

LOCAL SECULAR ACTIVISM

Graduation Day

The College of Charleston, a state institution, regularly began its graduation ceremonies with a prayer. I submitted a petition in 1990 to College president Harry Lightsey, signed by fifty faculty members objecting to the tradition. He agreed to end the practice for the 1990 graduation, but when the media heard about it, the College received many angry letters. Lightsey then reversed himself. What action could I take next? At the graduation, I sat with the other two hundred faculty members dressed in traditional academic garb. Most faculty bowed their heads during the prayer, but I held up an “Atheist on Board” sign, similar to the familiar “Baby on Board” signs. It was a bold yellow protest raised high above a flat black sea of academic caps.

This, to me, was the perfect dissent. Those with heads bowed would not be inconvenienced, but others would silently applaud. That evening, all three local networks began TV coverage of the graduation with a shot of my sign, which I continued to use at College ceremonies. (I’ve made friends at meetings that begin with a prayer. I look around while most heads are bowed, and invariably catch the eye of other nonprayers.)

The College hired a new president in 1993. Alex Sanders had been a member of the state legislature and chief judge of the South Carolina Court of Appeals. A newspaper article quoted me as being disappointed that we hadn’t chosen a president with a stronger academic background. Ever the politician, Sanders then invited Sharon and me to have dinner with him and his wife Zoe. Alex was charming, but it was obvious we were both trying to win each other over. I suggested academic changes

and discontinuance of prayer at graduation. Sanders understood the issue and said he would do the correct thing. There was no prayer at the next or future graduations, but Alex would start the ceremony in a way he knew would tweak me a bit. He'd typically begin his address, "As our thirteenth president Harrison Randolph once prayed, 'It's a great day for a graduation.'"

Now that's a prayer I can live with.

Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry

Whenever I received media attention during my "campaigns" for governor and notary public, I got unsigned hate mail and anonymous phone calls. But I also received letters and calls of support and appreciation. Many had thought they were the only atheists in South Carolina, and most were closeted for fear of social and family disapproval. These isolated atheists needed a supportive community, so with my list of local names I suggested meeting to see if there was interest in organizing a nontheistic group. And so in 1994 we formed the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry (SHL) with a dozen founding members. About the name: Charleston and its surrounding communities are at sea level, which is why the region is called the Lowcountry. And some SHL members liked to be identified as "atheists," while others preferred "humanists" because of the negative public perception of atheists.

An atheist is without a belief in any gods, while a secular humanist is a nonbeliever who strives to be good without god. These are two sides of the same coin. Atheism describes what we don't believe, while humanism describes what we do believe. Today there are increasing numbers of local secular groups around the country. We all have similar principles and values, sometimes written on paper, but not commandments written on stone. We wanted a close-knit community, where we would have opportunities to make our views and activities known to the wider culture.

Because the SHL at the time it was founded was so unusual in the Bible Belt, we received considerable media attention. Eric Frazier, religion writer for the Charleston *Post and Courier*, interviewed me for an article in 1994 about whether atheists celebrate Thanksgiving, a holiday

when Americans thank God for their blessings. I told him that we gather with friends and family, just like most Americans, and know whom to thank for our Thanksgiving meal. We thank the farmers who cared for the plants and the migrant workers who harvested them. We thank the workers at the processing plant and the truck drivers who brought the food to the grocery store. And finally, we thank our friends for helping prepare the meal and for being present to share in the festivities.

The newspaper got some angry letters about our members not thanking God, but several secular humanists heard about us for the first time and joined SHL. That would become a pattern for us. Whenever we received media attention, we'd hear from people who disliked us and people who joined us. It was easily worth the trade-off.

Another opportunity arose when one of my math students, James Christian, spoke to me after class. He was a member of First Baptist Church, the oldest Southern Baptist church in the South, and had seen an article about the SHL. James said both Southern Baptists and secular humanists probably had unfair stereotypes of each other, and it might be a good idea to get together for discussions. I heartily agreed, and we arranged for several in each group to meet for brunch at a local deli. One of the participants, Dr. Mitch Carnell, was a Sunday school teacher at First Baptist and also wrote a weekly column for the *Charleston Post and Courier*.

The title of Mitch's piece on September 25, 1995, was "Good Conversation Is Lurking If You Look." He wrote, "We were meeting to discuss religious beliefs or the lack of them. We knew in advance that we not only disagreed with each other, but that our views were directly opposite of each other's. Yet, by all accounts, the event was a rousing success. People not only enjoyed it, but also wanted to continue the discussions. Why? There was mutual respect for the individual."

