



The Separationist

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

April 2011

Brian Dalton

“Mr. Deity”

Sunday, April 24, 2011, 4 pm, Gage Hall, 4 Archdale Street, Charleston, SC

Brian Keith Dalton is the creator of Mr. Deity, a web show that began as an iTunes podcast and shortly thereafter became a YouTube sensation garnering hundreds of thousands of views and the attention of Sony Pictures Entertainment. After signing with Sony, Mr. Deity aired exclusively on Sony's "Crackle" website where the episodes were viewed by millions of fans and lauded by likes of Michael Shermer, Julia Sweeny, and Penn Jillette (Penn & Teller). Brian writes, directs, produces, stars in, edits, and composes the music for the show.

Brian is (as he likes to say) a "Formon" — a former Mormon. In his late teens, Brian got religion "with a vengeance" and began studying theology, philosophy, and psychology. In the 1980s, he wrote and performed an album of religious music with partner Paul Steenhoek, and toured the Western United States, singing and lecturing about the importance of faith. He ultimately ended up working with Jewish theologian, and Nationally Syndicated radio



talk show host, Dennis Prager. But in his mid-twenties, he began to question his devotion to both Mormonism and religion in general. This questioning lead him to a life of skepticism and a deep reverence for science, the scientific

method, and the value of free thought and critical thinking. Brian has an extensive background in Mormonism, Christianity, and Judaism.

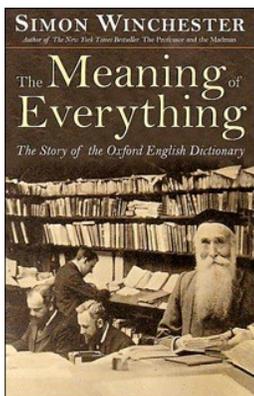
He is well-versed in skepticism, science, critical thinking, and is extremely passionate about the importance, and governing role of reason in our lives and in our society. He is an award-winning writer, director, editor, composer,

and producer and has shot, produced, and edited video for Disney, Clear Channel, Cap Cities, and other Fortune 500 companies.

Please note that this month's meeting will not take place on the third Sunday as usual, but rather on **April 24**.

SHL Book Group

by Matt Dean



On April 17th, 2011, the Book Group will meet to discuss *The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary*, by Simon Winchester.

The story of the making of the Oxford English Dictionary has been burnished into legend over the years, at least among librarians and linguists. In *The*

Professor and the Madman (1998), Winchester examined the strange case of one of the most prolific contributors to the first edition of the OED—one W. C. Minor, an American who sent most of his quotation slips from an insane asylum. Now, Winchester takes on the dictionary's whole history, from the first attempts to document the English language in the seventeenth century, the founding of the Philological Society in Oxford in 1842, and the start of work on the dictionary in 1860; to the completion of the first edition nearly 70 years, 414,825 words, and 1,827,306 illustrative quotations later. Although there is plenty of detail here about the methodology (including the famous pigeon holes stuffed with quotations slips from contributors around the world), the emphasis is on personalities, in particular James Murray, who became the OED's third editor in 1879 and died in 1915, "well into the letter T." The project backers complained loudly about the slow pace over the

years, but the scrupulous care taken by Murray and the many others who worked on the OED gave us what is arguably the world's greatest dictionary.

Amazon sells this book in paperback for \$17.59. Used paperback and hardcover copies are available for as little as a penny. There is one copy of this book in the Dorchester county library system. The Charleston county library system has six copies.

Family Corner

by Amy Monsky

Come take a walk on the wild side on April 10 at the Riverbanks Zoo and Garden in Columbia!



