness, I *don't* mean mere pleasure or material comforts. Just the other day, I read that Mukesh Ambani, the fifth-richest man in the world, has completed work on a new home—the world's first billion-dollar house. No doubt this house is abundant in all sorts of pleasures and material comforts, but given that it's located in Mumbai, and almost half of the children in India suffer from malnutrition, I would *not* say that spending a billion dollars on a single-family dwelling is an act that increases happiness or decreases suffering in the world at large.

In his new book, *The Moral Landscape*, Sam Harris bases his entire discussion on the idea that what is "good" is that which supports "well-being," although the very concept of "well-being" eludes precise definition. The precise meaning of physical health has changed and will continue to change and varies according to many factors. Well-being is similarly moveable.

Just as our actions can improve or degrade our physical health, they can also contribute to or detract from well-being. Just as we can join a gym, give up the daily trip to Krispy Kreme, quit smoking—work to improve our health, in other words—so, too, can we work to improve our lives and the lives of those around us. We can work to improve *well-being*.

Underlying all of this, there is an important assumption, that our well-being here and now, in *this* world, is within our control, or even worthy of our attention. We probably shouldn't take this assumption

for granted. In the Abrahamic religions, at least, this life is just a prelude to eternity, and our task on earth is just to earn our way into heaven.

The fact of death is a jagged little pill—no doubt about it. It's not hard to understand the desire to wriggle free of that particular trap—but I believe that the afterlife is one of the most pernicious ideas humankind has ever come up with. There are many reasons why I take this view, but I'll mention just one. If our hour of strutting and fretting on the earthly stage is just a kind of audition for the really big heavenly show to come, suffering in this world becomes altogether too tolerable. Poverty, hunger, torment—in the end, it will all be repaid with infinite peace and happiness, at least for the pious.

I think this is all backward, if not a little deranged. I'd like to turn Pascal's Wager on its head. If a person, against all facts, follows a dogmatic religion and ends up wrong, then how many opportunities did he lose? How many experiences did she deny herself just because she was afraid of something for which we have absolutely no evidence? How much guilt or shame did he carry because he was told to? And finally, how much grief and pain did she cause by applying her unyielding dogmas on those around her?

Here and now—in *this* life, because there probably *isn't* another one after this—we have to love each other and help each other. We have to work together to make our world—*this* world—a better place. If I'm wrong, and god exists, it's difficult to imagine a deity who is truly loving and truly just, but who would object to making the world a better place. Isn't it?

Sometimes I think I was born too late. I probably should have been a flower child. That explains the beard, anyway. But even if it makes me a dirty hippie, I want people to feel safe and loved and comfortable in their own skins.

If I could go back in time and visit my younger, campus-wandering self, I would say, "Put out that cigarette, you goof. That stuff stinks!" And then I'd say, "You're not broken. You're not irretrievably damaged." I'd say, "Just wait. You're going to have a good life."

And if I could go back in time and talk to Tyler Clementi, I would say this: "In spite of anything you might have heard to the contrary, you are beautiful through and through. You are kind and generous. You make the world better by being in it. And that is all that anyone can ask of you."

SHL President Matt Dean lives in the wilds of Ravenel, SC, with his partner, Todd, and their three dogs.

In October, Matt participated in a lay-led service celebrating humanism at the Charleston Universalist Unitarian Church that was organized by fellow SHL member Sharon Strong. This article is based on Matt's talk on ethical values.

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.

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