



THE SEPARATIONIST

MAY 2012

MAY POTLUCK AND FAMILY PICNIC

SUNDAY, MAY 20, 2012, 4 PM, 6165 OLD JACKSONBORO, RAVENEL

Summer's just about here! Dig out your flip-flops, shorts, and sundresses, and get ready to enjoy good food and good conversation with your fellow freethinkers and nontheists.

This year our annual May potluck will be held at the home of Matt Dean and Todd Frech. The fun begins at 4 pm on Sunday, May 20. There's lots of space for eating outside, picnic-style, and we'll have games and activities for grown-ups and kids alike.

Bring an appetizer, salad, main dish, side dish, or dessert to share. If you don't like to cook, wine, beer, and soft drinks are always welcome.

If you're using Google Maps, MapQuest, or a GPS, the address is 6165 Old Jacksonboro Road, Ravenel, SC 29470.



If you're coming from Charleston or Mt. Pleasant, take Highway 17 South. You'll pass two major intersections: Main Road and the cutoff to Hollywood (162). Turn right on Old Jacksonboro Road. After about a mile you'll come to a yellow house in a big yard surrounded by wire fencing. Turn left into the next driveway after that house.

If you're coming from Summerville, it's faster to go the back way. Take 165 to Ravenel and turn left on Old Jacksonboro Road. About a mile down the road bends sharply to the right. Turn right into the next driveway after that.

Note: There are two parallel driveways separated by a line of trees. **Take the driveway on the left of the trees and follow it until it ends.** Look for a gray stucco house with a green roof.

If you get lost or need further directions, you can call Matt on his cell phone at 843-302-2794, and he'll guide you in.


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 September.




FIND US ONLINE! WE'RE (NEARLY) OMNIPRESENT!


 <http://bit.ly/shlmeetup>

 <http://bit.ly/shlhome>

 <http://on.fb.me/shlFB> (main)
<http://on.fb.me/shlfamFB> (family)

 <http://bit.ly/shlyoutube>

 <http://bit.ly/shllist>

 <http://yhoo.it/shlyahoo>

FAMILY MOVIE NIGHT
WEDNESDAY, MAY 2, 2012, 5:30 PM



Join us on Wednesday, May 2, at Regal Palmetto Theater in Mount Pleasant to see *Chimpanzee*, a movie about the true-life adventures of a playful and mischievous chimp named Oscar. In addition to seeing a great movie, you'll be helping protect chimpanzees. Disney Nature will make a donation to the Jane Goodall Institute for each ticket purchased by May 3. We'll meet up in the theater itself instead of in the lobby. The movie begins at 5:30pm, but try to arrive 15 or 20 minutes before the start of the movie so we can get seats together. For questions or RSVPs, please email SecularCharlestonMom@gmail.com.

SHL MEETING
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2012, 4 PM
GAGE HALL
4 ARCHDALE STREET, CHARLESTON



Our next monthly lecture meeting will be held on Sunday, September 16. Dr. Louis Rubbo, assistant professor of Astronomy and Physics at Coastal Carolina University, will be our speaker.

Every few years we become pre-occupied with the latest doomsday prophecy. Quite often these prophecies are based on misinformation or a general lack of knowledge of basic scientific principles. As we approach Dec. 21, 2012, the prophesied end date for the Mayan calendar, we are once again inundated with bad science. Some of the doomsday scenarios include ideas of rogue planets hitting Earth, our destruction from solar activity, and even unusual alignments in the stars. In this talk we will review the origin of the Mayan predictions for 2012 along with other related doomsday prophecies. We will also discuss how an understanding of astronomical principles can debunk each and every one of these claims.

THE SEPARATIONIST, MAY 2012

BOOK GROUP
SUNDAY, MAY 27, 2012, 4 PM
WEST ASHLEY BARNES & NOBLE
1812 SAM RITTENBERG, CHARLESTON

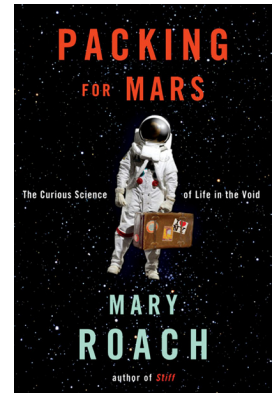
The Book Group will on May 27 to discuss *Packing for Mars: The Curious Science of Life in the Void*, by Mary Roach.

