

The Separationist

The Newsletter of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry
February, 1995

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Atheist or Agnostic?

That is the question confronting many humanists. It seems to surface at every meeting of our reading group. A convert to any cause often becomes its most enthusiastic adherent. With this in mind, I would like to comment about my "conversion" from agnosticism to atheism.

When I reached the age of reason, about 15, I became a nonbeliever. My interest in mathematics and its high standards of proof led me to call myself an agnostic. I felt that a religious person knew there was a God, an atheist knew there was not a God, but an agnostic knew there was inconclusive proof for either position. Certainly agnosticism seemed less offensive and more defensible.

Though I remained comfortable for many years about extolling my ignorance, this position raised some questions for me. Was I also an agnostic with respect to Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy? I couldn't prove that these supernatural creatures didn't exist. Another philosophically troubling point was that agnosticism proclaimed any knowledge of a God to be unknowable. How could I prove such knowledge unknowable? I was a nonbeliever who didn't want to be part of the same denomination that thought it as likely as not that God (or the tooth fairy) existed. I

felt like an atheist trapped in an agnostic's body.

Since I believed beyond reasonable doubt that there is no God, and was beginning to think of agnostics as no more than gutless atheists, I ended my 25 year affair with agnosticism and became an atheist. The truth is, I considered this appellation better than the rest but still

less than satisfying--until recently. My epiphany came when I learned that most people (myself included) incorrectly thought one must actually deny the existence of a God to be classified as an atheist.

Theists believe in a God or gods. The prefix "a-"

before "theist" means "not," "no," or "without." In other words, *an atheist is one without a belief in a God or gods.* (Some atheists may choose to deny the existence of deities, but it is not necessary to do so.) This definition is not simply my invention. Current and ancient atheist literature seems to accept this.

In 1770, Baron D'Holbach of Germany wrote the first openly atheistic book, *The System of Nature*, which later came to be known as "The Bible of Atheism." He wrote under various pseudonyms, since publishing such heresy was then punishable by death. Atheism to him meant an absence of belief rather than the more restrictive denial of a godly existence, as can be seen from his comment in *Good Sense*

Next Meeting
Sunday, Feb. 19, 4-6 P.M.
Gage Hall, 4 Archdale St.
Should We Tax Churches?
by Michael Deanhardt & Lee Deitz
The Public Is Welcome

(1772): "All children are atheists, they have no idea of God."

So I am asking all you agnostics, freethinkers, rationalists, and skeptics to come on down! Come to Father Herb and the theology of your birth. You too can become born-again atheists. I can't promise you eternal bliss or an everlasting life; on the other hand, it won't cost you any money. But even if you can't commit at this time, we can still remain friends. Without God as my witness, I have faith that there never was and never will be a war between atheists and agnostics. Amen!

Vatican Science

The Vatican has approved an important new medical device. Researchers at the University of the Sacred Heart (Rome) report that men can attach a new vibrating gadget to their testicles and obtain sperm samples (presumably for medical purposes) without "erotic feelings," thereby avoiding the moral evils of masturbation.

"Hey, don't knock masturbation! It's sex with someone I love."

Woody Allen

Coming Attractions Michael Deanhardt and Lee Deitz to Speak

We are pleased to have Michael and Lee speak on the very controversial (even for us) topic of taxing churches. Such legislation could have serious implications for all nonprofit institutions. Please plan to attend and bring a friend. After the talk, anyone interested can join us for dinner at Vickery's, two blocks away.

Michael is a member of the State Board of the ACLU from the Piedmont Chapter. He is actively working with the Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment, and Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-Flag). Michael has agreed to be a plaintiff if the ACLU takes a test case to the State Supreme Court against the State

Buggery (Sodomy) Laws. This, he hopes, would establish once and for all the constitutional right to privacy in the bedroom.

Lee is a graduate of fundamentalist Bob Jones University in Greenville. He had a conversion from fundamentalism and is now president of the Secular Humanists of Greenville and Upstate South Carolina. Lee's fascinating story, *Leaving the Fold*, has recently been published in a book by Prometheus.

Our March 19 meeting will feature Brett Bursey, editor of *The Point* and full time activist and radical. He will speak on "Spirituality Through Raising Hell."

