

The Minnesota Atheist

Minnesota Atheists

Established 1991

Positive Atheism in ActionSM

Volume 18 Number 2

February 2008

“What a Difference a Year Makes: An Update From Your Lobbyist in Congress”

Sunday, February 17 meeting... New location: Ridgedale Library

Lori Lipman Brown, director of the Secular Coalition for America (secular.org), returns to update us on how the past twelve months have catapulted atheists into an even more prestigious position among members of Congress, theistic allies, and the public.

From the announcement of Rep. Pete Stark as the first “out” nontheist member of Congress, to the inclusion in the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the nation’s premiere civil rights organization, the Secular Coalition for America is taking the mission to increase atheist visibility and respectability to the next level. Lori will also update us on the hottest church/state topics in Congress in 2008 and how we can take action.

While she is here, Lori will be interviewed twice on our “Atheists



Lori Lipman Brown,
Director of the Secular Coalition for America

Talk” radio. The interviews will take place live in-studio on Sundays, February 17 and 24, 9-10 a.m., AM 950 KTNF (or stream live at AirAmericaMinnesota.com/listen).

Lori will also be making appearances St. Cloud, Mankato, Morris, and Rochester. (Visit our website, MinnesotaAtheists.org, or call 612-588-7031, for her complete schedule.)

Prior to Lori’s presentation, we will hold our annual elections (see candidates’ statements on pages 4-6). We will be trying something new this month: holding our business meeting first

Upcoming events

Sundays, 9-10 a.m. - “Atheists Talk” on Air America Minnesota radio. AM 950 or stream live at AirAmericaMinnesota.com/listen. Studio call-in line: (952) 946-6205.

Sun., Feb. 17, 1-3:30 p.m. - Lori Lipman Brown, director of the Secular Coalition for America. [Ridgedale Library](http://RidgedaleLibrary). (See left.)

Feb. 17-24 - Lori Lipman Brown makes numerous appearances in Minnesota. (See MinnesotaAtheists.org and page 3.)

Mar. 19-23 - American Atheists national conference in Minneapolis. (See insert.)

so that after the main presentation we can go straight into a group discussion and then to dinner.

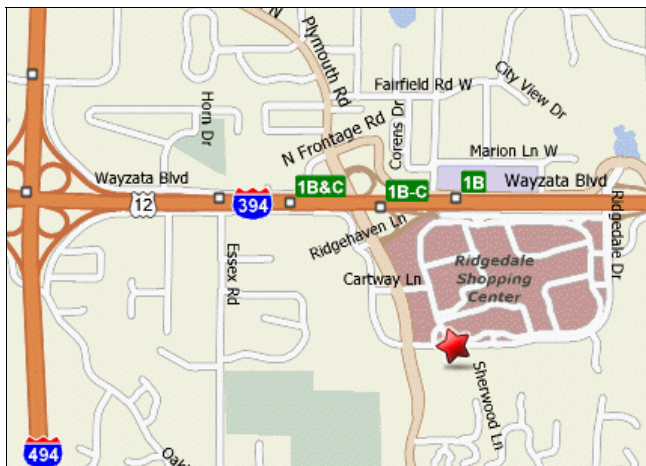
New Location

Ridgedale Library
12601 Ridgedale Dr.
Minnetonka, MN 55305

Sunday, Feb. 17, 1:00-3:30 p.m.

1:00-1:15 - Social
1:15-1:45 - Business/elections
1:45-2:00 - Social
2:00-3:00 - Presentation
3:00-3:30 - Social/discussion

4:00 p.m. - Dinner
Wanderer’s Garden
13059 Ridgedale Dr.
Minnetonka, MN 55305



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**Building Fund:
\$96,265.37**

Honorary Members

**Dan Barker
Gerald Erickson, PhD
Annie Laurie Gaylor
Dick Hewetson
Robert M. Price, PhD**

**MNA Meetup members: 209
Life memberships: 27**

Minnesota Atheists Mission Statement

Minnesota Atheists is dedicated to building a positive atheist community that actively promotes secular values through educational programs, social activities, and participation in public affairs.

The Minnesota Atheist

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**Minnesota Atheists practices
positive, inclusive, active, friendly
neighborhood atheism in order to:**

- Provide a community for atheists;
- Educate the public about atheism; and
- Promote separation of state and church.

President's Column

Claiming the moral high ground

By George Kane

As I am term limited by Minnesota Atheists' bylaws, this is my last President's Column. It has been fun to serve such a dynamic and growing organization at a time when atheism has sprung into the public consciousness as a respectable and even

compelling world view. We still have far to go, however. We must shatter the age-old stigma of atheism, so that every skeptic and freethinker can come out of the closet without fear or shame. We must also find the voice to lead the culture onto new paths of rational civilization.

The expression 'family values' seems finally to have lost most of its political cachet. It has become a token for opposition to the reproductive and economic rights of women, to the social acceptance of gays and legal recognition for their marriages, and for displays of government endorsement of Christianity, objectives all in declining favor. But I do have to commend conservative Christians for arguing that questions of ethics should be significant considerations in the



George Kane

debate of political issues.

Too often the secular opposition to Christian moralizing has been content merely to condemn their prurient interest in other peoples' sex lives. This surely is a necessary response, but it invites the identification of secularists with pornography,

sexual irresponsibility and the coarsening of culture.

Atheism is not an ethical system, but it is compatible with several philosophies that do not depend on divine moral decrees. Atheists can be Utilitarians or Rationalists, or they may simply introduce humanistic assumptions in opposition to god-proclaimed moral laws. There is no one way that every atheist must conceptualize morality. For this reason, we too rarely hear atheists speak to moral questions. We know that perfectly reasonable, solid atheists sometimes follow very different reasoning.

