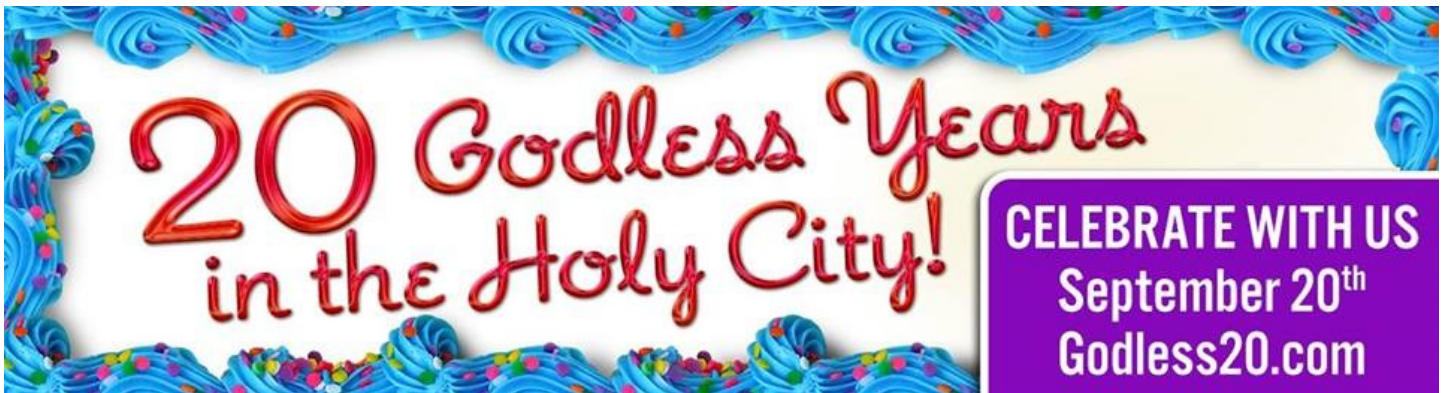


HAPPY BIRTHDAY SHL!!!



SHL is holding its 20th anniversary bash at Cypress Gardens on September 20, 2014, and you're invited! The party will feature food, activities, a silent auction, and a forum hosted by the Post & Courier's Adam Parker. Events before 4:00 are free and open to the public. The private dinner celebration, featuring food and music and cake and special guest Michael Newdow, is for ticket holders only. Currently paid members of SHL get complimentary tickets, and additional tickets are available for purchase at a cost of \$12 each. All SHL guests get complimentary entrance to Cypress Gardens for the day! See page 2 for full details!

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About SHL

The *Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry* was founded in 1994 by a group of local non-theists in Charleston, South Carolina.

Our members are freethinkers of many kinds. We call ourselves agnostics, atheists, skeptics, secular humanists, rationalists and scientific naturalists. We welcome you and all who are interested in participating in our friendly community, either as members or observers.

The purpose of our non-profit, educational organization is to promote the non-theistic, human-centered viewpoint as a valid contribution to public discourse and to strive to maintain the First Amendment guarantee of separation of state and church.

SHL 20th Anniversary Celebration

Saturday, September 20, 2014
Cypress Gardens, Moncks Corner, SC

Come celebrate with us! Events will be held all day. Events prior to 4:00pm are free and open to the public. These will be followed by a private party for SHL members and supporters.

All events will be held at Dean Hall in Cypress Gardens. Those attending our events get free admission to the Gardens. You are encouraged to enjoy the garden's many amenities including hiking trails, swamp tours, butterfly house, and reptile house along with our events!

SCHEDULE

Times are subject to change. Check our [web-site](#) for schedule updates.

Public events:

Public events will take place between 10:00am and 4:00pm and include an "Ask-an-Atheist" informational table, children's activities, and indoor planetarium. From 1:00pm—3:00pm there will be a roundtable forum with SHL's Herb Silverman and local religious and community leaders moderated by *The Post & Courier's* Adam Parker.

Private Party:

Ticketholders will enjoy a private party (see [page 3](#) for ordering information) beginning at 4:00pm. We will start with appetizers and socializing followed by a program with special guest Michael Newdow and a



Oh Valentino

buffet dinner featuring a build-your-own taco bar catered by The Taco Spot (meat, vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-free options will be available).

Then we party! We will have cake, champagne, music by Oh Valentino, and an all-around great time!

GETTING TO CYPRESS GARDENS

A recent rail accident took out the bridge on Cypress Gardens Road, the main road between Monck's Corner and Cypress Gardens. Everyone must arrive via Red Bank Road and Bushy Park Road.



ADMISSION

Everyone attending SHL events gets free admission to the gardens. Feel free to enjoy the amenities including hiking trails, swamp tours, butterfly house, and reptile house.