Christian-Jewish Council Debate

The topic will be "A Basis for Morality: Do We Need to Believe in God?" The debaters will be Father George Savas, Greek Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity, and your editor, Herb Silverman. The event is scheduled for Thursday, Feb. 16 at 7:30 p.m. in Room 107 of the Education Center at the College of Charleston. Members of the audience may ask questions and make comments. Please plan to attend. Your support is welcome and this is an opportunity for members of SHL to explain our views and possibly expand our base. The debate replaces the one planned for last month with Rev. Eichelberger, which was canceled because he required emergency coronary bypass surgery. We wish him a speedy and full recovery.

Civil Disobedience?

In December I spoke to The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia on "An Infidel from the Bible Belt." At the meeting I met a member, Norman Jenkins, who wished to contribute to our newsletter the information on the following page. Do with it as you wish.

THE LAW FORCES YOU TO DISTRIBUTE RELIGIOUS TRACTS

**U.S. CURRENCY CARRIES THE RELIGIOUS STATEMENT
"IN GOD WE TRUST"**

(It means MY Real God; not your mythic god)

**IT IS AGAINST THE LAW TO DEFACE U.S. CURRENCY
-but-
ANGRY SCOFFLAWS BREAK THAT LAW
BY CONVERTING CURRENCY INTO ANTI-RELIGIOUS TRACTS
THEY CHANGE IT TO
"IN GOD WE RUST"**

**THEY MAKE ALL CASH TRANSACTIONS IN NEW ONE DOLLAR BILLS.
\$100.00 STACK OF NEW BILLS IS LESS THAN 1/2 INCH.
(COUNTING IS EASY SINCE THEY ARE IN NUMERICAL ORDER)**

**THEY MARK THE BILLS WHILE THEY WATCH THE NEWS ON TV
BY CURLING THE STACK, THEY EASILY MARK EACH BILL:**

**THE STATEMENT AREA IS SWIPED 2 OR 3 TIMES WITH A FLUORESCENT
YELLOW OR ORANGE WIDE HIGHLIGHTER -- IT'S NOTICED.**

**ONE OR TWO MARKS WITH A BLACK MARKER, FROM THE TOP
OF THE "T" WITH A TAIL, -- IT'S CLEAR THAT THE "T" IS DELETED.**

**A SINGLE RED CURLING SWIPE, FRAMES THE STATEMENT
-- THE EFFORT CANNOT BE IGNORED --**

**"E PLURIBUS UNUM"
EVERYONE'S COUNTRY**



DO NOT POST NOTICE THIS WHERE SCOFFLAWS MIGHT READ IT

**DO NOT BREAK THE LAW
DO NOT DRIVE FASTER THAN THE POSTED SPEED
DO NOT TEAR OFF TAGS FROM UPHOLSTERED FURNITURE
DON'T ENCOURAGE ANYONE TO BE A SCOFFLAW NO MATTER
HOW MUCH THEY OBJECT TO DISTRIBUTING RELIGIOUS TRACTS**

Dr. Stephen McLeod-Bryant gave an outstanding talk at our January 15 meeting. He showed how methods he applies professionally as a trans-cultural psychiatrist may be beneficial in personal and group settings. He felt much more could be accomplished by making our neighbors comfortable with us than by confronting them with our differences. He believes in being "unconditionally constructive." During our questioning period, he agreed that we must sometimes publicly counter attempts to stereotype groups and restrict civil liberties. Dr. McLeod-Bryant cautioned against making quick judgments about individuals and situations. To graphically illustrate, he said a passerby at the time of his talk might only see "some black guy lecturing a bunch of white people." So much more happened at this meeting on the 66th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr. You can tune in to Steve's biweekly Sunday radio program on WPAL (730 on the AM dial) at 5 p.m.

Humanist Quote of the Month

"In their struggle for the ethical good, teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the doctrine of a personal God, that is, give up that source of fear and hope which in the past placed such vast power in the hands of priests. In their labors they will have to avail themselves of those forces which are capable of cultivating the Good, the True, and the Beautiful in humanity itself. This is, to be sure, a more difficult but an incomparably more worthy task."

Albert Einstein

Secular Humanist Meets Christian Coalitionist

The Soviet Union has fallen. Apartheid in South Africa has ended. We seem to be heading toward peace in the Middle East.

