



The Separationist



American Religious Civil War

a talk by Edwin Kagin, legal director for American Atheists

4:00 PM / February 17, 2008

Gage Hall / 4 Archdale Street / Charleston SC

Back in 1995, Edwin Kagin, our February speaker, wrote a column entitled "On the Coming American Religious Civil War (ARCW)". His article warned of the dangers of the growing power of the religious right in military metaphor saying:

The ARCW has already been started by the superstitious. They call it a "civil war of values." The shooting has already started. They call that "protecting innocent life." The purpose of the war is to overthrow science and constitutional democracy and to replace them with the Bronze Age myths and laws of ancient Iraq that became preserved in a collection of writings known, in translation, as "The Holy Bible." They regard this undertaking as "bringing America back to God." Loyal Americans should regard it as treason.

More recently, he has reiterated his fears that those who should be concerned about the ARCW are ignoring his warnings, even as the current administration continues to wear away the wall of separation between church and state.

Kagin has not only been writing about the ARCW, but also "fighting" in it...not literally as a warrior, of course, but as a lawyer and activist.

Edwin Kagin was born in Greenville, South Carolina, to a Presbyterian minister father. After abandoning belief in Christianity, Kagin became a freethought activist. He was a founding member in



1991 of the Free Inquiry Group, Inc., (FIG) of Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky.

Through his writings on the internet and in Fig Leaves, the FIG newsletter, Kagin gradually became known in wider humanist and freethought circles.

Kagin was the founding director of the first Secular Humanist summer camp, Camp Quest, in 1996. He was codirector with his Helen until 2005, the year that they were named "Atheists of the Year" by American Atheists.

Kagin was also a founder of Recover Resources Center, which provides a secular addiction recovery program. He currently serves on the national advisory board of the Secular Student Alliance, is Kentucky state director for American Atheists, and in 2006, was named national legal director for American Atheists.

As an outspoken public critic of religious intrusions into government, Kagin has appeared on hundreds of radio and television programs, sparring on more than one occasion with Michael Medved. Kagin has also run prominently, albeit unsuccessfully, as "the candidate without a prayer" for the Kentucky Supreme Court (1998) and the Kentucky State Senate (2000). Moreover, some of his legal work has involved him in religious issues and church-state separation controversies in addition to other civil liberties and constitutional issues. He has been a member in good standing of the bar of the U.S. Supreme Court since 1975.

Charity of the Quarter: My Sister's House

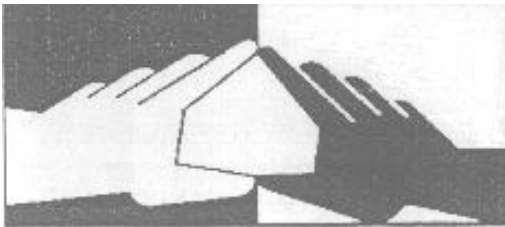
We are sure that our members already give money directly to the charities of their choice. However, we would like to ask you to give at least some charitable donations *through* the SHL. Every two months, the SHL selects a "Charity of the Quarter". Our members write checks to the SHL with money to be donated to the currently selected group and then we provide a single check for the total amount to the charity. Last month, for instance, we gave over **\$1,800** to **Lowcountry Orphan Relief**, and at the end of February we will hopefully write another big check to My Sister's House.

Two important purposes are served by this SHL policy of collecting money for charities from our members: we hope to be able to aid some charities in their valuable work, and we hope to also increase public awareness of our organization's Humanist principles.

The mission statement of our latest charity reads: My Sister's House, Inc., founded by volunteers in 1980, provides safe shelter to victims of domestic violence and their children throughout the Tri-County area. Victims who are in immediate danger from verbal, emotional, physical or sexual abuse are eligible for services offered by My Sister's House, Inc. at no charge.

Please help the victims of domestic violence, support this worthy charity, and help the SHL make a difference. Mail your check to the P.O. Box below or bring it to the next meeting. (Remember, the check should be made out to "SHL" and should

have "My Sister's House" written in the memo space at the bottom left.)



My Sister's House

Humanist Book Discussion Group By Sharon Strong

The February book group meeting will take place on the fourth Sunday of the month, as usual (February 24), at the Barnes and Noble bookstore at 1812 Sam Rittenberg Blvd., 4:00-5:30 p.m.

At this meeting we will be discussing a book that has generated a huge amount of buzz since it came out last spring: "God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything" by the acerbic writer and professional gadfly Christopher Hitchens. Not a shy man, Hitchens insists that religion is "violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children." But, in his urgency to expose the evils of religious dogma, does Hitchens verge on becoming "maddeningly dogmatic" himself (as the "Washington Post" has it)?