DINNER TICKETS ARE REQUIRED



Everyone attending the dinner must have a ticket. Members who have paid their 2014 dues get free tickets (1 free ticket for an individual membership and up to 4 free tickets for a family membership). Guest tickets can be purchased for \$12. All children 5 and under are free. In order to give a head count to the caterer, **all tickets must be reserved by September 13!** Reserve your tickets by [clicking here](#), by calling 843-670-0290, or by mailing a check to SHL, PO Box 32256, Charleston SC 29417.

A limited number of tickets may be available for purchase at the door for \$15 (subject to availability). Don't be left out, reserve your tickets today!

BEVERAGES

Tea, soda, and other soft drinks will be provided during dinner along with a free glass of celebratory champagne. Feel free to BYO adult beverages for consumption during the private party.



SILENT AUCTION

Bid on services provided by fellow SHL members along with collectibles and other treasures in a silent auction. Proceeds will help SHL provide another 20 years of being Godless in the Lowcountry!

Have an item or service to donate to the silent auction? Contact Sharon Strong (843-853-3976 or sharonstrong2000@yahoo.com) or Amy Monsky (843-291-8248 or president@lowcountryhumanists.org). You may either arrange to have your donation picked up or bring it with you to the event; but if possible we'd like to have your item(s) in hand by Saturday, 9/13.

MICHAEL NEWDOW

Our celebration includes a presentation by Michael Newdow!



Michael Newdow is an attorney and emergency medicine physician. He is best known for his efforts to have recitations of the current version of the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools declared unconstitutional because of its inclusion of the phrase "under God". Although he delivered a masterful argument to the United States Supreme Court, his case was thrown out due to "lack of standing" as the non-custodial parent.

He also filed and lost a lawsuit to stop the invocation prayer at President Bush's second inauguration and, most recently, he filed a lawsuit to prevent references to God and religion from being part of President Obama's inauguration.

Michael is an atheist and an ordained minister of the Universal Life Church. In 1997, he started an organization called FACTS (First Atheist Church of True Science), which advocates strong separation of church and state in public institutions. He also serves on the Advisory Board of Secular Coalition for America.

We will not be holding a meeting at Gage Hall this month. We hope you will join us for our 20th anniversary celebration!

Upcoming SHL Events

Events sometimes get added after The Separationist is posted. Keep up to date with SHL events by signing up for our [email lists](#) or [meetup](#), or check postings on our [website](#) and [facebook](#) group.

Adopt-a-Highway

Saturday, Sept 6, 2014, 8:50am

Harborview Rd, James Island

The leaves are starting to turn, kids are going back to school and the temperatures are (finally) coming back down. Our volunteer activity for September will be to pick up trash along SHL's adopted stretch of Harbor View Road on James Island.

Join us on Saturday, September 6th at 8:50am in the parking lot of South State Bank (formerly First Federal) at 1011 Harbor View Rd, James Island (next to the Harris Teeter (formerly Pig-gly Wiggly)).



It is often a pleasant walk in the outdoors as well as a chance to talk with fellow volunteers and find strange or funny things

along the road. This is an opportunity for us to make things a little better than they were before and to let people know that Secular Humanists exist, and that we care about our communities. If you have any questions, [email our volunteer coordinators](#).

SHL Movie Club

Saturday, Sept 6, 2014

TBD

Our movie club selection will be made once the movie schedules for this date are published. Please check the [website](#), [meetup](#), [facebook](#), or join the movie club [email list](#) for updated information.



Following the movie we will enjoy dinner at a nearby restaurant.

SHL Happy Hour

Tuesday, Sept 9, 2014, 6:00pm

Liberty Tap Room, 1028 Johnnie Dodds Blvd, Mount Pleasant

Join us for a fun and relaxing evening of stimulating conversation over drinks (alcohol is optional) and food with old and new friends! Everyone is welcome. Don't be shy - come join us!



Upcoming SHL Events cont.

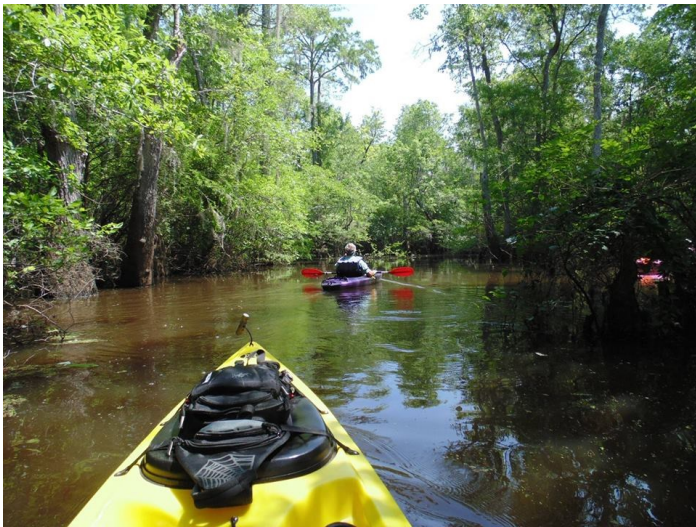
Kayaking in Myrtle Beach

Saturday, Sept 13, 2014, 12:00pm

Peachtree Landing, Socastee SC

For all the kayakers in the group, amateur to pro, we have planned a trip to the inter-coastal waterway near Myrtle Beach where our fellow humanists, Jane and Chris Osheinbein who run Gator Bait Adventure Tours, have graciously opened up their calendar on Saturday, September 13th for a SHL meetup and paddle!