And that was the key. Both groups chose representatives who knew how to disagree without being disagreeable. We continued to meet periodically, and even gave a name to our group: BASH. The acronym stood for Baptists And Secular Humanists, not the tenor of our meetings.

An article about BASH appeared in the December 3, 1995, *Charleston Post and Courier*. In it, First Baptist Pastor Lamar King referred to the intolerance of some in the Religious Right, and wanted to prove to us

that Southern Baptists can be reasonable. They did prove their case. However, shortly thereafter, Lamar King lost his job. Though BASH was not the stated cause, it appeared there weren't enough like-minded Southern Baptists at his church. When theists and nontheists get together, I think there is generally more of an upside for nontheists. We know more about them than they know about us, and none of our people feel threatened when we talk to their people.

Membership in SHL continued to grow and our activities expanded. We had monthly newsletters, speakers, and book club meetings. We had community service projects and took political action when state and local governments illegally promoted religion. We also had potluck dinners and enjoyed socializing with one another. Members were free to partake in as many or few activities as time and comfort level permitted. We tried to create a "big tent," with room for all as long as we treated one another with respect. Some of our members have shirts with my favorite pun, "Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry: A Non-Prophet Organization."

The Charleston *Post and Courier* printed a long "High Profile" feature weekly about distinguished and beloved people in the community. Reporter Sybil Fix decided to break the mold and write a profile about me, which appeared on November 7, 1998. Sybil later told me that the newspaper received more hate mail about this piece than for any other article in its history. Some cancelled subscriptions in protest. The week after the piece appeared, the "Letters to the Editor" section devoted a full page to complaints, with the subheading, "Silverman Profile Riles Readers."

Here are some of the things that riled readers. The profile usually included a standard boxed question that asked, "What guests would you like most to have at a fantasy dinner?" I took the word "fantasy" literally and said, "God, Santa Claus, and the Easter Bunny." Many letters claimed I was making fun of Jesus, whom I did not name and who had probably existed, unlike the other three. Bob Mignone, a math colleague, good friend, and fellow atheist was quoted in the article as saying he had appointed me the spiritual advisor to his children, who were two and five, and that every time I saw them I said, "There is no God." Perhaps my "spiritual advice" worked, since they are both atheists today. Though

I don't think I deserve the credit, readers were especially upset that I was pushing helpless little children toward hell.

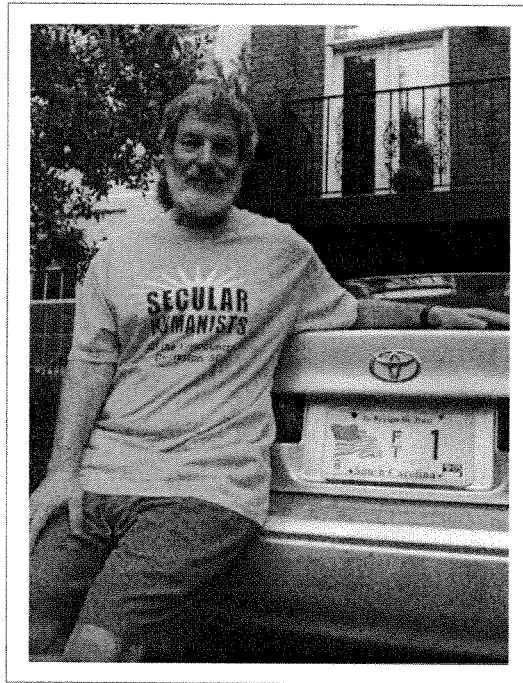
The High Profile piece began with a comment related to the College of Charleston's purchase of an abandoned Catholic school building.

College of Charleston President Alex Sanders recently got a humorous letter asking that the "plus sign" atop the old Bishop England High School be removed. The letter was vintage Herb Silverman, Sanders knew. And while he agreed the cross couldn't stand atop a secular building, he wasn't going to take it down without making a joke or two about Charleston's most famous atheist. "I said, I will just assign the building to Herb Silverman as his office," Sanders jokes. "With the cross at the top and Herb Silverman at the bottom, I thought that would be an equalizing force. I wrote him back, and told him that if he kept quiet about the cross, no one would be nailed to it."

President Sanders and I had exchanged private e-mails about the matter. Neither of us had been offended by the humor, which he chose to make public. However, there was much community outrage about my referring to the cross as a "plus sign." Indignant writers fumed about how I offended Christians. Nobody took offense (myself included) to Sanders' allusion that I might get nailed to the cross for my behavior.