And, as if romping with 350 different species of animals wasn't enough fun, this trip is being advertised to groups across the state, so come prepared to meet some new friends! We will meet for lunch at 11 am. For details on where we're meeting or if you have questions, please email me at:

SecularCharlestonMom@gmail.com

The Separationist

Newsletter of the
Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

Editor: Daniel O'Neal

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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

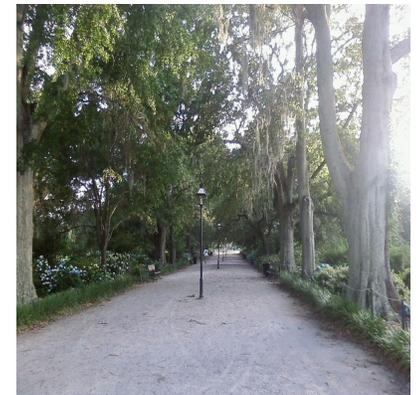
At the March meeting, Dale McGowan explained how his newly formed organization, Foundation Beyond Belief, pools donations from humanists around the country to contribute to several small to medium-sized charities. His inspiration for this actually came from SHL's Charity of the Quarter which he read about in our newsletter. A natural question about such initiatives is why not donate individually to the chosen organization? The answer is that it allows you to help articulate the humanist philosophy by working together with like-minded individuals to make the world a better place. When a non-profit receives a check from the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, they hopefully read our cover letter and learn about our organization. If you were to donate to them directly, it is unlikely that they would learn the word "secular humanist" in the process! Finally, we are able to pool donations, small and large, for local charities in need of support that you may not have supported otherwise.

Through the end of April, we are collecting donations for Crisis Ministries in Charleston, SC. Despite the word ministries in its name, it is not a religious organization and does not proselytize to those it serves. It is the largest homeless shelter and soup kitchen in the Lowcountry, in addition to providing desperately needed health care and family planning services to the poor. We have \$380 so far; let's aim for \$500. The easiest way to contribute is by clicking on the link on our website under the Top News section and paying via PayPal. Thank you for your continued support of our Charity of the Quarter program!

Volunteer Corner

by Nancy Worley

On April 16, SHL volunteers will be joining Richard Williams, head horticulturist for the City of Charleston in planting a flower bed at Hampton Park. As many of you may know, the greenhouses at



Hampton Park supply the plantings for all public places in Charleston so this will also be an opportunity to tour the greenhouses. Wear comfortable clothes that you don't mind getting dirty, bring sunscreen, a bottle of water and a pair of gloves if you don't want to get your hands dirty. Hampton Park will be absolutely beautiful in April.

Some of you might like to stay on after the planting and picnic. The park is closed to traffic on Saturdays but the staff is leaving a gate open so that we can drive into the park. Take Rutledge Avenue and turn left onto Grove Street. Turn left at 11th and Grove straight into the park. The greenhouses are immediately to your left. The staff has asked for a rough head count by April 11 so they can plan the right size activity for the group. If you would like to participate, please let me know by April 10. You can call me at 763-4044 or e-mail at worley@bellsouth.net.

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, **May 14**. 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.

Public Truths vs. Private Truths

The Politics of Public Religion

by Austin Cline

To what extent is it legitimate to use religion as a basis for political decisions on public policy? Many people believe that such a use of religion ultimately results in violations of the separation of church state, and thus other people's religious liberty. Many religious believers, however, argue that it is wrong to exclude religion from public debates and that such a policy effectively constitutes discrimination against religion and religious believers. Who is right?

In a way, both perspectives are "right" — it would be a mistake to assume that only one is valid and that the other must be wrong. Nevertheless, it must also be pointed out that former position is ultimately stronger. So long as it is not taken too far, it is the position which must serve as guiding principle.

There are a number of reasons why this is so, but perhaps the most fundamental and important is the fact that there is no one single religious perspective on the world or on questions of public policy. No matter what issue you might consider, even the existence of gods, there are a variety of religious positions on it.

What this means, then, is that it simply isn't possible for the government to "take the religious perspective" into consideration — there is no one "religious perspective." The government also can't take **every** religious perspective into consideration because there are simply too many for that.

For the government to adopt any particular religious position as a basis for laws or policies, though, would mean treating the religious beliefs in question as true — or at least as more true than the religious beliefs that have been excluded. All other religious beliefs that have something to say on the matter are treated as if they were false, or at the very least as worthy of less consideration. This is a genuine example of religious discrimination which cannot be tolerated in a democratic, tolerant society.

To understand how this might be so, we can

look at any number of examples from the headlines today: capital punishment, abortion, cloning, war, etc. What is the "religious position" on such issues? There are some especially **vocal** religious perspectives involved, but in no case is there a single religious perspective that we can consult. If those vocal religious views obtain a prominent role in the shaping of public policy when it comes to something as contentious as abortion, other religious views must be ignored — and that isn't fair.