We will be paddling a section of the Waccamaw Blue Trail launching from Peachtree Landing in Socastee SC. We plan on arriving there around noon. And the paddle will take 2-3 hours. The only thing you need to bring is ... yourself! All kayaks, paddles, lifejackets etc will be provided. There will be a \$10 fee to cover these costs. So come join us for an afternoon of fun on the river!



Myrtle Beach Humanists and Freethinkers

Sunday, Sept 14, 2014, 4:00pm

Chapin Memorial Highway, 400 14th Ave N, Myrtle Beach, SC

The Pledge of Allegiance: Its History and the Rights of Citizens with Amy Monsky

Join Amy Monsky as she explores both the history of the Pledge of Allegiance itself along with the legal history surrounding the rights of public school students to participate or not. Amy will explain case history in easy-to-understand language, empowering public school students, their parents, and any people who find themselves where the Pledge is recited in a government institution to better defend their rights should they come under attack.

You probably know that "under God" wasn't in the original Pledge of Allegiance, but do you know that this addition wasn't the only divisive wording decision in its history? The history of the Pledge is an interesting one, and many facts have lost their place in our collective memory. This presentation will tell the story of the Pledge from its inception as part of a marketing strategy to sell flags to public schools to the inclusion of the alienating "under God" wording during the anti-communist McCarthy era.

Its divisive history has landed the Pledge of Allegiance front and center in many legal challenges. Prominently found on the FAQ page of the American Civil Liberties Union, Americans for Separation of Church and State, Freedom From Religion Foundation, and more, the Pledge is no stranger to controversy. Between objections to "under God" and objections to forced allegiance to a country that values freedom of conscience, many people in the secular movement choose to opt out of participation. Standing – or in this case sitting – alone is not always an easy thing to do, especially for students in public schools. Whether due to a lack of understanding at best or a manipulative coercion of values at worst, teachers and administration are not always supportive of students' rights. Many times students lack the knowledge that they have rights and or what to do if those rights have been violated. Monsky will share tips for addressing violations with teachers and administration as well as where to turn when rational communication fails.

Amy Monsky is the executive director for Atheist Alliance of America, a national 501c3 organization that envisions a society that supports and respects a non-theistic world view as well as one that respects and protects the separation of church in state.

Upcoming SHL Events cont.

Girls Night Out

Thursday, Sept 18, 2014, 6:30pm

Barsa Tapas, Lounge & Bar, 830 King St, Charleston

A fun night for girls to socialize! Nursing infants okay, but otherwise adults only, please.

Team Trivia



Wed, Sept 24, 2014, 7:00pm
Steel City Pizza, 1440 Ben Sawyer Blvd, Mt Pleasant

Come out for a night of trivia and socializing! This is a team event and is free.

Our team **Happy Humanists** is officially registered, so our points are cumulative and will be going for season totals.

Team Trivia offers trivia nights at various places throughout the Charleston area on different days and times. We currently play on the **4th Wednesday** in Mt. Pleasant.

Team members are welcome to play using the team name at any Team Trivia night. And if you would like to organize an SHL trivia night in your part of town

(hello, West Ashley!) let us know. Organizers are responsible for checking in using our team name, welcoming players, and using any winnings from the previous week to purchase appetizers for the team. For info, contact president@lowcountryhumanists.org.



SHL Book Club

Sunday, Sept 28, 2014, 4:00pm

Barnes & Noble, 1812 Sam Rittenberg Blvd, West Ashley

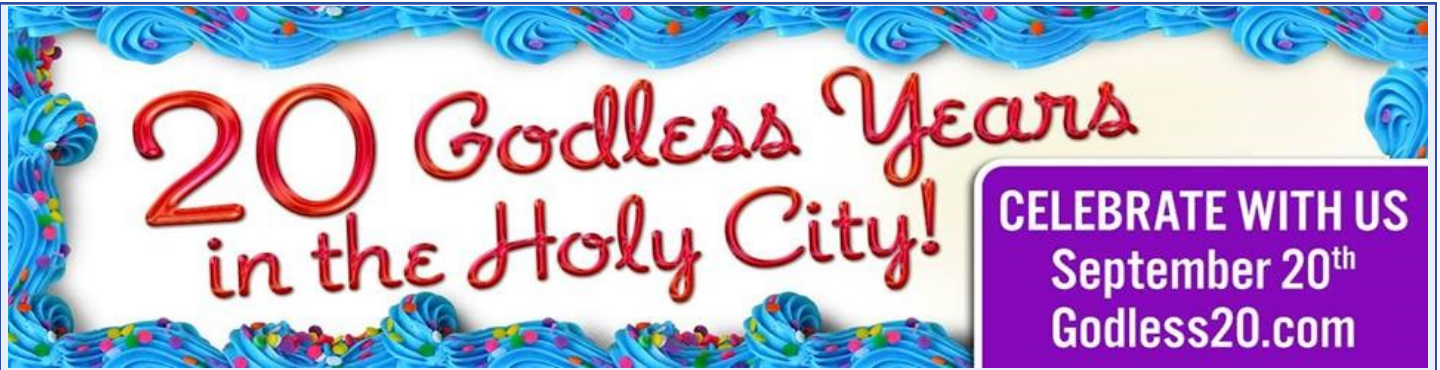
The selection for September is **Zealot** by Reza Aslan. This is a very informative quick read and should generate some great discussion.

