



The Separationist

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

January 2011

Toni Van Pelt

Faith Based Initiatives and Charitable Choice – What Does it All Mean?

Sunday, January 16, 2011, 4 pm, Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston, SC

The fight continues in the Congress to add charitable choice to legislation. The Obama administration renamed the George W. Bush's Faith-Based and Community Initiative; it's now called the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. What does it all mean?

This presentation will focus on the history of faith based-initiatives and charitable choice. What are they? How did these programs come about? Are taxpayers dollars being used to discriminate? Learn what U.S. citizens concerned about strengthening the American secular democracy ideal and the separation of state and church need to know.



Toni Van Pelt is a director and a primary mover, along with Paul Kurtz, Norm Allen and Vincent Parr, of the newly founded Institute for Science and Human Values. As former vice president of the Center for Inquiry and as a congressional lobbyist, she organized and directed one of the first public policy offices of the secular humanist movement in Washington, DC with a key focus on the importance of science to the well being of the nation. She also serves on the board of the National Organization for Women as the Southeast Regional Director.

It's Time to Renew Your SHL Membership – or Join!

Membership is open to all persons who support the purposes for which it was founded. Membership costs \$24 for an individual and \$36 for a family. Dues are tax-deductible, as we are a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation. (As we like to say, we are a "non-prophet" organization!) There are two ways to join/renew:

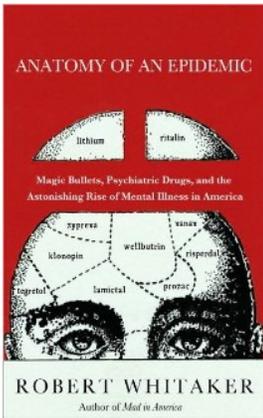
By Mail: Send a check made out to "Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry" along with a letter stating your name, address and (if possible) a phone number and e-mail address to: SHL, P.O. Box 32256, Charleston, SC 29417

Electronic Payment: You can now join or renew your SHL membership securely online at <http://lowcountryhumanists.org>. You don't need a PayPal account to pay using a major credit card. If you are a New Member and your payment is received January through August, it will apply toward the current calendar year's dues. If payment is received September through December your membership will be paid through the following calendar year. Renewing Members' dues will always apply toward the current year with dues again requested in January. Be sure to select the proper membership level from the drop-down box.

Need help? Write to treasurer@lowcountryhumanists.org with questions about new or existing membership.

SHL Book Group

by Matt Dean



The Book Group will meet on January 23 at the West Ashley Barnes & Noble to discuss *Anatomy of an Epidemic: Magic Bullets, Psychiatric Drugs, and the Astonishing Rise of Mental Illness in America* by Robert Whitaker.

In every year between 1987 and 2007, Americans spent about \$40 billion on psychiatric medications, and yet the

number of people disabled by mental illness more than doubled. Psychopharmaceuticals are widely prescribed, widely used, and widely regarded as "magic bullets" —antidotes or cures to all sorts of mental illness.

But when Robert Whitaker, author of *Anatomy of an Epidemic*, looked closer, he found that psychiatric drugs have repeatedly been shown to exacerbate mental illness rather than relieving it, and that they carry all sorts of ugly side effects—liver damage, weight gain, elevated cholesterol and blood sugar, and reduced cognitive function among them.

Whitaker concluded, and now argues in this book, that no one knows what causes mental illness, that the pharmaceutical companies have produced a whole range of drugs that fail to perform as promised, and that those drugs have been aggressively and deceptively marketed as panaceas to consumers who are desperate for relief.

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. In addition, this pick up has been designated as the SHL Volunteer Activity for January-February.

Our next trash pick up will be on Saturday, **February 5**. 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.



The Separationist

Newsletter of the
Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

Editor: Daniel O'Neal

newsletter@lowcountryhumanists.org

Opinions expressed in *The Separationist* are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry.

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

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Charity of the Quarter

by Jonathan Lamb

Before I announce the January/February charitable giving recipient, I want to thank everyone who contributed to one or more of our collections during 2010. We raised an impressive \$3,500 for four worthwhile causes while demonstrating our humanistic principles to the community. It is worth noting that about half of the contributions were \$25 or less. Therefore even if you can only give a little, it really adds up! For January and February we are raising money for the Charleston Animal Society. In 2009 we raised more than \$600 for



this organization and I think we can easily top that amount this year. The Charleston Animal Society provides food, shelter, and medical care to more than 12,000 homeless animals each year, while working to find homes for as many of them as possible. They also provide low-cost spay and neuter services and rescue animals suffering from cruelty. You may donate via credit card on our website. Just look for the link in the Top News section of our website. You also have the option of bringing cash or check to our next monthly meeting.