Nancy Worley has kindly agreed to lead what promises to be a lively discussion of this peppery volume. As ever, please feel free to join us, even if you haven't had a chance to read the book!

T-Shirts for Sale

A new supply of SHL t-shirts have arrived. They have "Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry / Charleston SC" printed on the front



in a starburst design and have the pun "A Non-Prophet Organization" on the back. They are available in white or dark blue and come in sizes M, L or XL. Short sleeved shirts are \$12.00 and long sleeved are \$15.00. The shirts are available at our monthly meetings at Gage Hall.

Contact Information for the SHL:

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Book Review by Laura Kasman

“The Portable Atheist (Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever)”

Selected and with introductions by Christopher Hitchens, published by Da Capo Press.

I must admit that my first reaction to the prospect of reading *The Portable Atheist* was one of trepidation. To begin with, I had misgivings about its editor, Christopher Hitchens. A literary critic and journalist turned political activist, Hitchens' critiques of people and politics, while often in agreement with my views, are so merciless and brutal that I usually end up pitying the object of his scorn. Second, despite its title, the book itself was clearly no lightweight, either in mass or content. In 480 brimming pages plus notes, the writings of forty-seven freethinkers spanning the last 2000-plus years are presented in roughly chronological order. And third, as a regular reader of atheist publications, I didn't expect to hear anything new. However, *The Portable Atheist* is full of interesting and entertaining surprises and I was quickly won over.

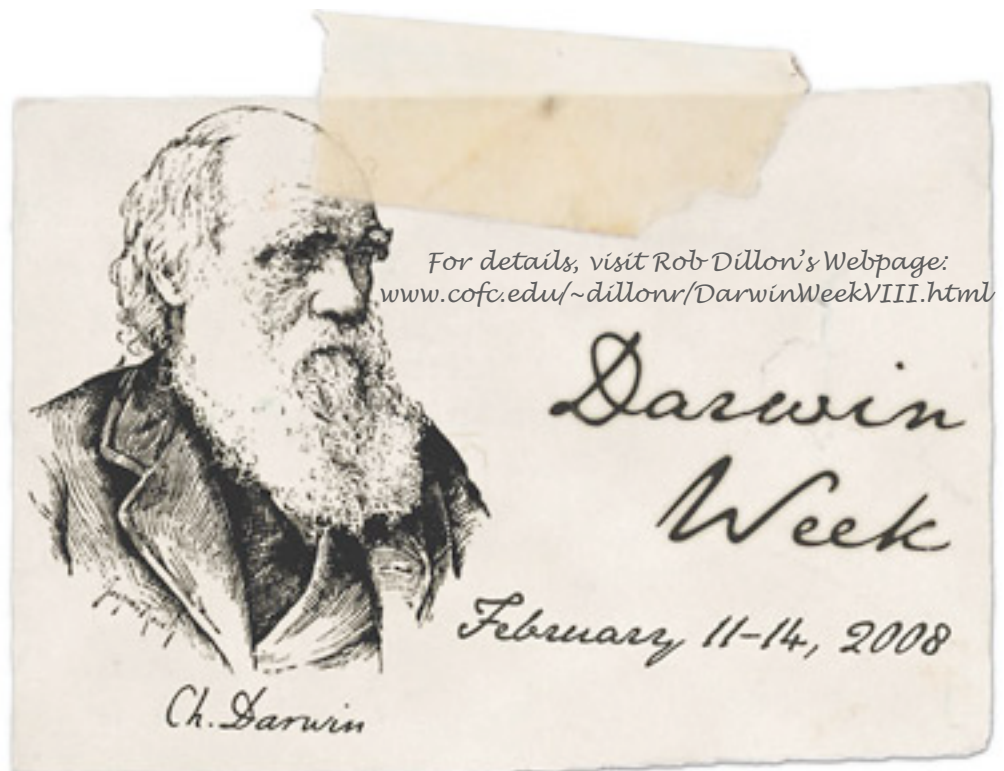
The first unexpected pleasure was Mr. Hitchen's thoughtful introduction. His opinion on the matter of the existence of god is no secret, as he recently authored *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. However, he acknowledges the arguments most often taken up against atheism, and dispatches them thoughtfully. He then briefly lays out the arguments for atheism, acknowledging that his purpose in this anthology is to arm “the resistance to the faith-based, and to faith itself, for combat against humanity's oldest enemy.”

Some of the authors and their writings were familiar to me and will be to most readers of modern freethought literature: Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Michael Shermer, and Daniel Dennett. Others are household names, but their writings on religion were new to me. Charles Darwin's autobiographical account of his loss of faith, Sigmund Freud's hypothesis for the existence of religion, Karl Marx's Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the Right, George Eliot on evangelical teaching,

Thomas Hobbes' “Of Religion” and Mark Twain's “Thoughts on God” and “Bible Teaching and Religious Practice.” In addition to being enlightening, reading these works produced in me the irrational pride of being in the same “club” as such icons.