As usual we need a facilitator for the book and if you would like to volunteer email Barbara at gardeniabarb1940@gmail.com or John Childs at johnmchilds6909@gmail.com.

It's also time for book suggestions so bring your ideas and email us so we can have a hard copy available during the meeting to browse through.

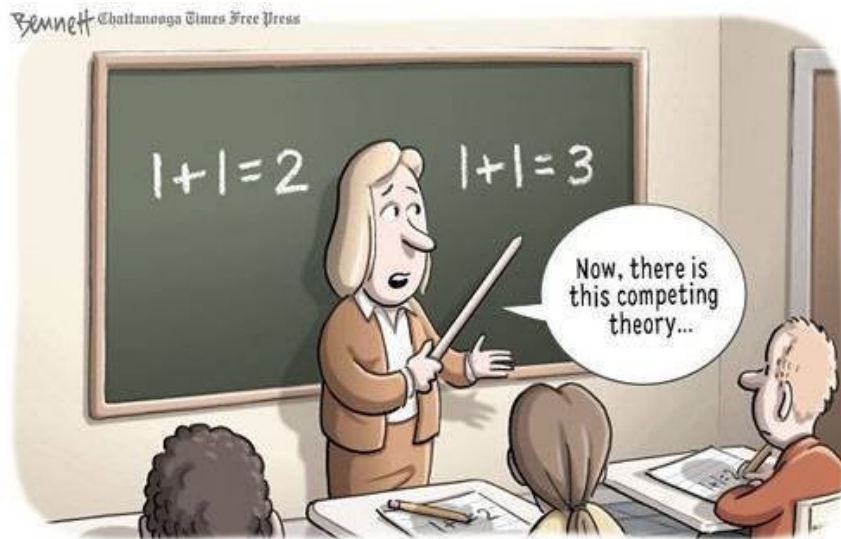
Following the discussion we go out to socialize over a bite to eat at a local restaurant and we need your suggestions at the start of the meeting so we can call for reservations. We try to stay somewhere West of the Ashley but are open to voting for whatever your ideas are.

SHL is affiliated with the Amazon Associates program! Our organization earns up to a 15% commission on items purchased at Amazon.com through the links on our Website. So, if you are buying the book club book (or anything else from Amazon), this is a super-easy way to contribute to SHL! Simply use the link at <http://>

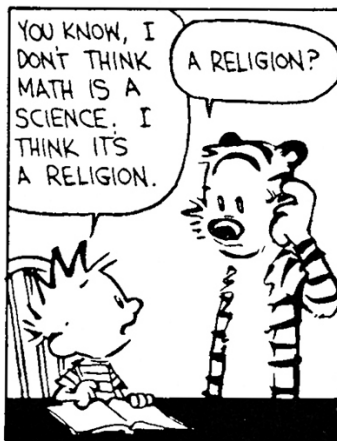


Look for our billboard!

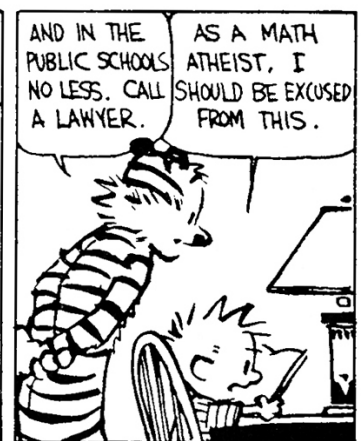
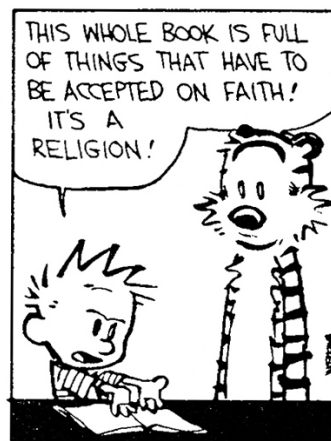
Look for the electronic billboard on I-26 West near Montague Ave. Ours is one of eight rotating messages sure to be seen by motorists as they fight rush hour traffic!