Family Corner

by Amy Monsky

This month we have 2 fun activities planned! Not only can you double your fun this month, you can do it FREE with a Be a Tourist Pass because both activities are participating attractions in this year's Be a Tourist in Your Hometown program. Available for individuals or families, this pass allows the user a one-time admission to 28 local attractions for the month of January. You can read more about it at their website: www.beatourist.net.

We will go ice skating at the Carolina Ice Palace on Sunday, 1/9/11 from 4-6 pm. Admission and skate rental are FREE with the Be a Tourist Pass. Otherwise, the cost is \$3/pair of skates and admission is \$7/adult (13yo and up), \$5/child (5-12yo), and \$3/child (4yo and under). If you have a child who is new to skating, or even if an adult doesn't skate so well, the Ice Palace has walkers you can rent for \$3 each. They come in two sizes and are nifty little devices that you can easily push around to help you keep your balance. If you

are interested in renting one, I strongly recommend you get there early to reserve one. They do sell out. We can go to dinner at a nearby restaurant if anyone is interested.

On Saturday, 1/29/11, we will go to the Center for Birds of Prey for a walking tour and flight demonstration, both open to the general public. The Center for Birds of Prey offers visitors a unique insight into the lives and impressive adaptations of more than 30 species of birds of prey. Whether you're a birder, a photographer or simply want to spend the day outdoors, this is a great opportunity to explore the natural history of birds of prey. The walking tour begins at 10:30 am and the flight demonstration follows at 11:30 am. Admission is FREE with the Be a Tourist Pass. Otherwise, admission is \$12/adult (19yo and up), \$10/youth (6-18yo), and free for children 5yo and under. Please note that this is an outdoor activity, so dress accordingly.

Who Wants to Be a Porn Star?

Saturday, January 15, 2011, 5 pm, Charleston Marriott Hotel, 170 Lockwood Blvd., Charleston, SC

Pop culture tells us that pornography is a form of empowerment for women, a way to take charge of our sexuality and make money. Indeed, the money is an attraction for mostly young, working-class women who face limited choices in a harsh economy. Given those economic realities and the glamorization of pornography, it's not surprising that some young women will see this as a viable career option. Not only is pornography seen today by many as a way to make money it is viewed by many as a teaching guide for how we should have sex, and this message is coming through loud and clear to many of our young women and men.

This slide show presents a serious analysis of pornography and of the increasingly pornographic culture in which we live. Many of us have felt a shift in this culture that seems threatening, scary and at times, out of control. Watching television or surfing the net, we are bombarded with more and more sexualized images of women that we're told represent sexual liberation and freedom, but that don't feel particularly liberating.

This presentation provides a critical analysis of the sexist and racist images that are so harmful to children, women, and men; to our relationships; and to the culture at large. For many, this show is an introduction to understanding of the pornographic culture, and the Slides may be hard to look at. We have included these harsh images not to shock but to help us understand porn culture.

This presentation takes seriously pornography's consequences in the lives of the women in the industry, the men who use pornography, and the women who live and

**Adults 18
and older
only please!**

work with those men. How is pornography made? What are its effects on those who use it? What kinds of images are most prevalent and what messages about women and men, sex and power, do they convey? And, what does all this mean in a culture coping with not only epidemic levels of sexual violence but also widespread dissatisfaction with our relationships and intimate lives? This critique of pornography is rooted not in a reactionary sexual morality, but in concerns about this material's very real effects in the world, how pornographic images have bled over into the everyday advertising of Madison Ave. in magazines, TV ads, TV shows, billboards and the movies.

Our world has become what one writer has called "pornified."

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This presentation includes graphic, sexually explicit images, including some commonly referred to as hardcore pornography. No one under the age of 18 should be in the audience.

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Many people find these images arousing or disturbing, or both. Remember, most of us who have grown up in this hypersexualized culture—women and men—are socialized to find these images pleasurable. So, it's not surprising that we have complex reactions to them, including arousal.