President Sanders frequently put his humor on public display. He sometimes showed me his written responses to phone calls or letters asking that I be fired. Here's what Sanders wrote to a Christian who told him to fire me or repent for allowing me to teach at the College: "I repent for a lot of things, but Professor Silverman is not one of them. He is a fine professor of mathematics. His personal beliefs, or lack thereof, have nothing to do with his teaching ability. Even if his views did carry over into the classroom, no harm would come of it. The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ does not need my protection or yours from Herb Silverman. To suggest that it does is the ultimate blasphemy. Fearing the Lord, as I do, I would not dare suggest any such thing. Why don't we instead pray for Herb? After all, God loves him just as he loves you and me."

Dave Munday, a new religion writer for the *Post and Courier*, wrote a full-page story on February 24, 2002, about how atheists say morality and good works guide their lives, and that we don't need a belief in God to be moral. There were photos of several SHL members picking up



*My car and I trust reason to get us where
we need to drive.*

trash along a highway, and the article mentioned other good works some of our members did. Whether or not people joined SHL, we wanted to change some hearts and minds of our fellow South Carolinians about how people can be good without god.

Reason and God

When the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry learned in 2003 that South Carolina offered license plates at no extra charge with the motto “In God We Trust,” we looked into challenging it as an unconstitutional government endorsement of religion. An attorney advised us we couldn’t win, since that is now our national motto. So one of our members, Bill Dusenberry, suggested we request tags from the Department of Motor Vehicles with the motto “In Reason We Trust.” Other organizations and schools had special tags, for which a fee was imposed. We paid the extra

fee and our tags were finally approved. Had we been turned down, we were ready to publicize that South Carolina promotes God, but opposes reason.

Atheist Student Group

A student named Kate Martin came to my office in 1998 and asked about starting a group at the College of Charleston similar to the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry. I was thrilled and agreed to be its faculty advisor. Despite attempts by a few Christian students in the Student Council to oppose giving official club status to the Atheist/Humanist Alliance, the new AHA prevailed. When the group first met, several students talked about friends or roommates who now shunned them because of their nonbelief. These atheist students came to meetings because they needed a supportive community. Gradually attitudes at the College of Charleston have changed and now students worry far less about becoming unpopular because of openly being atheists. I've heard students in 2011 say they joined the club because atheist students are pretty cool. They are, but they were also cool in 1998. I'm encouraged by the younger generation's wider acceptance of the diversity in our society.

Working in a Coalition

In 2001, SHL joined the South Carolina Progressive Network, which formed to counter an increasingly conservative state government and social climate. The Progressive Network contained more than fifty state organizations, including groups like Charleston Peace, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Planned Parenthood, Alliance for Full Acceptance, Alliance for Fair Employment, Environmentalists, Inc., S.C. Hispanic Outreach, S.C. AFL-CIO, and South Carolinians for Abolishing the Death Penalty. We didn't agree on all issues, but we were all outside mainstream South Carolina and usually opposed by the Religious Right. We understood that people are more likely to listen to a network than to one lone group.

Here's an example. In 2003, the Progressive Network sponsored a "Meet the Candidates" forum prior to a Charleston City Council election, and each group submitted a question for the candidates. Our question was

this: “As you know, City Council starts meetings with a prayer. Since you will represent all your constituents, not just religious believers, will you consider periodically allowing nonbelievers to give the invocation?”

Two candidates indicated they would, and both were elected. One took me to lunch, and told me his religious views were similar to mine but that he didn’t want to take the political risk of inviting me to give an invocation. I respected him for his honesty, if not his courage. The other, an African-American who told me he was religious, also invited me to lunch. He wanted my assurance that I wouldn’t make fun of religion. He then asked what I thought about reparations for descendants of slaves, which I knew he favored. I told him I thought the government should help people in need, but that I didn’t favor reparations. To my surprise, he smiled, gave me a high five, and said: “I like you. You’re not just one of those knee-jerk liberals who agree with everything I say.”

Councilman Kwadjo Campbell then invited me to give the council invocation on March 25, 2003. I felt this would be an opportunity for atheists to gain some community respect, so I carefully prepared and delivered the following inclusive invocation:

Thank you for this opportunity to invoke a minority point of view. Each of us is a minority in some way. It might be race, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, or any other aspect in which we may be regarded as different. Each of us is also part of some majority. It is when we wear our majority hats that we need to be most mindful of how we treat others. We must pledge our best efforts to help one another, and to defend the rights of all of our citizens and residents.