If math was taught like science.



YEAH. ALL THESE EQUATIONS ARE LIKE MIRACLES. YOU TAKE TWO NUMBERS AND WHEN YOU ADD THEM, THEY MAGICALLY BECOME ONE *NEW* NUMBER! NO ONE CAN SAY HOW IT HAPPENS. YOU EITHER BELIEVE IT OR YOU DON'T.



Humanism at Work

by Alex Kasman

Humanists seek more than just achieving fairness and happiness for atheists like ourselves. As [our principles](#) make clear, we want to



eliminate injustice and suffering wherever it exists and whoever it affects. Our group, in particular, takes these goals very seriously and we should be very pleased by what SHL's social action programs have achieved. Our "Charity of the Quarter" program has raised many thousands of dollars for local charities and was cited by Dale McGowan as having helped to give him the idea for his national "Foundation Beyond Belief" (FBB). Our joint team with Camp Quest South Carolina was the *top* fundraising team for Light the Night in 2012. And, for our many volunteer efforts in 2013, including a major project at the Palmetto House family shelter in Summerville, we received the "Gimme Food and Shelter" award from Volunteers Beyond Belief (VBB).

Yes, I am very proud of what SHL's volunteers and donors have achieved. So, when I went to the "Humanism at Work" conference in Chicago in July to accept an award on behalf of SHL (see photo), I did so thinking that our group might be an inspiration for the other attendees. Well, perhaps we were, but mostly it was *me* who found everything and everyone else there to be inspiring. Please, let me share with you what I saw and learned at this conference so that it can hopefully inspire you as well.

Some Amazing Examples

Many of the other people at the conference represented local groups like ours that get involved in fundraising and volunteering for a

variety of charities. However, the list of speakers included many *individual* humanists who have done so much more. Three particularly inspiring examples were: Hemley Gonzalez (winner of FBB's "Heart of Humanism" award) whose reason-based charity is achieving unprecedented success in helping India's poor, Camen Zepp who started the first non-religious soup kitchen (called "Human Beans Together") in Raleigh, NC, and Leo Igwe whose explicitly secular program rescues Africans accused (falsely, obviously) of using witchcraft to bring misfortune on others.

The lesson of these examples is not just that some people can do amazing things to make the world a better place, not just that we can and should help them, but that given the right circumstances each of us could do something amazing, too.

The Power of a Movement

Another inspirational aspect of the conference was the opportunity to see the charitable work of each individual and group not as a million separate little things but collectively as a *joint effort* by all humanists to enact our collective vision of a better world. As Serah Blaine (a lobbyist who received an award for her work for the homeless) said, "we wield the power of a movement". And, when we help each other, as

when David Smalley used his Dogma Debate podcast to raise money for the causes of local groups or when we coordinate our efforts through VBB, the whole is truly more than the sum of its parts.

We Can Do Better . . . And We Will

For me, the most inspiring thing was the discussion of our *potential* to do even more in the future. I do not believe that humanists and other non-believers are any less compassionate, charitable or willing to volunteer to improve conditions for others than our religious counterparts. However, public opinion and even some studies suggest that we fall short when it comes to putting our principles into action.

To a small degree, our apparently poor performance is due to biases in the studies (which lump us together with all of the "nones", so that our efforts are overwhelmed by the inactivity of a large number of very apathetic people who would not self-identify as "humanist"). And, to a small extent, it is because society's bigotry against us sometimes makes it harder for us. (Remember last year when the food pantry in Spartanburg refused to let the Upstate Atheists volunteer there, or in 2011 when the American Cancer Society refused a half-million dollar donation from FBB?)

However, a major focus of the "Humanism at Work" conference was on the parts of the problem that are directly under our control. If we do underperform in charity and volunteerism, it is partly because we lack some of the infrastructure and moti-

Humanism at Work, cont.

vating habits that the major religions have developed over their long histories, and those are things we can fix!

At the conference, we looked at improve-

able to utilize in the future to achieve bigger and better things. Moreover, these organizations have three very interesting sounding new sub-programs that I learned about at the conference. Conor Robinson

I do not have the space in this article to tell you about it all in detail. Another major theme of the conference was the question of how one selects “good” charities using humanistic values, along with our emphasis on reason and evidence. Diversity, in every sense of the word, was not only a topic of discussion at the conference but something that was spectacularly achieved there. And, of course, I met lots of wonderful and interesting people each of whom had a fascinating life story. This conference has left me both proud of what our social action *has* achieved and even more optimistic of what it *will* be able to do in the future. If *you* would like to be a part of these efforts, I would urge you to:

- * Make sure you are on SHL’s [volunteer network mailing list](#) so that you are informed of our activities.
- * Donate to [SHL’s Charity of the Quarter](#) and/or [FBB’s](#) many vetted humanistic charities.
- * Get in touch with SHL’s new volunteer coordinators, Stephanie Greene and Aerin Zimmerman, by writing to volunteers@lowcountryhumanists.org.
- * Consider attending the *next* [Humanism at Work](#) conference, which will be held in Boston in Summer 2015.
- * [Sign up](#) to be part of the Humanist Crisis Responders, a new national network of freethinking volunteers to help in case of an emergency.