If during the show people feel they can't continue to watch, there are a variety of ways to deal with that. If an image is too intense, it can help to just look away until you feel ready. Sometimes people prefer to put their heads down and just listen. Or if things start

to feel too overwhelming, it can be best to leave the room.

These images also have the potential to trigger memories and feelings connected to sexual assault and other kinds of violence. If during the presentation you feel you need help, please signal one of the organizers.

Later if you have reactions that are difficult to sort out, it can be useful to talk them over with someone you trust. If you are in real distress, you may want to contact the People Against Rape crisis hotline at (843) 745-0144 or the My Sister's House crisis hotline at (843) 744-3242.

Parenting Beyond Belief Seminar

Saturday, March 19, 2011, 12:30 to 4 pm, Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston, SC

Over nine million parents in the U.S. are raising children without theistic religion. The Parenting Beyond Belief Seminar, a unique half-day workshop with author and educator Dale McGowan, offers encouragement and practical solutions for secular parenting in a religious world.

Based on the freethinking philosophy of the book Newsweek called "a compelling read," the Beyond Belief Seminar is empowering secular parents across the country to raise ethical, caring, confident kids without religion.

Participants will learn effective ways to:

- Encourage religious literacy without indoctrination;
- Help kids interact productively with a religious world;
- Help kids develop active moral reasoning;
- Weigh church-state issues in the public sphere;

- Address sensitive issues with religious relatives using the principles of nonviolent communication;

- Help children develop a healthy understanding of death and a joyful love of life;

- Build a family atmosphere of fearless questioning and boundless wonder;

...and much more.

The cost for this special seminar is as follows:

Individuals: \$30 for SHL members, \$40 for non-members

Couples: \$50 for SHL members, \$60 for non-members

We don't want cost to be a barrier to attendance. If you can't afford the full fee, please pay what you can. Childcare will be provided, and refreshments will be served.

To register, please visit our Meetup page:

www.meetup.com/lowcountryhumanists/calendar/14405902/

Or email president@lowcountryhumanists.org

**Mark the
Date!**

A New Year's Resolution for the Rich

by Sam Harris

While the United States has suffered the worst recession in living memory, I find that I have very few financial concerns. Many of my friends are in the same position: Most of us attended private schools and good universities, and we will be able to provide these same opportunities to our own children. No one in my immediate circle has a family member serving in Afghanistan or Iraq. In fact, in the aftermath of September 11th, 2001, the only sacrifice we were asked to make for our beloved country was to go shopping. Nearly a decade has passed, with our nation's influence and infrastructure crumbling by the hour, and yet those of us who have been so fortunate as to actually live the American dream—rather than merely dream it—have been spared every inconvenience. Now we are told that we will soon receive a large tax cut for all our troubles. What is the word for the feeling this provokes in me? Imagine being safely seated in lifeboat, while countless others drown, only to learn that another lifeboat has been secured to take your luggage to shore...

Most Americans believe that a person should enjoy the full fruits of his or her labors, however abundant. In this light, taxation tends to be seen as an intrinsic evil. It is worth noting, however, that throughout the 1950's—a decade for which American conservatives pretend to feel a harrowing sense of nostalgia—the marginal tax rate for the wealthy was over 90 percent. In fact, prior to the 1980's it never dipped below 70 percent. Since 1982, however, it has come down by half. In the meantime, the average net worth of the richest 1 percent of Americans has doubled (to \$18.5 million), while that of the poorest 40 percent has fallen by 63 percent (to \$2,200). Thirty years ago, top U.S. executives made about 50 times the salary of their average employees. In 2007, the average worker would have had to toil for 1,100 years to earn what his CEO brought home between Christmas in Aspen and Christmas on St. Barthes.

We now live in a country in which the bottom 40 percent (120 million people) owns just 0.3 percent of the wealth. Data of this kind make one feel that one is participating in a vast psychological experiment: Just how much inequality can free people endure? Have you seen Ralph Lauren's car collection? Yes, it is beautiful. It also cost hundreds of millions of dollars. "So what?" many people will say. "It's his money. He earned it. He should be able to do whatever he wants with it." In conservative circles, expressing any doubt on this point has long been synonymous with Marxism.

And yet over one million American children are now homeless. People on Medicare are being denied life-saving organ transplants that were routinely covered before the recession. Over one quarter of our nation's bridges are structurally deficient. When might be a convenient time to ask the richest Americans to help solve problems of this kind? How about now?