Can secular humanism and the Christian Coalition get along? Ken Todd, a University of South Carolina graduate and owner of Hairlines at 48 Wentworth St., is a fundamentalist Christian and active participant in the Christian Coalition. As you can imagine, we have some interesting conversations when he cuts my hair.

At my suggestion, Sharon and I invited Ken and his wife, Connie, to our house for dinner. As expected, we disagreed on almost all things theological. At one point, they spoke of an argument that Satan had caused them to have, just before coming over. When they realized the Devil was responsible, they cast him out and ended the argument. I'm sure some of the comments Sharon and I made were just as surprising to them. Nevertheless, we ended the evening thinking they were nice people and I hope they felt similarly about us.

Theology aside, there are a lot of important ideas and issues on which Ken and I agree. The following statement we wrote jointly emphasizes these points. I suggest that all of us can learn from writing cooperatively with someone whose differences seem greater than our similarities.

From Ken Todd and Herb:

"We are concerned with securing justice and fairness in society. We attempt to transcend divisive parochial loyalties based on race, nationality, and religious beliefs, and strive to work together for the common good of humanity. We believe that democracy provides the best guarantee to protect human rights. We believe in supporting the disadvantaged and the handicapped so that they will be better able to help themselves. We encourage negotiation and cooperation as a means of resolving differences and achieving mutual understanding. We believe in the common moral and ethical decencies: altruism, compassion, integrity, honesty, and responsibility. We want to protect and enhance the earth, to preserve it for future generations, and to avoid inflicting needless suffering on

other species. We believe in the fullest realization of the best and noblest that we are capable of as human beings."



Baby Needs a New Pair of Shoes

by David Sumner

"God does not play dice with the universe"

This oft-quoted assertion of Albert Einstein is frequently used to suggest that he was a believer. Some even go so far as to try to argue that—despite his Jewish heritage—Einstein was a Christian. Nothing could be further from the truth. Einstein, as so many of us, found the term 'God' and other religious metaphors useful. It would be a grave error to infer from this statement that Einstein was religious in any usual sense of the word. One may as well infer that he was an inveterate gambler.

Curiously, it turns out that both scientifically and scripturally God does indeed play dice with the Universe

What he meant

All Einstein intended to convey was that he did not accept the conclusions of Quantum Mechanics. He did not believe that the universe was as random as the theory of Quantum Mechanics suggested.

Einstein's Religion

As a child of about 11, Einstein went through an intense religious period. He would make up songs about god and sing them on the way to school. He expresses the end of this (short) period of his life this way, (Pais — *Einstein Lived Here*)

"Through the reading of popular scientific books, I soon reached the conviction that much in the stories of the Bible could not be true. The consequence was a positively fanatic [orgy of] free-thinking."

Einstein did not bar-mitzvah.

Never-the-less, Einstein admitted to having views that could be interpreted as religious in the sense of Spinoza.

"The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the power of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the rank of devoutly religious men."

Einstein: His Life and Times

Einstein also says,

"I cannot conceive of a personal God who would directly influence the actions of individuals, or would directly sit in judgment on creatures of his own creation. I cannot do this in spite of the fact that mechanistic causality has, to a certain extent, been placed in doubt by modern science.

My religiosity consists in a humble admiration of the infinitely superior spirit that reveals itself in the little that we, with our weak and transitory understanding, can comprehend of reality. Morality is of the highest importance— but for us, not for God."

Albert Einstein: The Human Side

What's in a Name?

Physicists or mathematicians will often use the term 'God' without referring to a sentient being of any kind. Still, many true believers will consequently argue that this great man of science believed in god (and so why don't you?).

Even if it is true, such an ad hominem assertion doesn't argue for the existence of any god. However, it is annoying to hear such a twisting of the beliefs of great scientists.

How did Einstein feel about the reports of his religious convictions? The following quote also from *Albert Einstein: The Human Side*, is about as specific and pointed as possible. It should put to rest any mutterings about Einstein's religious views.

"It was, of course, a lie what you read about my religious convictions, a lie which is being systematically repeated. I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly. If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it."

How 'bout Them Dice?