The author accepting a (clear) trophy and check from Brittany Shoots-Reinhard of Volunteers Beyond Belief on behalf of SHL at the “Humanism at Work” conference (Chicago, July 2014).

ments we could make in our own organizations, without changing or contradicting our worldview, that would improve the effectiveness of our social action programs. The speakers at the conference had many good suggestions and applied the skepticism and empiricism that is such a key part of our approach to science and claims of the supernatural to the question of how we can improve in this area. It all left me convinced that the *potential* for humanism to alleviate much suffering and injustice in the near future is truly great.

FBB and VBB, themselves relatively new programs, are examples of the sort of infrastructure that our movement will be

has created and had one successful run of a humanist “Peace Corps”-like program called “Pathfinders”. Rebecca Vitsmun (who many of you may remember from the viral video in which she “comes out” to a shocked Wolf Blitzer after her neighborhood in Moore, OK was destroyed by a tornado) has helped FBB/VBB to create a network of crisis response teams. Finally, I was pleasantly surprised to hear about their “Challenge the Gap” project, which seeks to promote joint efforts between humanists and religious groups with whom we share common goals.

But wait, there’s still more

So much more went on at this meeting, but

2014 Atheist Alliance of America Convention

by Brian Murtagh

I attended the 2014 Atheist Alliance of America Conference in Seattle, Washington from Thursday, 7 August to Sunday, 10 August. I found the conference productive, educational and enjoyable.

Other than simply being a regular attendee I was filling a few special roles; I was Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry's Affiliate Council representative, I was the Secretary to AAA's Board of Directors, and I was the incoming editor of Secular Nation magazine.

As a lesson learned at this conference, let me say that while they may seem awkward and vaguely silly at first, Robert's Rules of Order absolutely **rock** for keeping a meeting efficiently on point. Several of the Affiliate representatives had been at prior Council meetings and remarked to me afterward that they'd never seen one proceed so smoothly.

The remainder of the conference was largely devoted to learning and networking, apart from an Affiliate Council strategy session. The speakers were all as amazing as I'd expected them to be. The only small sad disappointment was the absence of Horus Gilgamesh, who had been sent a death threat and who decided that it wasn't worth it to forge ahead, partly for his own safety and to spare his family worry but also so that the conference would not have to bear extra security costs and other attendees would not be put in danger. In solidarity just about every attendee

wore stickers on our ID badges saying "Hello, my name is Horus Gilgamesh!" – a gesture that he has conveyed was deeply appreciated. Rebecca Vitsmun was the first main speaker on Friday, and her speech was both emotionally moving and a great example of using an emotional impetus to



achieve very practical organizational ends. She didn't simply embarrass Wolf Blitzer by failing to be a theist after a tornado wiped out her town, she set about

working with Foundation Beyond Belief to set up a genuinely useful infrastructure to allow on both a local and national level for humanists to respond effectively to natural disasters.

In the first breakout session I chose to attend Mynga Futrell's presentation on "Seeking Influence in Public Schools: A Strategy For Atheists" in which she provided me with a better understanding of how the curricula and textbooks are determined for public schools. The textbooks are mainly determined by four states, California, Texas, Florida, and New York, but there is ample opportunity for affecting curricula at the State and school board level, and she offered some examples of how she'd gotten small but important changes made, often by working in coalition with minority religious groups (Jewish and Muslim, mostly), and some advice on framing issues in ways most likely to be seen as positive and nonthreatening to the Christian majority.

Bob Seidensticker, author of the novel *Cross Examined* and the eponymous blog, spoke after lunch giving a whirlwind tour of the counter-apologetics he specializes in. Pretty much all of the arguments he deconstructed are covered by the characters in the novel, which I recommend. (I fetched my copy from home and he graciously signed it "Bob Seidensticker, or possibly Horus Gilgamesh!") In the afternoon breakout session I attended the presentation by August Brunsman, of the Secular Student Alliance, one of the success stories in the modern free-thought movement. August gave us a picture of how rapidly the SSA has grown, identified the balance between allowing local SSA leaders to tune the program for their own environs and providing solid, standardized support methods to them. He told us about additional SSA-sponsored programs like Secular Safe Space providing a non-threatening place for students to express doubt, and told us about the training programs SSA offers faculty and other interested non-student adults to enable them. He also spoke of the relative difficulties SSA has had moving down the educational ladder from colleges to high schools, with the lesser levels of autonomy available to students at those levels, and about how SSA is trying to bring in more parental involvement at those levels to compensate.