It is easy to understand why even the most generous person might be averse to paying taxes: Our legislative process has been hostage to short-term political interests and other perverse incentives for as long as anyone can remember. Consequently, our government wastes an extraordinary amount of money. It also seems uncontroversial to say that whatever can be best accomplished in the private sector should be. Our tax code must also be reformed—and it might even be true that the income tax should be lowered on everyone, provided we find a better source of revenue to pay our bills. But I can't imagine that anyone

seriously believes that the current level of wealth inequality in the United States is good and worth maintaining, or that our government's first priority should be to spare a privileged person like myself the slightest hardship as this once great nation falls into ruin.

And the ruination of the United States really does seem possible. It has been widely reported, for instance, that students in Shanghai far surpass our own in science, reading, and math. In fact, when compared to other countries, American students are now disconcertingly average (slightly below in math), where the average includes utopias like Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Albania, Kazakhstan, and Indonesia. President Obama was right to recognize this as a "Sputnik moment." But it is worse than that. This story was immediately followed by a report about giddy Creationists in the state of Kentucky being offered \$40 million in tax subsidies to produce a full-scale model of Noah's ark. More horrible still, this ludicrous use of public money is probably a wise investment, given that such a monument to scientific ignorance will be guaranteed to attract an ovine influx of Christian tourists from neighboring states. Seeing facts of this kind, juxtaposed without irony or remedy at this dire moment in history, it is hard not to feel that one is witnessing America's irreversible decline. Needless to say, most Americans have no choice but to send their children to terrible schools—where they will learn the lesser part of nothing and emerge already beggared by a national debt now on course to reach \$20 trillion. And yet Republicans in every state can successfully campaign on a promise to spend less on luxuries like education, while delivering tax cuts to people who, if asked to guess their own net worth, could not come within \$10 million of the correct figure if their lives depended on it.

American opposition to the "redistribution of wealth" has achieved the luster of a religious creed. And, as with all religions, one finds the faithful witlessly espousing doctrines that harm almost everyone, including their own children. For instance, while most Americans have no chance of earning or inheriting significant wealth, 68 percent want the estate tax eliminated (and 31 percent consider it to be the "worst" and "least fair" tax levied by the federal government). Most believe that limiting this tax, which affects only 0.2 percent of the population, should be the top priority of the current Congress.

The truth, however, is that everyone must favor the "redistribution of wealth" at some point. This relates directly to the issue of education: as the necessity of doing boring and dangerous work disappears—whether because we have built better machines and infrastructure, or shipped our least desirable jobs overseas—people need to be better educated so that they can apply themselves to more interesting work. Who will pay for this? There is only one group of people who can pay for anything at this point: the wealthy.

To make matters more difficult, Americans have made a religious fetish of something called "self-reliance." Most seem to think that while a person may not be responsible for the opportunities he gets in life, each is entirely responsible for what he makes of these opportunities. This is, without question, a false view of the human condition. Consider the biography of any "self-made" American, from Benjamin Franklin on down, and you will find that his success was entirely dependent on background

conditions that he did not make, and of which he was a mere beneficiary. There is not a person on earth who chose his genome, or the country of his birth, or the political and economic conditions that prevailed at moments crucial to his progress. Consequently, no one is responsible for his intelligence, range of talents, or ability to do productive work. If you have struggled to make the most of what Nature gave you, you must still admit that Nature also gave you the ability and inclination to struggle. How much credit do I deserve for not having Down syndrome or any other disorder that would make my current work impossible? None whatsoever. And yet devotees of self-reliance rail against those who would receive entitlements of various sorts—health care, education, etc.—while feeling unselfconsciously entitled to their relative good fortune. Yes, we must encourage people to work to the best of their abilities and discourage free riders wherever we can—but it seems only decent at this moment to admit how much luck is required to succeed at anything in this life. Those who have been especially lucky—the smart, well-connected, and rich—should count their blessings, and then share some of these blessings with the rest of society.

The wealthiest Americans often live as though they and their children had nothing to gain from investments in education, infrastructure, clean-energy, and scientific research. For instance, the billionaire Steve Ballmer, CEO of Microsoft, recently helped kill a proposition that would have created an income tax for the richest 1 percent in Washington (one of seven states that has no personal income tax). All of these funds would have gone to improve his state's failing schools. What kind of society does Ballmer want to live in—one that is teeming with poor, uneducated people? Who does he expect to buy his products? Where will he find his next batch of software engineers? Perhaps Ballmer is simply worried that the government will spend his money badly—after all, we currently spend more than almost every other country on education, with abysmal results. Well, then he should say so—and rather than devote hundreds of thousands of dollars to stoking anti-tax paranoia in his state, he should direct some of his vast wealth toward improving education, like his colleague Bill Gates has begun to do.