So, does God play dice with the Universe? From the view of Quantum Mechanics the answer is a resounding *Yes*.

Moreover, there is pertinent scripture to back up this statement. Biblically speaking the answer is also a definite *Yes*.

Read Joshua 14 1:2 — which in *The Living Bible* reads as follows:

The conquered lands of Caanan were allotted to the remaining nine and a half tribes of Israel. The decision as to which tribe would receive which area was decided by throwing the sacred dice before the Lord, and He caused them to turn up the way He wanted. Eleazar the priest, Joshua, and the tribal leaders supervised the lottery.



Take not God's name in vain; select a time when it will have effect.

Ambrose Bierce,
The Devil's Dictionary

The following letter was sent to us by an SHL member who lives in Davis, California.

Dear Herb,

Words, even if they are the "word of God," are always subject to interpretation, so they easily become a tool for simply promoting what one wants to do. Too many people decide what they want God to say and then claim superior moral authority over others because God said it.

My concern is over people who to varying degrees believe in the importance of the Bible, but do not use it as a means to exert moral authority over others. I understand that you may find it irrational and silly, but for the most part harmless. You probably find yourself in agreement with many of these people on moral ethics. By presenting your Bible quotes, you successfully attack those who use the Bible as a moral sword, but you may lose others who don't.

If, however, you do believe that it is important to debunk the Bible to all because you wish to convince people to live their lives more rationally, then you need to be more even handed. What I mean is that you need to not only attack the Bible as a source of irrational belief, but other sources as well. This includes other religious works, astrology, witchcraft, and people's unfounded acceptance of the authority of celebrity figures. I would guess that for many people other irrational bases of belief play a much bigger role than the Bible.

Cheers,
Don Dudley

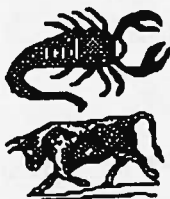
Dear Don,

A belief in astrology or witchcraft seems about as untenable to me as a belief that the Bible is the unerring word of God. I wish critical thinking played a larger role in people's lives. However, we need to be especially apprehensive about irrational beliefs that prove harmful to our community. Biblical

fundamentalists are more likely to try to impose their value system on the Bible Belt than are those who check their astrological charts before making travel plans. If I were (safely) editing a comparable newsletter in Iran, I would mention the Bible in passing and concentrate on issues raised by the Koran.

Critical thinkers will agree with some parts and disagree with other parts of the Bible, the Koran, the Humanist Manifesto, and the Separationist. None of these documents should be accepted on the authority of the authors. Finally, members who feel certain points of view have been neglected in this newsletter are encouraged to remedy the situation by writing, as you have done.

Regards,
Herb



Astrology is a
lot of Taurus.

Speaking of astrology, I recently read an interesting article on astrology in Russia by Fred Hiatt of the Washington Post Foreign Service. Banned in Soviet days as beneath the dignity of scientific Marxism, astrology has caught on big-time in the new Russia.

Russian astrologers do not sugarcoat the news. A typical horoscope read, "This day is entirely unsuitable for undertakings of any sort. The risk of accidents is high. You shouldn't expect anything good from your family life today." A workers' newspaper recently said, "You have a lot of big plans as far as money is concerned, but none of them will come true." A business newspaper stated, "On Tuesday, the shady deals that you made earlier may become known to the broad public."

The optimism of American astrologers is probably more a reflection of cultural

and situational differences than of star alignments. As with most forecasters, Biblical or otherwise, the "truths" we learn are about the culture, personality, and times of the prophets.

Our biblical quote shows that John Wayne Bobbitt & Jesus Christ have a lot in common: Neither will ever get to Heaven.

Biblical Quote of the Month

"He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the Lord. No bastard shall enter the assembly of the Lord, even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the Lord."
Deut. 23:1-2



It doesn't seem fair that Jesus should be made to suffer simply because his mother and father never married. But what can you expect from a justice system that condemns you and me because Adam ate a piece of fruit 6000 years ago?

Community Service

Ewa Wojcicka and Sharon Fratepietro have volunteered to be labor coaches for residents of the Florence Crittenton Home for unwed mothers. Other services from our group would also be appreciated. For example, folks are needed to help with various kinds of fitness training or instruction in skills like cooking, needlework, recreational hobbies and so forth. If you prefer to make a financial donation, send a check in any amount to the Florence Crittenton Home to use for numerous good reasons, such as buying maternity underwear or new baby items. Call Sandra Fowler at Florence Crittenton (722-7526) if you have questions.