However, my favorite works were the ones that surprised me the most. “The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam”, known to me previously I am embarrassed to admit, in title only via an episode of the 70's cartoon series *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, is a humorous 11th century poem satirizing religion. Who knew!?! Chapman Coen's essay “Monism and Religion” is a sly analysis of ‘virgin births’ throughout history. Lucretius' insight into the nature of matter and the irrationality of religion is amazing in the first century work “De Rerum Natura.” Ibn Warraq's “Why I am Not a Muslim” taught me more about the nature of the Koran and Islamic practice in a few pages than I had ever encountered previously. And Salman Rushdie's letter to the 6 billionth person

(Continued on next page)



born on Earth is as touching as it is funny as it explains religiosity to a naive mind.

Of course, any anthology is bound to include some works that don't appeal to individual readers. I personally was annoyed by Richard Dawkins' essay "Atheists for Jesus" which is based on a controversial assumption about of the evolution of group behaviors. The excerpt from John Updike's novel, *Roger's Version*, seemed out of place in both style and substance.

And then there are the people whose writings were left out. To include nothing by Robert Ingersoll seems strange, as he was arguably the most famous and prolific non-theist writer and orator of 19th century America. And an omission obvious just from the table of contents is a scarcity of contributions by women. Of the 47 essayists, only 4 are female - George Sand, Elizabeth Anderson, Emma Goldman, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali - and none of them writes specifically regarding the effect religions have had on the treatment of women. Hitchens acknowl-

edges the paucity of female contributors in his introduction to Goldman's essay, but provides no explanation for it. It can't be for lack of material to choose from. Anne Laurie Gaylor's biographical encyclopedia "No Gods, No Masters", includes the lives of 51 godless women, many of whom wrote freethought books or edited freethought newsletters at a time when freethought and feminism went hand in hand. A contribution or two along these lines would have added yet another argument in favor of atheism to the otherwise admirably broad selection in "The Portable Atheist."

Despite these deficiencies, and no anthology calling itself "portable" could contain everything, *The Portable Atheist* would be a worthy addition to the bookshelf of any atheist, and perhaps even a curious theist. Atheist "bibles" have been attempted in the past, but with its unusual mix of philosophy, science, biography, poetry, and commentary, *The Portable Atheist* perhaps comes closest to filling that niche.

2008 Membership Dues

Dear new and returning members, if you haven't paid dues at a recent meeting, it's time to send them in for 2008. Just \$24 (individual) or \$36 (couple or family) gets you this newsletter mailed to your home 9 times a year, and supports our speaker series at Gage Hall, refreshments at meetings, and community outreach activities. All dues and donations are tax deductible.

Please send your check made out to "Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry" with the form below to **SHL Treasurer, P.O. Box 32256, Charleston SC 29417**. If you have any questions, please write to our treasurer, Frances Hay, using the e-mail address treasurer@lowcountry.humanists.net.

Name(s) _____ Individual ____ Family ____

Street Address _____

Email Address _____

New member ____ Renewing member ____ Amount enclosed _____

Thank you!

Letters to Editors from SHL Members

Letter to Post and Courier (not accepted for publication)

A recent letter to the editor from Mike Gesling of Summerville (1/1/2008) blames "atheists and evolutionists" for crime and violence among teens in America today. Violent crime among youths is a problem that concerns me as well, but I would like to correct some of Gesling's misconceptions.

Although the availability of 24 hour cable news channels may make it seem that America has a growing problem with violence, the facts are actually much more optimistic. According to the US Department of Justice, there has been a steady decrease in the number of violent crimes in the US since 1993 so that the rate is now less than half of what it was during the entire two decade period from 1973 to 1993 (see <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/glance/viort.htm>). Of course, any violent crime at all is a problem, but contrary to Gesling's suggestion, this does not appear to be a new problem caused by recent changes in school policies, but something that is actually getting better.

As for his idea that criminal activity is associated with atheism or the teaching of evolution in public schools, Gesling offers no evidence other than his own prejudices. Atheists do make up a small percentage of the American population today (probably around 5%), and Gesling might be surprised to learn that the vast majority of us are ethical, law abiding citizens and caring parents. Let me offer some evidence. If there was a connection between atheism and crime, you would expect there to be a lot of atheists in prison. However, statistics show that there is actually a smaller percentage of atheists in prison than in society as a whole. Another clue that Gesling's accusations are incorrect is to look at Europe, where the percentage of atheists in the population is much higher than in the US and the teaching of evolution in science classes is standard practice. In contrast to what you might expect if "atheists and evolutionists" were to blame, violent crime rates in Europe are much lower than in the US.