Christians are quick to presume that they are secure in the moral high ground, yet there is no more a definable Christian morality than there is an atheist morality. One need only

look at the Mennonite position on conscientious objection to war, the Catholic position on capital punishment, liberal views of contraceptive use in several mainstream Protestant denominations, and even support for equal rights for gays in the United Church of Christ to see that the religious right has no copyright on Christian values.

But the failure of atheists to present a compelling moral vision has made it too easy for Christians to brand us as amorality concerned only with our selfish interests. I've heard members of Minnesota Atheists argue that we should initiate community service projects to demonstrate our humanitarian concern, but that falls far short of a moral purpose to inspire commitment.

I hope that in the near future, writers emerge who are able to impress the stamp of Utilitarianism on atheism just as Darwin stamped it with the seal of science. I know of no moral standard more compelling than the greatest good for the greatest number. It is a far more worthy banner than "family values" to guide our nation's political direction.

Lori Lipman Brown's Minnesota Visit

Sun., Feb. 17, 9-10 a.m. – "Atheists Talk" radio.

Sun., Feb. 17, 2 p.m. – MNA meeting, Ridgedale Library. (See page 1.)

Mon., Feb. 18, 7 p.m. – Brown Hall, Room 143 (auditorium), St. Cloud State University. Sponsored by Friends Free of Theism.

Tues., Feb. 19, 7:30 p.m. – Trafton Central (science building), Room 121 (lecture hall), MN State University, Mankato. Sponsored by Campus Atheists and Agnostics.

Wed., Feb. 20, time? – University of Minnesota, Morris. Exact location to be announced. Sponsored by PZ Myers of Pharyngula science blog: scienceblogs.com/pharyngula.

Thur., Feb. 21, 7 p.m. – Coffman Memorial Union, 3rd floor, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. Sponsored by Campus Atheists, Skeptics, and Humanists (CASH). (cashumn.org)

Fri., Feb. 22, 11-11:30 a.m. – "Catalyst: Politics and Culture" KFAI radio; FM 90.3 Mpls., FM 106.7 St.

Paul. (kfai.org/node/57?page=0%2C3)

Sat., Feb. 23, 10 a.m. – Nokomis Recreation Center, 2401 E. Minnehaha Pkwy., Mpls. Sponsored by Humanists of Minnesota (humanistsofmn.org)

Sat., Feb. 23, 3 p.m. – Rochester Public Library, 101 2nd St. S.E., Rochester, MN 55904. Sponsored by Rochester Area Freethinkers (RAFT).

Sun., Feb. 24, 9-10 a.m. – "Atheists Talk" radio.

Presenting the Candidates

The following people are candidates for positions on our board of directors. Two people who were nominated at our January meeting, Matthew Richardson for Chair and Vanita Mishra for Director-at-Large, have since withdrawn. Thus all of the following candidates are running unopposed

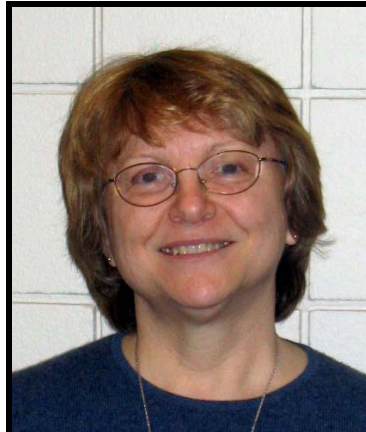


**Candidate for President:
August Berkshire**

Three of the biggest projects we will undertake this year are our new radio show, being the local hosts for the American Atheists conference, and the possible purchase of a building. I have been very involved in these projects and I look forward to their success. I have good experience dealing with the public and the media on the topic of atheism.

I serve on the boards of directors of the Humanists of Minnesota, Camp Quest of Minnesota, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and am a former vice president of Atheist Alliance International.

I have been active in the atheist movement since 1984. I am in the center of the continuum between older members and younger members. As the organizer and co-moderator of our MNA Meetup, I am in a good position to help recruit new people into our organization. After we get our Minnesota Atheists Center, we can work on getting ourselves an atheist retirement home!



**Candidate for Associate
President: Cynthia Egli**

I look forward to serving the membership of Minnesota Atheists for another year as Associate President. My focus continues to be on assuring the highest levels of ethical conduct on the Board as well as a firm but compassionate representation of atheism to the public.

It is important that we are clear, yet tactful, in our communication about the fact that atheists contribute a healthy balance of reason and compassion to our communities, hold high ethical standards and deserve the same respectful treatment that is or should be given to all persons of good will living among us.

I support continuing and expanding outreach, membership growth and the effort to fund a home for atheism in the Twin Cities.



**Candidate for Chair:
Steve Petersen**

As a founding member and a candidate for Chair of the Board, this is a thrilling time to be a member of Minnesota Atheists. Our public presence is opening up new avenues of support and growth. Cable television: 20 years of production. Podcasts: enable the recording of speakers and enhance the cable productions. Atheists Talk radio program: An hour of atheist's views, paid for by a combination of donations and advertisements. Booths, parades, cleaning the highway and Day of Reason at the Capitol, build friendships and public relations. Any inquiring mind can find us on the Web page to view information and connect to multiple organizations and individual voices for atheism. The Minnesota Atheist newsletter: A living history of our organization and activities of our dedicated members available in printed or electronic versions. The most exciting is yet to come – the day we open the Minnesota Atheists Center!



**Candidate for Associate
Chair: Bruce Honnigford**

I have been an active member of Minnesota Atheists for many years and have held the offices of Promotions Director, