



The Separationist

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

December 2010

Winter Solstice Party 2010!

Sunday, December 19, 2010, 5 p.m., Carolina Cove, 415 Parkdale Drive, Charleston

SHL's annual Winter Solstice Potluck will be held December 19, 2010 at 5 pm at the clubhouse at Carolina Cove. Please bring an appetizer, salad, main dish, side dish or dessert to share. If you aren't into cooking, wine, beer and soft drinks are always welcome.

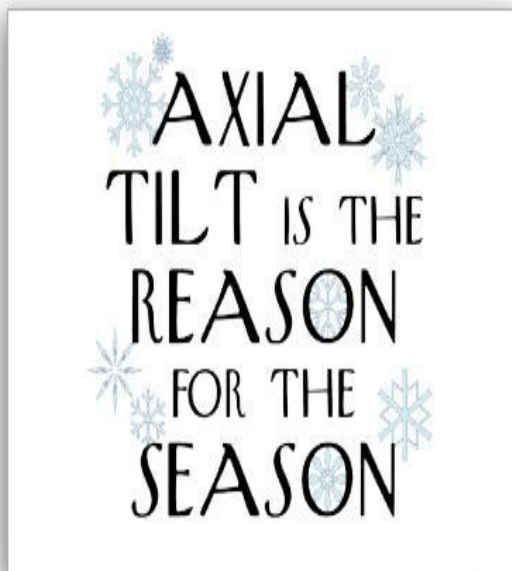
Also, bring books, CDs or DVDs for our annual book auction. Proceeds will be donated to the Trident Literary Association. Herb of the Silver Tongue will be our auctioneer.

The SHL Book Group will meet before the Potluck at 4PM in the Carolina Cove Clubhouse to discuss *Anatomy of an Epidemic: Magic Bullets, Psychiatric Drugs, and the Astonishing Rise of Mental Illness in America* by Robert Whitaker.

Carolina Cove is located at 415 Parkdale Drive, Charleston SC 29414 for those of you who Google or use Map Quest for your directions. For those who don't – if you are coming from downtown or West Ashley – cross the Ashley River Bridge and stay on 17S. After you pass the sign for Costco, begin to get into the left lane. Immediately past the Hess gas station on your left, there is a left turn lane onto Parkdale Drive. Stay on Parkdale for about 0.7 miles. You will see two entrances for Carolina Cove on your right. Take the second

entrance. The first building on your right is the Clubhouse. If you are coming from Mt. Pleasant and want to take 526W, go to the end of 526, turn right on Sam Rittenberg which will merge onto 17S near the Costco sign. begin to get into the left lane. Immediately past the Hess gas

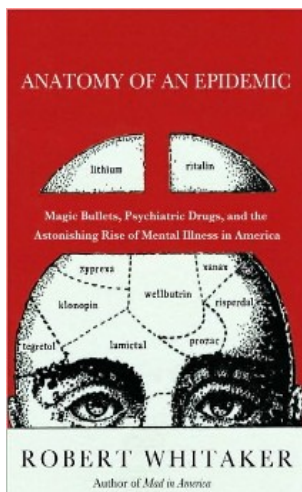
station on your left, there is a left turn lane onto Parkdale Drive. Stay on Parkdale for about 0.7 miles. You will see two entrances for Carolina Cove on your right. Take the second entrance. The first building on your right is the Clubhouse. There is limited parking in front of the clubhouse. However, there is a visitor's parking lot. Go past the clubhouse and take the first right – on your left is visitor's parking. If visitors' parking fills, park anywhere in the complex. However, try to avoid



parking directly in front of one of the condos. It makes the owners grouchy.

We hope to see you there, and we would like to extend a special invitation to people on our mailing list who rarely come to meetings, as well as past speakers who are not members. There will be no meeting at Gage Hall this month but we will return to our regular meeting format in January.

SHL Book Group



The Book Group will meet on December 19th, before the Solstice Potluck and Book Auction, 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.

The book is available on Amazon for \$17.19, with used and new copies a bit cheaper. Barnes & Noble sells the book online for \$18.72. The Kindle and Nook editions are \$14.30. There is one copy of the book in the Dorchester county library system.



Reminder

Volunteers are needed to assist with inventory at the Teachers Supply Closet on December 4 from 1-4 PM. If you are interested in participating, e-mail Nancy Worley at worleyn@bellsouth.net or call at 763-4044.

The Separationist

Newsletter of the
Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

Editor: Daniel O'Neal

newsletter@lowcountryhumanists.org

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

Contact information

Phone: (843) 556-4490

Email: shl@lowcountryhumanists.org

Web: lowcountryhumanists.org

Mail: P.O. Box 32256, Charleston, SC 29417

Officers

President: Matt Dean

Vice President: Herb Silverman

Treasurer: Jonathan Lamb

Secretary: Laura Kasman

What Do We Want?

by Frank Hay

We, the members of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, frequently find ourselves involved in a discussion as to how assertive, or forceful, or aggressive we should be when faced with situations which involve the conflict between religious believers and humanist non-believers. This conflict arises over such questions as (1) should the Bible or creationism be taught in public schools? (2) should crèches be displayed on public property? (3) should our coins and currency bear the words "In God We Trust"? (4) should the pledge of allegiance contain the words "under God"? and (5) are claims correct that "this is a Christian nation"?

These discussions very quickly arouse a secularist's emotions, e.g. anger and resentment, because the religious advocates (who get equally emotional) usually think they have the truth and are therefore justified in imposing their views on everyone. It is what their religion has taught them, although some are more gentle in their manner than others.

Would it not behoove all of us secularists to prepare ourselves by thinking in advance about how we would like to see such confrontations resolved? Most humans have a competitive streak which urges us to want to "win" such a debate--to take our stand and refute all counter-argument. But how often does this approach lead to what might be called a constructive conclusion? When we take this approach, not only do we not "win", but we usually end up widening the gap between ourselves and the others.

We need to ask ourselves: what is our goal?, or what is the outcome which would be the most constructive, and how can we help to bring this about? Here is what I try to keep in mind.

A. Remember that, for many people, life is harsh, and religious faith is a source of comfort

of last resort. Anything which opposes, or threatens, one's faith is perceived with fear and anger. Do we really wish to deny this source of comfort to anyone? Is not every person entitled to whatever fantasy helps to make their lives more bearable so long as they do not infringe on anyone else's right to the same?

B. Is it not true that efforts to dissuade a religious believer of his/her faith usually results, not in changing their minds, but in their retreating into deeper defensiveness and resentment?

C. A positive outcome, e.g. mutual respect, is more likely if the non-believer avoids any remarks that are put-downs or that sound like "I'm right and you're wrong". One way to do this might be to stick with asking questions rather than seeming to have all the answers or arguing. Some questions might be: "How do you see it?", and "So what you're saying is ----?", and "How do you reconcile what you said here with what you said there?"

D. Other constructive comments might be: "Your faith seems to be really important to you" and "What would your life be like if you did not have faith?" and "What thoughts come to your mind when you find out that someone is not a believer?"

E. In the throes of a heated discussion, it is difficult to keep in mind the outcome we would like to see, i.e. mutual understanding and respect, but it is essential to a positive outcome that we learn to do this.

SHL member Frank Hay is a retired business man, having been a self-employed distributor of petroleum products in the Charleston area. He grew up in a Presbyterian family and was a Deacon and an Elder by the time he was 30. He was never a Biblical literalist, read widely, became an agnostic in his 40s, and an atheist by the time he was 45.

New Atheism & Militant Atheism: Should Atheists Respect Religion and Theism?

Beliefs, Opinions, Ideas Do Not Merit Automatic Respect - Not Even if Religious

by Austin Cline

Question:

Should atheists show more respect and deference to religion and theism? Isn't it disrespectful to religious theists to be so critical of their beliefs?

Response:

There is an increasingly popular attitude that religion and theism deserve automatic respect and deference from everyone — even those who don't share that religion or that theism. People attack atheists for failing to show the "appropriate" respect to religious and theistic beliefs. Atheists shouldn't say things which constitute pointed, direct, or harsh challenges to religious and theistic claims. At the risk of further accusations of being intolerant and disrespectful, this is nonsense.

To be fair, religious theists typically put their religion and their theism at the center of their lives; when something is so important, it's natural to become defensive or upset when those beliefs are criticized at all, never mind harshly. However understandable such reactions may be, though, they aren't a good reason to insist the criticism not be made — just because a person takes criticism of their religion or theism personally doesn't mean that others are obligated to protect the believer's feelings by not speaking out.

First, religious believers who object to atheistic critiques of religion and theism, demanding more deference and respect, don't typically apply this standard consistently. They don't claim that political beliefs should be accorded more respect and not be criticized harshly. They don't demand that movie or restaurant reviews be less harsh and more deferential. Atheists' criticisms of religion aren't more harsh or intolerant than

analogous political, movie, or restaurant criticisms.

Religious theists don't even apply this standard across the full spectrum of religious and theistic beliefs. Richard Dawkins writes in *The God Delusion*: "As long as we accept the principle that religious faith must be respected simply because it is religious faith, it is hard to withhold respect from the faith of Osama bin Laden and the suicide bombers." Most religious theists don't respect the beliefs of bin Laden; that, however, requires not treating religious beliefs as inherently and necessarily deserving of our automatic respect; instead, we evaluate those beliefs on their own merit and react accordingly. This is what the so-called "new atheists" or "militant atheists" do, but they do so to all religious and theistic beliefs.

Second, beliefs themselves do not merit automatic respect and deference. Humans certainly deserve some basic level of respect and respectful treatment, but beliefs aren't people. We should be polite and respectful towards the person, but we are justified in being harsh and critical of a person's claims. However much a person might take such criticism personally, we must separate ourselves from our beliefs. An attack on one shouldn't be treated as an attack on the other. If a belief or idea is to be respected, it must earn that respect.

Third, treating a belief with respect or deference sends the message that one considers the belief worthy of respect — that one holds the belief in high or special regard. Synonyms for "respect" include: admiration, esteem, favor, honor, and reverence. These may be the opposite of what an atheist critic

(Continued on page 5)

really thinks; thus a demand that atheists show more respect towards religious and theistic beliefs is a demand that atheists change their minds about religion and theism, adopting a new perspective on them. This is not achieved through counter-arguments, refutations of, or rebuttals to any of the atheists' critiques; instead, it is achieved by insisting that insufficiently respectful "criticisms" need not be addressed at all. In a sense, religious theists are saying that unless you approach their religion and theism from something like their perspective, they can dismiss your comments without a second thought.

Fourth, the mere existence of atheists is considered an affront to some. We don't have to criticize their religion at all, much less harshly, in order to be treated as if we are insulting believers and their religion. Simply by calling ourselves atheists, we are telling people that we not only reject the important beliefs upon which their lives are based and don't place those beliefs at the center of our own lives, but we go out and live full, interesting, and happy lives without their religion or theism. We demonstrate that their religion and theism simply aren't necessary.

Atheists in America represent a specter of doubt, questioning, skepticism, criticism, and even blasphemy. Irreligious atheists are like metaphysical anarchists who do not submit to the authority of any religious institution, not even those of "false" religions, and thus feel free to criticize all religions. Irreligious atheists call into question the validity of religion generally by merely existing. Some people just can't handle this and that's why they object to people being vocal, unapologetic atheists at all. It's also why some people are bullied into not even admitting that they are atheists, preferring instead to use the label "agnostic" because it's perceived as more "polite."

Atheists are not responsible for making religious believers feel better about their

religion or their theism. Atheists are not responsible for helping validate religious theism by treating it with a respect or deference that it hasn't earned. Atheists are not responsible for protecting the feelings of religious theists by not speaking out, showing where theists haven't supported their claims or where they have used poor arguments.

Theists who believe they can't handle pointed, direct, and even harsh criticism of their religious and theistic beliefs always have the option of just not bringing them up. This is precisely the same choice facing every person and every belief: you can either put your belief out in public for comment and critique, or you can keep it to yourself. You don't have the option of putting your belief out in public and then insisting that everyone respect it or not criticize it.

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>.

Charity of the Quarter

by Jonathan Lamb

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

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

Heretics, Humanism, and "the Hood"

by Sikivu Hutchinson

As a radical humanist critic of America's Christian slavocracy Frederick Douglass once wrote, "I prayed for twenty years and received no answer until I prayed with my legs." What would Douglass, a trailblazing male feminist, have made of the brutal ironies of twenty first century black America? How would he have reconciled the "triumph" of its first black president with the travesty of crushing black poverty? The decline of mass movement liberation struggle with its prayer cult obsession? Or Black women's second class citizenship with the sham of "post-feminism?"

In the spirit of Douglass, the black secular community's moral obligation to social justice was the recurring theme of the L.A. Black Skeptics' first "Going Godless in the Black Community" roundtable. Held in South Los Angeles, the heart of the West Coast's Black Bible Belt, the meeting was one of the first L.A. gatherings of its kind in recent memory. The group was founded in March of this year to give non-theist and skeptic African Americans "congregating" online a real time community. Fifteen atheist/humanists from a broad array of backgrounds, ages and world views attended. The discussion ranged from critiques of the influence of hyper-religiosity in the African American community to practical strategies for developing humanist resources and social welfare institutions. I was recently reminded of the urgent need for humanist mental health and wellness alternatives at a black/Latina women's conference I attended on "breaking the silence" about domestic violence and HIV/AIDS. Several presenters portrayed faith-based mental health and wellness "remedies" as the most viable approaches to healing. Prayer will "right you,"



a woman who had been in a violent long term relationship declared to a literal amen corner of nodding heads. Relying upon prayer as an antidote to stress and trauma is a common coping strategy in communities of color, particularly for women of color. Race and gender-related stress are major contributors to stroke, hypertension and obesity in African Americans. Yet those who question faith-based healing remedies and belief systems are often marginalized as being "white-identified" and/or elitist. In some quarters evidence-based therapy is slammed as something black and Latino folks simply "don't do" or can't realistically afford.

The mental health crisis amongst African Americans is a devastating indicator of racial and social inequity, of which the prayer as therapy epidemic is an insidious symptom. During the Going Godless discussion participants focused on the importance of instilling black youth with an appreciation for critical thought and free inquiry. Reflecting on his K-12 education in L.A. schools Black Skeptics member Fred Castro said that he couldn't recall ever being exposed to humanist curricula or anything beyond a traditional Western Judeo Christian lens. As the second largest school district in the nation, with skyrocketing dropout rates and youth who are homeless, in foster care and/or on probation, Los Angeles city schools are particularly challenged by the absence of systemic culturally relevant education. High incidences of "faith-based" bullying and harassment, degradation of young women and the culture of violent hyper-masculinity all underscore the need for anti-racist anti-sexist anti-homophobic humanist youth leadership initiatives. Atlanta-based activist Black Son

spoke forcefully about having imbibed a culture of bigotry from the Bible, noting that African American youth are merely recycling the oppressive images and gender stereotypes they've been taught by "Christian" precepts. Parenting children amidst a sea of religious conformity and finding secular private schools with multicultural student bodies were also topics of concern. Children of color who come from atheist households—especially those who are taught to openly identify that way—are often subject to ridicule and ostracism as cultural traitors. In a world of public school Christian Bible study clubs, "mandatory" flag pledges, and teachers who violate church/state separation by using and/or endorsing prayer as a coping strategy, black children who don't believe are marked as other.

The gathering also highlighted generational differences in atheist of color experience; from that of Clyde Young and Bella De Soto who linked religion to capitalist exploitation and spoke of the need for anti-sexist revolution, to Jermaine Inoue who suggested that socially conscious hip hop was a means of promoting media literacy. Jeffrey "Atheist Walking" Mitchell mused about whether atheists could be spiritual and materialist at the same time, eliciting a comment from artist Rachel Ross about having faith in empirical evidence versus "magical thinking." The discussion became heated when some men wondered what it would take to make black women "less



religious." There was much debate about whether black women were entirely responsible for their overinvestment in religion or whether larger societal and cultural forces kept them overinvested. In response, I noted that there was relatively little social pressure/onus on black men to exhibit the kind of religious devotion that black women exhibit in their everyday lives and relationships. Hence, because black men enjoy patriarchal privilege, the real issue should be transforming masculinity to make men and boys more accountable for the care giving and nurturing roles that women are expected to fulfill. Merely criticizing the God-investment of black women without interrogating how patriarchy works in everyday space won't change sexist power relations.

Reeling from recession, unemployment, wage decreases, foreclosure, homelessness and health disparities, black communities nationwide have borne the brunt of the global financial meltdown. Humanism can and should engage with the complexity of our disenfranchisement; otherwise it is a vacuous promise asking power to "concede nothing without demand."

Sikivu Hutchinson is a Senior Fellow with the Institute for Humanist Studies and the author of the forthcoming book *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars* (Infidel Books, 2011).

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.

<http://lowcountryhumanists.org>

Secular Humanists of the
Lowcountry

P.O. Box 32256

Charleston, SC 29417