There is much in Gesling's letter I can agree with. I agree that it is horrible that young people who should be in school or gainfully employed are ruining their own lives (and the lives of others) by involvement in criminal activity, and I agree that we all suffer the consequences. Believe it or not, as a believer in freedom of religion, I also agree with his insistence that parents should teach their children about their religious beliefs. However, where I disagree with him is in his suggestion that public schools should be doing this for them and his selection of atheists as a scapegoat to blame for violent crime.

Alex Kasman

Letter to Charleston City Paper (published 1/23/08)

In your Jan 9 volume, Arthur Holland takes issue with statements by Will Moredock which implied that Pagans have died for their faiths. He denies that such people existed. It's true that names are hard to come by, since most pagan religions do not preach an eternal reward for martyrdom, whereas Christianity venerates the names of such people as icons of the faith. Even, when as occurred most frequently, they were executed by other Christians (St. Joan of Arc, to name but one).

However, it is documented by multiple sources that Hypatia of Alexandria, a Pagan and advocate of religious

tolerance for paganism, as well as mathematician and exceptional scholar of her time, was murdered and dismembered by a Christian mob in 415 A.D. It is also well documented that in 435 A.D., the Christian Roman Emperor Theodosius II found that his laws prohibiting Pagan rites were so ineffective that he increased the penalty to death and ordered that all remaining Pagan shrines and sacred places be destroyed. Magistrates who refused to enforce these laws were also to be punished with death. However, after three years of this persecution he lamented that practicing Pagans were still to be found in large numbers in Rome. Some three centuries later, Charlemagne had been attempting to convert the Pagan Saxons through military force for almost 30 years when he captured several thousand at the town of Verden. According to some accounts, he offered the prisoners the choice of baptism or death. Apparently 4500 Saxons refused because they were beheaded at the town on that one day.

I am not a Pagan myself and don't know much about their rites or practice. However, I have to conclude that Pagans are willing to die for their faiths like Christians.

Laura Kasman

Letter to the Post and Courier (published 1/23/08)

In my own "pursuit of happiness" I find myself wishing for peace and equality for all mankind. This has led me to wonder whether perhaps the main reason, that religious people such as Christians, Jews and Muslims, sometimes get defensive and antagonistic about non-religious people is that the religious ones see morality as a product of religious belief. After all, the Bible, Torah and Koran are the sources to which these faiths refer for their "instruction" as to what is right and what is wrong. Good and evil are what their scriptures say they are---not because of any sociological consideration, but because God, or Elohim or Allah said so. Thus, any criticism or doubt cast upon these faiths is seen as threatening to destroy morality itself. And this is scary.

This suggests to me that a way to begin a dialogue which could lead to peace and harmony amongst people of any and all religious backgrounds would be to consider a different perspective on morality. There are concepts of morality which are common to all the major religions as well as to the non-religious: the prohibition against murder; the prohibition against theft; the efficacy of love.

There are also needs and desires which are common to all, no matter their religious background: compassion, respect, belonging, safety, food and shelter, freedom.

If we can focus on these values which we have in common, perhaps we can come to the understanding that morality has to do with how we relate to each other and to the universe. Good then becomes that which contributes to a constructive relationship between each of us, and Bad becomes that which is destructive or harmful to our relationships. Love is good, not because Jesus recommended it or God commanded it. Love is good because it makes life better for all of us.

Respectfully submitted,

Frank S. Hay, Jr.

SHL Calendar

The Separationist

**Newsletter of the
Secular Humanists
of the Lowcountry**

Editors:

Laura and Alex

Kasman

SHL Movie Club

February 2, 2008

Contact Sue Edward bflosue@earthlink.net to join SHL members at a movie and discussion over dinner, first weekend of every month.

Adopt-a-Highway Pickup

February 2, 2008

Meet at 8:50AM in parking lot of the First Federal Bank on Harbor View Rd on James Island.

SHL Monthly Meeting

February 17, 2008 at 4PM

Featuring Edwin Kagin.

SHL Book Discussion Group

February 24, 2008 at 4PM

Barnes and Noble on Sam Rittenberg Blvd in West Ashley. Nancy Worly leads discussion of "God is Not Great" by Christopher Hitchens.

Join the SHL:

The Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry (SHL) is a group of free-thinkers who believe in the humanist philosophy. Members come primarily from the 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 this newsletter and can participate in activities planned for the Lowcountry. For more information consult our Webpage at:

<http://lowcountry.humanists.net>

Contribute

Please contact the editors 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 appreciated. Write to us at newsletter@lowcountry.humanists.net or use the contact information at the bottom of page 2.

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