The dice of God are always loaded.
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Of course, you are always welcome to participate in escorting at the Charleston Women's Clinic on Saturday mornings. Even an hour of your time once a month will be valuable. Call Ron Kaz for details at 795-3572.

Reading Group

The end of the second and beginning of the third chapter in Corliss Lamont's book, *Philosophy of Humanism*, will be discussed on Monday, February 6. For further information, call Sharon Robles (881-8651).

There have been a few requests from SHL members for our membership list. The Executive Committee feels this could provide an avenue for us to get to know each other better. However, a couple SHL members have expressed concern for their reputations. One even worried about potential problems should he decide to run for office. (No, Governor David Beasley has not joined!) If any members object to having their names distributed to other members only, please let me know at 577-0637.

She's Baaak

One evening last spring, Sharon Fratepietro and I went to a group session at Folly Beach to hear the internationally renowned channeler, Darlen-De. She modestly bills herself as a Master Teacher and Spiritual Doctor channeler, able to make "adjustments" to anyone's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual levels. We sat quietly in a circle and watched her enter a deep trance. Her voice changed and she developed an unusual accent. Her assistant then told us the entranced Darlen-De could now answer our questions. I asked if the troubles Calvin and I were having at home would be detrimental to a future college career for him. Darlen-De assured me that Calvin would go out of town to college, but that he would not choose my preferred area of study. Too bad! I was hoping Calvin, my cat, would major in "obedience."

At first I was amused by the evening's entertainment. Then I became worried that so many participants planned to make life decisions based on Darlen-De's words of wisdom. In any case, she is returning with a half-price special on channeled tarot-trance readings.

The following stanza is taken from Curt Systma's satiric poem, "A Humanist Manifesto":

In every age, the bigot's rage
Requires another focus,
Another devil forced on stage
By hatred's hocus-pocus:
The devil used to be the Jew
And then it was the witches;
And then it was the Negroes who
Were digging in the ditches.
The devil once was colored pink
And labeled communistic;
Now, all at once, in just a blink,
The devil's humanistic.

Letters to the Editor of the *Charleston Post and Courier* by SHL Members

In his Jan. 2 column, Cal Thomas expressed his dismay over the views of a theology graduate student at Emory University. Mr. Thomas said, "One might ask what good it does to study theology if the subject doesn't point the student to an authority higher than his or her own mind." Perhaps Mr. Thomas doesn't know the difference between an education and an indoctrination. A rational inquiry into transcendent religious questions like the nature and existence of a deity leads different people to different conclusions.

As a professor of mathematics, I do recognize the need for memorizing basic axioms, rules, and definitions in order to understand and appreciate some of the more abstract concepts and ideas. Yet even as objective a field as mathematics can lead to some surprising and unexpected results. Mathematicians often

disagree about the significance of their findings to real-world applications.

There is more to an education than the memorization of a body of facts or a catechism. Little is discovered by those who close their minds to ideas and evidence that conflict with preconceived prejudices. We are better equipped to deal with the problems in a complex and technologically advanced democratic society if we emphasize how to think rather than merely what to think.

Herb Silverman

(Published January 8, 1995)

Mark Highum's letter (12/01/94), "Humanism a Religion," starts off well by praising *The Post and Courier's* Religion section's coverage of an atheist's Thanksgiving. The letter, unfortunately, goes downhill from there. Highum says that Merriam Webster defines religion as "a cause, principle, or belief held with faith or ardor." Highum is being disingenuous--a word Merriam Webster defines as "lacking in candor." Merriam Webster's Third International has seven definitions for religion, of which Highum's is a part of the seventh. Merriam Webster illustrates Highum's proffered definition thus: "by making democracy our religion and practicing as well as preaching its doctrines. W.O. Douglas." Thus Highum's definition-based argument leads logically to the absurd conclusion that anything a person feels strongly about falls under the first amendment "freedom of religion" clause. Secular Humanism is not a religion!