There are, in fact, some signs that a new age of heroic philanthropy might be dawning. For instance, the two wealthiest men in America, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, recently invited their fellow billionaires to pledge the majority of their wealth to the public good. This is a wonderfully sane and long overdue initiative about which it is unforgivable to be even slightly cynical. But it is not sufficient. Most of this money will stay parked in trusts and endowments for decades, and much of it will go toward projects that are less than crucial to the future of our society. It seems to me, however, that Gates and Buffett could easily expand and target this effort: asking those who have pledged, along with the rest of the wealthiest Americans, to immediately donate a percentage of their net worth to a larger fund. This group of benefactors would include not only the super-rich, but people of far more modest means. I do not have 1/1000 the wealth of Steve Ballmer, but I certainly count myself among the people who should be asked to sacrifice for the future of this country. The combined wealth of the men and women on the Forbes 400 list is \$1.37 trillion. By some estimates, there are at least another 1,500 billionaires in the United States. Something tells me that anyone with a billion dollars could safely part with 25 percent of his or her wealth—without being forced to sell any boats, planes, vacation homes, or art. As of 2009, there were 980,000 families with a net worth exceeding \$5 million (not including their primary residence). Would a one-time donation of 5 percent really be too much to ask to rescue our society from the maw of history?

Some readers will point out that I am free to donate to the treasury even now. But such solitary sacrifice would be utterly ineffectual, and I am no more eager than anyone else is to fill the pork barrels of corrupt politicians. However, if Gates and Buffett created a mechanism that bypassed the current dysfunction of government, earmarking the money for unambiguously worthy projects, I suspect that there are millions of people like myself who would not hesitate to invest in the future of America.

Imagine that Gates and Buffett raised a trillion dollars this way: what should we spend it on? The first thing to acknowledge is that almost any use of this money would be better than just letting it sit. Mindlessly repairing every bridge, tunnel, runway, harbor, reservoir, and recreation area in the United States would be an improvement over what are currently doing. However, here are the two areas of investment that strike me as most promising:

Education: It is difficult to think of anything more important than providing the best education possible for our children. They will develop the next technologies, medical cures, and global industries, while mitigating their unintended effects, or they will fail to do these things and consign us all to oblivion. The future of this country will be entirely shaped by boys and girls who are just now learning to think. What are we teaching them? Are we equipping them to create a world worth living in? It doesn't seem so. Our public school system is an international disgrace. Even the most advantaged children in the United States do not learn as much as children in other countries do. Yes, the inefficiencies in our current system could be remedied, and must be, and these savings can then be put to good use—but there is no question that a true breakthrough in education will require an immense investment of further resources. Here's an expensive place to start: make college free for anyone who can't afford it.

Clean Energy: As Thomas Friedman and many others have pointed out, our dependence on nonrenewable sources of energy is not only bad for our economy and the environment, it is obliges us to subsidize both sides of the clash of civilizations. Much of the money we spend on oil is used to export the lunatic ideology of conservative Islam—building mosques and madrassas by the tens of thousands, recruiting jihadists, and funding terrorist atrocities. We should have devoted ourselves to a clean-energy Manhattan Project thirty years ago. Success on this front would still yield enormous wealth in this country, while simultaneously bankrupting the Middle Eastern states that only pretend to be our allies. Our failure to rise to this challenge already counts as one of the greatest instances of masochistic stupidity in human history. Why prolong it?

I am aware that a proposal of this kind is bound to seem quixotic. But what's to stop the wealthiest Americans from sponsoring a 21st Century Renaissance? What politician would object to our immediately spending a trillion dollars on improvements in education and energy security? Perhaps there are even better targets for this money. Let Gates and Buffett convene a team of brilliant people to lay out the priorities. But again, we should remember that they could scarcely fail to improve our situation. Simply repaving our roads, the dilapidation of which causes \$54 billion in damage to our cars every year, would be better than doing nothing.

Sam Harris is the author of the *New York Times* bestsellers, *The End of Faith*, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and *The Moral Landscape*. *The End of Faith* won the 2005 PEN Award for Nonfiction.

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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