The final work session of the day was Affiliate Strategic Planning, in which we used brainstorming and mind mapping techniques to get some idea of where AAA would like to go for and with affiliates, as well as clarifying what representatives of the Affiliate Council saw as their proper relationship to the Board of

2014 Atheist Alliance of America Convention, cont.

Directors. An unofficial post-session developed out of that meeting for myself and AAA consultant Richard Haynes with valuable insights into practical aspects of both best-practice bylaw writing and producing a viable print magazine being offered by affiliate Brian Allen; we decided that we'd skip the movie in order to continue discussion and develop ideas.

Friday evening wound up with Comedy Night, which was hilarious (especially Ian Harris, who I'd frankly never heard of before but who is a complete riot), followed by an after-party at which I ended up imbibing entirely too much ethanol.

As a result on Saturday I was not running on all cylinders, but I managed to at least be present for Steve Hill's sharing of the intersectionality of being in racial, religious, and class minorities, and Amanda Metskas' explication of the Secular Coalition for America's workings. (I also recorded them for later perusal, as I did all the presentations I attended.)

After lunch Brother Richard Haynes presented on developing online freethinking communities, in which he made what I thought were some very cogent points, especially about being willing to tolerate atheist voices that differ from our own (S.E. Cupp and Bill Maher both being used as examples) and being willing to forgive and move on when one of our own screws up. (There may be some self-interest there though, as Brother Richard confessed that he actively encouraged Richard Dawkins to Tweet more!)

Then there was the presentation

I'd been agog for; I am a major* Steven Pinker fan! He is an even bigger intellectual hero to me than the aforementioned Richard Dawkins, even if he's less popular in the world at large, and he did not disappoint as he clearly and precisely laid out the reasons why religious beliefs were plausible and cogent evolutionary survival strategies or at least explanations, and why the alternate explanations based on religious ideas being factually true did not hold water at all. His points were pellucid, beautifully organized, and compelling. In the Q&A afterward he was poised, thoughtful, and interesting in his elaborations.

Yes, I want to be like Steven Pinker if I ever grow up... and I was first in line to get my books signed! We had a few minutes to chat and as I told him, his books are not only intellectually heavy but physically heavy, yet it was well worth the lug. As he started to sign them he laughed and asked me "Is your name really Horus Gilgamesh?" So I had to explain...

(I did have to skip the Richard Carrier debate, as I desperately needed more sleep by this point; I am a third shift worker! Richard's a friend, so he accepted my excuses! By the way, if we have him as a speaker for SHL at any time we get \$25 off his normal honorarium.)

In the evening of course was the Richard Dawkins Award, which this year went to Rebecca Newberger Goldstein (whose husband is Steven Pinker, so he was kind of a freebie! When Amy introduced him she rattled off an amazing long list of the awards he's received, and Dr. Pinker pointed out that she'd missed one very important one; he

was last year's recipient of the same award his wife received this year!).

She gave an acceptance speech which seemed very much off the cuff, speaking of her upbringing in an Orthodox Jewish family where it was questioned whether even her speaking voice should be kept silent – but as casual and informal as her acceptance was it remained cadenced and interesting throughout. Afterward I made sure to get up to be first in line to get her books signed as well, and ended up enjoying a multi-way conversation with her for the better part of an hour, and she is a *fantastic* conversationalist! When we did finally get around to getting the books signed, she looked at my name tag and said, "Is your name really Horus Gilgamesh?"

The wrap-up the following day was a trip to Chateau Ste. Michelle Winery, Snoqualmie Falls, and Boehm Chocolaterie, and it was lovely indeed, socializing in congenial environs with my fellow freethinkers (and getting extra wine samples in because the pourer used to live in my home town back in England, Banbury). I even made some possible arrangements for future Secular Nation articles, and an exchange program between SN and our sister magazine of the Atheist Alliance International, Secular World.

As I said, productive, educational, and enjoyable!

5 Books All Atheists and Other Outsiders Should Read

Yes, you really should read the Bible. And plenty of Orwell.

By Herb Silverman

Each of the books below changed my worldview and my way of thinking to varying degrees. They are listed in the order I read them — and all but the last I read before the age of 20, when most of us are probably more open to learning about and considering new ideas.



1. The Bible by authors unknown

I “knew” as a trusting child that the Bible

was God’s word, and consequently the most important book in the world. I learned Hebrew in my Orthodox school by reading the Hebrew Bible (which we called Torah). We were praised for our ability to read fluently and follow rituals, but not so much for understanding what we were reading. Later we learned to translate and to converse in Hebrew. And, thankfully, my best Hebrew teachers encouraged us to question. And unlike Ken Ham, I found no answers in Genesis.

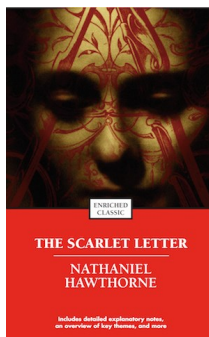
Teachers in my public school in the 1950s used to start the morning by reading biblical passages. One passage from 1 Corinthians 13:11 captured my evolving views about the Bible: “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” Long before Judy Collins had any hit songs, I could say: I’ve looked at Torah from both sides now, from Orthodox

Jew and atheist, too. But it’s Torah’s illusion I recall. I really don’t know Torah at all.