Space is a world devoid of the things we need to live and thrive: air, gravity, hot showers, fresh produce, privacy, beer. Space exploration is in some ways an exploration of what it means to be human. How much can a person give up? How much weirdness can they take? What happens to you when you can't walk for a year? have sex? smell flowers? What happens if you vomit in your helmet during a space walk? Is it possible for the human body to survive a bailout at 17,000 miles per hour? To answer these questions, space agencies set up all manner of quiz-zical and startlingly bizarre space simulations. As Mary Roach discovers, it's possible to preview space without ever leaving Earth. From the space shuttle training toilet to a crash test of NASA's new space capsule (cadaver filling in for astronaut), Roach takes us on a surreally entertaining trip into the science of life in space and space on Earth.

As always, we'll meet at the West Ashley Barnes and Noble, 1812 Sam Rittenberg Blvd. The discussion runs from 4 pm to 5:30 pm. We'll go out to dinner afterward.

After a break in June and July, the book group will return on Sunday, August 26, when we'll discuss *Brainwashed: Challenging the Myth of Black Inferiority*, by Tom Burrell. In this powerful examination of "the greatest propaganda campaign of all time"—the masterful marketing of black inferiority, aka the BI Complex—Burrell poses ten disturbing questions that will make black people look in the mirror and ask why, nearly 150 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, so many blacks still think and act like slaves.

To buy books and for a list of our past selections, visit <http://bit.ly/shlbooks>



ADOPT-A-HIGHWAY

**SATURDAY, MAY 5, 2012, 8:50 AM
FIRST FEDERAL OF CHARLESTON BANK
HARBOR VIEW ROAD, JAMES ISLAND**



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 5th. 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. If you have any questions, contact our volunteer coordinator, Kristen Channel, at 860-326-6079 or kristenchannel@gmail.com.



**SHL HAPPY HOURS
MAY 8 AND MAY 15, 2012, 6 PM**



Come relax among friends and enjoy a drink and friendly conversation. Everyone is welcome—alcohol is optional and no topic is taboo.

Join us for SHL Happy Hour on May 8th (Mt. Pleasant) and May 15th (north area). Details are still being worked out so please watch your

email for an announcement.

Hope to see you there!

HUMANIST STUDIES

Myrtle Beach Humanists & Freethinkers is starting a Humanist Studies discussion group to take a closer look at the history, application and advocacy of the Humanist philosophy. The first meeting, which will be at 2 p.m. Saturday, May 12, at the Chapin Library in Myrtle Beach, will focus on the various Humanist Manifestos and other declarations. There is no charge to participate and all Humanists, as well as those who are just curious, are invited to attend.

For more information, contact David Feld at david@humanistresources.org or 260-337-3353.

**OTHER MAY EVENTS**

May 6, 4 pm: Monthly Meeting

Chapin Memorial Library

400 14th Avenue North, Myrtle Beach, SC 29577

Dr. Louis Rubbo

What Does Astronomy Tell Us About The 2012 Domsday Prophecies?

May 12, 2 pm: Humanist Studies Group

Chapin Memorial Library

400 14th Avenue North, Myrtle Beach, SC 29577

May 16, 7 pm: Ice Cream Social

Dairy Queen

101 Orchard Drive, Myrtle Beach, SC 29579

May 20, 10 am: Beach Cleanup and Picnic

Myrtle Beach State Park

4401 South Kings Highway, Myrtle Beach, SC 29575

May 27, 9 am: Breakfast Social

Golden Corral

868 Oak Forest Lane, Myrtle Beach, SC 29577

CANDIDATE WITHOUT A PRAYER: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A JEWISH ATHEIST IN THE BIBLE BELT
HERB SILVERMAN. PITCHSTONE PUBLISHING
BOOK REVIEW BY GEORGE ERICKSON

“If a man is going to publish his life story, he had best take the precaution of leading an interesting life first. Or at least to being a very funny writer or of lacing his pages with wittily unconventional wisdom. Or even being just an exceptionally nice person. Fortunately, Herb Silverman ticks all these boxes, and more.”

With these words, Dr. Richard Dawkins, yes, *the* Richard Dawkins, began the foreword to *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt*, and Herb deserves every word.

I first met Herb in the nineties, when we served on the board of the American Humanist Association, where his humor, his clear thinking and thoughtful nature helped move our meetings along. However his attire and appearance, which trended toward the hippie end of sartorial splendor, explains why I was shocked to find (in *Candidate*) a photo of Herb dressed in an oversized tux for a presentation he gave at Oxford. For a moment, I thought that Lincoln had arisen from the grave.

Before reading *Candidate*, I already knew of Herb's efforts in behalf of Humanist and Atheist causes, and that he'd taught Mathematics at the College of Charleston, South Carolina, but his opening chapters were a revelation. Why? Because we grew up in very different worlds—I in an average Northern Minnesota family where religion or ethnicity was never an issue, and Herb in a Philadelphia family where Jewishness was everything, and *their* Jewishness included a loving, “control freak” mother whose attentiveness to her son included *ironing his shoelaces*. Thus, when Herb arrived at college, his roommate had to tell him how to boil water and change a light bulb—skills I was practically born with.

I had expected Herb's pre-college chapters to be a bit of a slog (because mine would have been), but instead, they provided a look into a culture I'd never had a chance to understand, and though the entire book is first rate,

those opening chapters were, for me, among the best. And as it turned out, it would also be the most expensive book I've ever read. (More on that later.)

I was surprised to learn that Herb had joined a fraternity, then pleased that he'd been elected its president, but I was not surprised that he had been arrested for protesting the Vietnam War, that he had been an early advocate for Women's Rights, or that, on learning in 1990 that the South Carolina constitution prohibits atheists from

holding public office, he had decided to run for governor- which is how he met his future wife, whom he calls his first and only groupie. He lost, but, as Herb puts it, “with politics in my blood... I decided to try to fulfill my lifelong dream of becoming a notary public.” Herb won. Bigotry lost.

In the ensuing years, Herb founded the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, followed by the Coalition for the Community of Reason, which evolved into the Secular Coalition for America. His tireless work for reason and against bigotry

makes inspiring reading in the chapters he devotes to Discussions on Religion, Debates on Religion, and Essays on Religion before turning to his first love and his occupation in a chapter titled Mathematics and God.

Silverman's *Candidate Without a Prayer* is, to use the vernacular, a candid, well-written, captivating “read,” but be warned: If you find *Candidate* as inspirational as I did, it might cost you—like it cost me—because, inspired by Herb's remarkable story, I was moved to donate \$200 to the Secular Coalition for America. Don't say I didn't warn you.

Candidate Without a Prayer is available from the usual sources and is also an eBook.

George Erickson is a former AHA VP and author of four books, including Eyes Wide Open: Living, Laughing, Loving and Learning in a Religion-troubled World. <http://www.tundracub.com>



An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt

HERB SILVERMAN
 Foreword by RICHARD DAWKINS

IS THERE A NEED FOR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS?

LEE DEITZ

Oftentimes we are engaged in conversation about religion/religions and church teachings/doctrines and some one will make the statement that “oh, those people need that religion to hold onto. It gives them purpose in life.” Does it really?

I have disagreed with members of our humanist group (Upstate SC Secular Humanists) and followed up their statement with, “I don’t believe that is the fact of it.” Until now, I have not bothered to sit down and put “pen to paper” and set out to prove my point. Here it is.

I firmly believe that people do not need religion. Religion needs people! It is a con job. With out the parishioners, religion would collapse. They go. They sing. They communicate. They listen to a “sermon.” They teach. They give money. They have done their visit with God for the week. After an hour, that is it! After this visit with God on Sunday, it is then business as usual.

The vast majority either go out to a restaurant or go home and prepare a Sunday meal. In both cases they breach the forth commandment (Remember the Sabbath day). Their Bible commands “No work on the Sabbath and no preparing of food on the Sabbath” (Exodus 16:23). Religions have their rules. They are discarded; therefore, religion is not needed. This is only one example of how “Christians” deliberately violate their own “sacred” teachings, therefore exhibiting evidence that religion is not needed.

Thousands claim a supernatural experience with God called “being saved” or “born again.” They have this experience in Church (99% of the time) after a sermon is preached and are invited to join the family of God. They respond to an “invitation” at the end of the sermon, speak with the minister, shake hands and their name is added to the church membership. For all the good that does, they just as well sign a barn door and shake a mule’s tail. It is a “feel good” thing! Now that they have joined and are a part of the congregation, they give an attempt at trying to “trust God.” That experience fades with time and they mesh in with the other members who give a beleaguered testimony which pales in comparison to testimony of their secular life. After all -- one hour, per week,

with God and 167 hours with self, family, friends and work. They *need* their friends, family, and work but the religion thing is secondary. The religion is community and in that sense, it fulfills a need. The same fulfillment could be realized with a secular, political or community setting.

Religion is community. It is tradition. It is meeting friends. It is sitting with family. It is half heartedly listening and enduring (not enjoying) a sermon. They could have done all this at a picnic! The “tribe” demands we conform to the rituals of the family. The “need,” if there is any, is to satisfy the vanity of being a part of the group whether it be family, friends, business, community etc.

The religion of the group is all secondary. It is not religion that is the crutch, but it is the pride of being accepted and there is nothing wrong with that. In other words, religion *needs* these people to continue the tradition—not the other way around. My wager is that instead of *needing* religion, many of these folk need a social worker or appointment with a therapist. Religion is not the answer to their needs—religion is the problem in a vast number of cases.

It is possible that religion and family, in some cases, could be synonymous. Family is religion to some, so this is their “crutch” and religion is family. Man creates his own situations and looks to someone else to bring him relief. Caught in the cross hairs, religion and/or family is there! Is religion fulfilling that need? The religion is a bump in the road with no permanent solutions. In some cases, the religion becomes divisive and an impossible dream punctuated with nightmares. In other cases, the religion is only tradition, family, business, community and sometimes an inconvenience that does not par with reality; Therefore, subjecting one to an ideology and superstition that is not the reality of a real world. They need this? No, they do not need that. It is a fantasy, not a need!

*Lee Deitz is a member of the Upstate SC Secular Humanists,
based in Greenville*

THE CASE AGAINST THE CASE FOR RELIGION

ALEX KASMAN

In the past two months, the New York Times published four separate op-ed pieces which attempted to argue for the importance of religion and belief in the supernatural. In his April 7th piece “Divided by God,” Ross Douthat argued that many of the problems with our country today stem from the weakening of the Protestant church. Both Nicholas Kristof and David Brooks wrote articles about Alain de Botton’s book *Religion for Atheists*. And Matthew Hutson’s short article was entitled “In Defense of Superstition.”

One interesting point to be made is that all four of these authors offered only *secular* arguments to support their case. That is, none of them claimed or even really hinted that the reason for being religious or for believing in the supernatural is because it is *factually* correct. Rather, they argued that there are real consequences of these belief systems that one can see and measure which are independent of whether the claims are actually true. Moreover, they offer *evidence* to support these claims. Hutson mentions a study by a psychologist which found that people got better golf scores when they believed they had a “lucky ball.” Douthat recalls the important role that the strong Protestant church played in the civil rights movement and in the building of hospitals and schools. Kristof cites studies showing that religious people donate more money and volunteer more time to charity than the non-religious.

Before I offer some criticism of these arguments, let me say that the questions they are asking are good and important, and that I appreciate the use of evidence in attempting to address them. We *should* be looking at religion to determine what good it does for people in *this* world, as opposed to the hypothetical afterlife or “End Times.” If we find that there are such things which cannot be replicated outside of religion, then it would certainly be a reasonable thing for the religious to use in arguments against people like us. And, if there are *good*

things that religion offers its followers that we *can* incorporate into groups like SHL, we at least consider whether we can do so without violating our core principles.

But the evidence cited by these articles are so far from being convincing that they lead me, at this point at least, to suspect that the very opposite is true. (For, if there were any truth to their claims they would surely be able to find better arguments.)

Douthat’s arguments are the most ridiculous. All he offers are anecdotes, a form of evidence that is especially susceptible to being biased by telling only part of the story. He certainly is right that Protestant churches played a role in many good things during the 20th Century, but he fails to mention that the churches were also involved in *fighting* against civil rights, he does not ask whether there were Jews, Catholics and atheists who also played a role in fighting for these good things (and whether they did so in greater or lower proportions). He seems to forget the vicious slander that Catholic politicians faced from the Protestant majority in the early 1900s. And he pretends to be entirely unaware that the political divisiveness that he bemoans appears to have been greatly enhanced by the partnership between his GOP and fundamentalist Protestants back when he claims that the church was still strong.

In my opinion, the studies which claim to compare religious and non-religious individuals to determine *scientifically* what the differences exist are a much more interesting form of evidence. The problem is, the most frequently cited studies really do not justify the conclusions that are claimed. Consider, for example, the studies which claim to show that religious people are happier. The way they are conducted is the following: they ask a large sample of people to indicate how happy they are, and they separate out those who attend church regularly from those who do not. And they find, unsurprisingly, that those who attend church regularly report being hap-

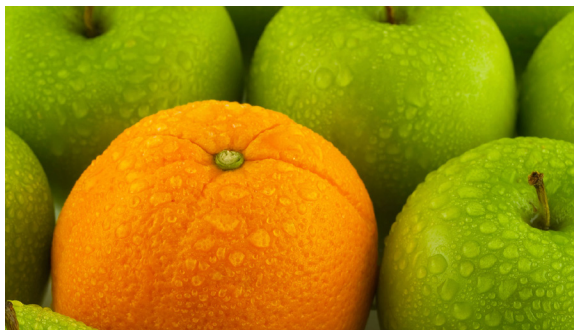


THE CASE AGAINST THE CASE FOR RELIGION (CONT'D)

ALEX KASMAN

pier. This result is to be expected *even if* being religious did not make people any happier at all. One problem with the study as conducted is that it is based on how happy the individuals *report* they are. Since religious people might think that admitting they are unhappy would be an insult to the deity who created this beautiful world just for them, they might be more inclined to say they are happy even when they aren't. A more serious problem with these studies is that it uses regular church attendance as a way to divide the sample into two cohorts. By doing so, the method assures that people who suffer from clinical depression (a disease whose sufferers rarely are able to attend any social or public functions regularly) are counted among the "non-religious," even though they may well have been regular church-goers prior to the onset of the depression.

In the previous paragraph, I have suggested that the method used in those studies *might* create a bias, but I cannot cite evidence to show that this bias actually is responsible for the supposed results. My final argument, however, is one that does have such support. I doubt many people would be surprised to learn that being part of a very small minority in one's community has negative consequences for both happiness and health. What if the relative happiness of the church-goers in the study comes not from an objective difference between the religious and non-religious, but from the fact that the religious individuals were part of the *majority* group in their community? As it turns out, when Jochen Gebauer, Constantine Sedikides and Wiebke Neberich compared various psychological parameters of religious and non-religious individuals in many different countries, they found that the happiness supposedly associated with religiosity only manifested itself in religious countries but could not be found in Europe and Scandinavia, where a majority of people are atheist ("Religiosity, Social Self-Esteem, and Psychologi-



cal Adjustment: on the cross-cultural specificity of the psychological benefits of religiosity" *Psychological Science*, Vol 23 #2 158-160 Jan 2012). Sandra Upton (quoting book author Phil Zuckerman) presents a scenario that helps to make this point clear in the article "Healthy Skepticism" (*Scientific American Mind*, May/June 2012): just as children of atheists in America experience discomfort and possibly even abuse in social settings such as playgrounds, children of devout Christians can experience the same problems at a playground in Denmark.

As you can see, this additional information completely changes the conclusions one can reach from the sorts of studies cited by the NYT authors. So, I am not arguing that these questions should not be asked or that such studies should not be an important part of answering them, only that one must construct the studies so that they will truly answer the question. To find out if religious individuals are more charitable, one cannot compare church-goers to everyone else (to "compare apples-to-apples," one should compare regular church-goers to those who are active members of a group like SHL!) and one cannot count church dues as being a charitable contribution (since the question really is whether they are more likely to give money to other people in need). To find out if superstition is a useful trait, one must consider more than just its effect on golf scores. What if the same additional confidence responsible for improved golf scores also leads to an increased likelihood of dying in a traffic accident or becoming bankrupt from poor investment choices? If these studies were done fairly and produced results that were not complimentary to the non-religious, I would acknowledge the fact and seriously think about what we could do to improve the situation. But, if it turned out that religion was not the source of happiness and morality that its proponents have long claimed it was, I would hope that they would do the same.

THE SEPARATIONIST

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SECULAR HUMANISTS OF THE LOWCOUNTRY

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

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. Contact the editor at newsletter@lowcountryhumanists.org.

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JOIN SHL

SHL is a group of freethinkers who believe in the humanist philosophy. Members come primarily from the greater Charleston, South Carolina, area. 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 South Carolina Progressive Network. Annual tax-exempt membership fees are \$35 (individual) or \$50 (couple or family). Additional donations are always welcome. To join, visit our website at <http://bit.ly/joinshl>, and for more information about our activities, visit <http://bit.ly/shlevents>