What divides us is not so much our religious differences in this diverse country, but the degree of commitment we have to equal freedom of conscience for all people. We are gathered today, both religious and secular members of our community, with the shared belief that we must treat our fellow human beings with respect and dignity.

In this invocation, I don’t ask you to close your eyes, but to keep your eyes constantly open to the serious problems that city government can solve or improve. I don’t ask you to bow your heads, but to look up at what you can accomplish by applying your considerable talents and experience to the issues that confront us.

As you work together on behalf of all who live in this city, may you

draw strength and sustenance from one another through reason and compassion. I'd like to close in a bipartisan manner by quoting from two presidents I greatly admire—one a Republican and the other a Democrat.

First, the Republican: "When I do good, I feel good; when I do bad, I feel bad. That is my religion." Abraham Lincoln.

And now, the Democrat: "It's remarkable how much you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit." Harry S. Truman.

Nobody who heard my invocation was offended by it. However, when Mayor Joseph P. Riley stood to introduce me before a large crowd, half the council members (seated on the stage at the front of the room) walked out and did not return until I had finished the invocation, just before all recited the Pledge of Allegiance. As the protesting council members said the Pledge, they turned toward me and bellowed the words "under God."

Sharon and I remained at the meeting for about half an hour. As we went to the car, she said the surprise walkout had taken her breath away. I too felt shocked. Just as I thought we were beginning to gain some respect in our community, this had happened. But then I saw how I might be able to turn these lemons into lemonade. The following day I phoned a reporter from the Charleston *Post and Courier*. I told him which council members had walked out and suggested that his readers and I would like to know why. The reporter followed up immediately, and here's how the council members justified their action in an article he wrote for the paper.

Councilman Jimmy Gallant: "The fool says in his heart, there is no God."

Councilman Wendell Gilliard: "An atheist giving an invocation is an affront to our troops, who are fighting for our principles, based on God."

Councilman Robert George: "He can worship a chicken if he wants to, but I'm not going to be around when he does it."

To this last, the reporter printed my response, "Perhaps Councilman George doesn't realize that many of us who stand politely for religious invocations believe that praying to a god makes no more sense than praying to a chicken. At least you can see a chicken."

Several days later, six favorable letters, some from Christians, appeared in the Charleston *Post and Courier*. It was extraordinary to see Christians side with atheists in South Carolina, against other Christians. And there

was this letter from Dot Scott, president of the Charleston branch of the NAACP:

I read with disbelief the actions of our councilmen who walked out of an official meeting during the invocation by Herb Silverman simply because of his religious views. It is most difficult for me, a Christian African-American female, who has probably experienced every kind of prejudice and intolerance imaginable, to understand an act that was not only disrespectful, but also unquestionably rude by folks elected to represent all of the citizens, regardless of race, creed, color, religion or sexual orientation. It is most regrettable that during a time when the fight is so fierce to have all citizens' rights protected and respected, some of us would neglect to do the same for others. When any elected official demonstrates such lack of tolerance, especially while performing his official duties, those of us of conscience must speak out and voice our outrage.

(Four years later, Dot Scott was a guest at a dinner party Sharon and I had. We exchanged stories about how the Religious Right treats our respective constituencies, though clearly African-Americans have it much worse than atheists in South Carolina. She told a shocking story about a fund for families of the nine Charleston firefighters who had died in a furniture store fire on June 18, 2007. Some potential contributors wanted to give only if they could earmark their donations to the *white* firefighters. Dot said that when bad things used to happen in South Carolina, the consoling comment would be "Thank you, Mississippi." She opined that this comment is no longer operative, since South Carolina may now be worse than Mississippi. I looked at her and responded, "Dot, I've lived here long enough to know the real expression, so please feel free to say it correctly." She thanked me for not being offended by the phrase "Thank God for Mississippi," and I thanked her for recognizing that not all people are religious.)

The *Post and Courier* gave me the opportunity to write an op-ed about the council walkout. Here's an excerpt: "In recent years, Charleston has taken steps to become a progressive city that celebrates, rather than fears, its diversity. The walkout, however, vividly shows that we are still engaged in one of the last civil rights struggles in which blatant discrimination is viewed as acceptable behavior. Of course, bigotry exists everywhere, but it is especially lamentable when public acts of

intolerance at government functions are later defended in the media by government officials.”