Herb Silverman is founder and President Emeritus of the [Secular Coalition for America](#), author of [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#), and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston.

For better or worse, the Bible and the monotheistic religions it spawned have deeply influenced our culture and the world. For that reason alone, the Bible is worth reading. I regard it like Aesop’s fables, with some moral lessons and universal truths (along with talking animals). My problem isn’t so much with so-called holy books, but with adherents who take them literally. I’ve written here about the value I find in the Bible.



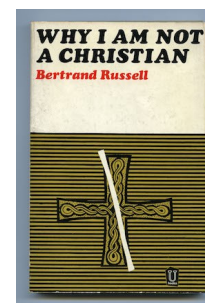
2. The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne

This novel was required reading in my high school sophomore English class, which means I didn’t

expect to like it. I was wrong. I identified strongly with Hester Prynne, who was required to wear a Scarlet A on her chest as punishment for her “sin” of adultery. She refused to reveal that her baby’s father was the respected Reverend Dimmesdale.

Though shunned by her community, Hester lived an exemplary life and raised her daughter to be a fine young woman. Dimmesdale, on the other hand, suffered in silence and died a broken man.

Atheists are familiar with the symbol of the Scarlet A, which has evolved today into a redA that some wear proudly as part of an Out Campaign for atheists. From *The Scarlet Letter* I learned that to be comfortable in your own skin (or letter) is better than hiding who you are in order to please those you don’t respect.



3. Why I am Not a Christian by Bertrand Russell

After first reading Hawthorne’s classic, I wondered about scarlet letters I

might be hiding. I hadn’t told anyone that I no longer believed in God, thinking I might be the only one in this country. Then, in 1958, when I was sixteen, I discovered Bertrand Russell’s *Why I am Not a Christian* in the public library.

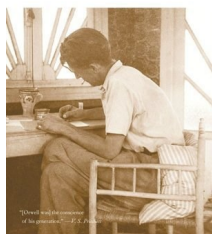
I felt better about myself after

Herb Silverman, cont.

learning that Russell was more than just not a Christian. He was as many “nots” as I was, and brave enough to say so. Bertrand Russell transformed the lives of many in my generation. For the first time we heard articulate arguments that confirmed and gave voice to our own skepticism and doubts. Even some true believers were led on a thoughtful journey toward altered religious states.

Learning that Russell was a logician and a mathematician at least partially inspired me to become a mathematician.

GEORGE ORWELL
A Collection of Essays



4. A Collection of Essays by George Orwell

George Orwell is my favorite author. He was thoughtful, insightful, wrote clearly, and was honest about

himself. I read this collection of essays as a freshman at Temple University, before I had even heard of 1984 or Animal Farm. Three of the essays stood out for me.

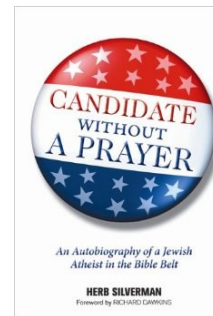
“Shooting an Elephant” begins with “In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people — the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me.” I wondered at the time if I would ever be important enough to be hated by any group of people. That day came in 1990 when I became a candidate for Governor of South Carolina (see book #5 below) to

challenge the state constitutional prohibition against atheists holding public office.

Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language” clarified for me the importance of honest, clear language, and how misleading and vague language can be a tool of political manipulation. Orwell taught me to never use a long word when a short one will do. He said that those who simplify their language would be freed from the worst forms of orthodoxy, and that when you make a stupid remark its stupidity should be obvious, even to yourself. Political language, he worried, was designed to make lies sound truthful. (These thoughts must have been on his mind when he later wrote 1984.)

In the essay “Why I Write,” Orwell explained the motives that inspired him: sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, and political purpose. Those motives spoke to me then, and even more so now.

What I didn’t know at the time I first read Orwell was that he was an atheist. In 1984, the character “Big Brother” appears to be an omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, authoritarian figure who demands absolute obedience. Here’s Orwell’s explanation: “In 1984, the concept of Big Brother is a parody of God. You never see him, but the fact of him is drilled into people’s minds that they become robots, almost. Plus . . . If you speak bad against Big Brother, it’s a Thoughtcrime.”



5. Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt by Herb Silverman

— or possibly your own life story

This last inclusion is not meant to be a shameless plug for my own book, though I’m not above doing that. Through my math profession, I discovered that one of the best ways to learn a subject is to teach it. I also discovered that one of the best ways to learn about yourself is to write about yourself, which is an enterprise I recommend for almost everyone. (It’s also cheaper than therapy.) We should write about what we know well, and you are likely the world expert on yourself.

But writing your life story is something like being a suicide bomber: you only get to do it once.

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