But why isn't this the case any time the government adopts one basis for laws rather than other? The difference is that religion is based on what might be called "private truths" — ideas, beliefs, and "truths" that rely upon divine revelation. Such "truths" are a personal, private conviction which cannot claimed as creating obligations for others.

Non-religious arguments, however, can be based upon what might be called "public truths" — ideas, beliefs, and "truths" that rely upon public arguments and publicly accessible perspectives available to everyone, regardless of their religion. When public policy is based upon such public truths, then everyone is a part of the debate; but when private truths are used, then a great many people who do not recognize that particular divine revelation are automatically excluded.

Richard John Neuhaus, a conservative Christian, explained the nature of public and private truths when he wrote:

The religious new right . . . wants to enter the political arena making claims on the basis of private truths. The integrity of politics itself requires that such a proposal be resisted. Public decisions must be made by arguments that are public in character. . . . Fundamentalist morality, which is derived from beliefs that cannot be submitted to examination by public reason, is essentially a private morality. If enough people

(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 4)

who share that morality are mobilized, it can score victories in the public arena. But every such victory is a setback in the search for a public ethic. ... A public argument is transsubjective. It is not derived from sources of revelation or dispositions that are essentially private and arbitrary.

An example of a private truth would be the idea that murder is wrong because God commands it. This may be a true statement — but it has no normative force in terms of public policy because even those who believe it cannot reasonably expect the public assent of their fellow citizens who have not experienced this revelation, who do not share a religion which teaches it, and who are unwilling or unable to accept such religious teachings on faith.

An example of a public truth would be the idea that murder is wrong because it causes suffering in other human beings. Even if such an argument were wrong, it would be “public” because no one has to experience a personal revelation from a god in order to understand or believe it. It is “publicly accessible” in that regardless of one’s religious beliefs, the terms, inferences, and conclusions can be comprehended, critiqued, and accepted by anyone at all.

Of particular importance is the fact that the idea that murder causes suffering can actually be demonstrated (or, at least in theory, refuted) empirically. This is a major difference from either the existence of a god or the idea that a god actually wants us to do anything.

Does this mean that people shouldn’t personally believe that murder is wrong because God commands it? No, this isn’t an argument about what individuals should themselves believe. Rather, this is an argument about what grounds may be legitimately used to coerce other citizens to avoid certain behaviors and engage in other behaviors.

In a theocracy, it would be expected to base public policy and public laws on religious doctrines and divine revelation — that is, after all, what makes a political system theocratic. If a theocracy is what someone wants a nation to be, then they should by all means advocate that

position openly and be forthright with their goals.

In a liberal democracy, however, where freedom generally and freedom of conscience in particular are valued, neither religious doctrines nor divine revelation are legitimate sources of public policy. It is, after all, **public** policy that we are talking about — and in such a context, only **public** arguments are legitimate.

Whatever **private** reasons a person might have for following a certain course of action, they cannot expect others to necessarily share those reasons unless they are **publicly** accessible. Most of the time, this means that the arguments will be secular rather than religious — pure appeals to religious tradition or divine laws must be rejected.

Sometimes religious arguments may be employed, but in such a case “religious” will be descriptive more of the origin of the position rather than the structure of the argument itself. Thus, a person might believe for religious reasons that every human being has an essential dignity and, from that, argue that abortion or capital punishment is wrong.

Such an argument could be legitimate because it doesn’t necessarily matter (for the terms of public discourse) why each human has an essential dignity or even why a particular person believes it — what matter is how well the premise can be sustained and what conclusions might be derived from it outside of purely private revelation. We might then be able to make a case for the idea that insofar as a religious position can serve as a basis for public policy, that may only happen if the position does not require a particular theological support structure.

Believers may not personally choose to disentangle their theological beliefs from their arguments — and there is nothing wrong with that when it comes to what they believe privately. Yet if such disentanglement is possible for the purpose of public policy debates, then their arguments may be legitimate.

Austin Cline is past Regional Director for the Council for Secular Humanism and a former Publicity Coordinator for the Campus Freethought Alliance. Check out Austin’s blog at: <http://atheism.about.com>.

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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