Highum's letter ends with the all-too-common resort to some variant to Pascal's wager. Formulated by the eminent French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist in the mid-seventeenth century, it states that one is better off believing in God than not, because not believing has no rewards in either case, but belief does, should it prove correct.

The problem with Pascal's wager is that those offering it always make the

assumption that the choice is between their God and no God; Highum makes that assumption explicit by positing a Christian God.

The atheist looks at this and says, "You, Mr. Christian, have made no better a case for your God than has the Muslim, the ancient Greek, or the headhunter of New Guinea for his. You say that those other religions have fatal flaws? Not more so than Christianity. Christians might, as an intellectual exercise, try refuting the arguments presented in Michael Martin's *The Case Against Christianity*."

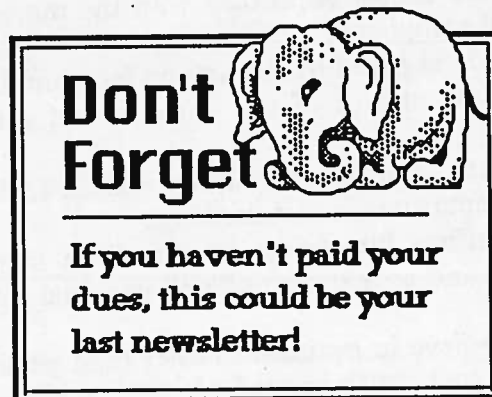
I suspect, though, that the believers will hold to their usual tactic of ignoring the substance of atheistic arguments and go blithely along in ignorance of the untenability of their beliefs.

David D. Peterson

(Letter unpublished as of January 25, 1995)

\$ If you would like to become a \$ member at this time, you can write a check for \$15 (\$25 for a family membership) made payable to Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry and sent to PO Box 32256 Charleston, SC 29417.

If you know of others who might be interested in joining, please let us know. It is our policy to send potential members two free copies of the newsletter.



The Affirmations of Humanism: A Statement of Principles and Values

- We are committed to the application of reason and science to the understanding of the universe and to the solving of human problems.
- We deplore efforts to denigrate human intelligence, to seek to explain the world in super-natural terms, and to look outside nature for salvation.
- We believe that scientific discovery and technology can contribute to the betterment of human life.
- We believe in an open and pluralistic society and that democracy is the best guarantee of protecting human rights from authoritarian elites and repressive majorities.
- We are committed to the principle of the separation of church and state.
- We cultivate the arts of negotiation and compromise as a means of resolving differences and achieving mutual understanding.
- We are concerned with securing justice and fairness in society and with eliminating discrimination and intolerance.
- We believe in supporting the disadvantaged and the handicapped so that they will be able to help themselves.
- We attempt to transcend divisive parochial loyalties based on race, religion, gender, nationality, creed, class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, and strive to work together for the common good of humanity.
- We want to protect and enhance the earth, to preserve it for future generations, and to avoid inflicting needless suffering on other species.
- We believe in enjoying life here and now and in developing our creative talents to their fullest.
- We believe in the cultivation of moral excellence.
- We respect the right to privacy. Mature adults should be allowed to fulfill their aspirations, to express their sexual preferences, to exercise reproductive freedom, to have access to comprehensive and informed health-care, and to die with dignity.
- We believe in the common moral decencies: altruism, integrity, honesty, truthfulness, responsibility. Humanist ethics is amenable to critical, rational guidance. There are normative standards that we discover together. Moral principles are tested by their consequences.
- We are deeply concerned with the moral education of our children. We want to nourish reason and compassion.
- We are engaged by the arts no less than by the sciences.
- We are citizens of the universe and are excited by discoveries still to be made in the cosmos.
- We are skeptical of untested claims to knowledge, and we are open to novel ideas and seek new departures in our thinking.
- We affirm humanism as a realistic alternative to theologies of despair and ideologies of violence and as a source of rich personal significance and genuine satisfaction in the service to others.
- We believe in optimism rather than pessimism, hope rather than despair, learning in the place of dogma, truth instead of ignorance, joy rather than guilt or sin, tolerance in the place of fear, love instead of hatred, compassion over selfishness, beauty instead of ugliness, and reason rather than blind faith or irrationality.
- We believe in the fullest realization of the best and noblest that we are capable of as human beings.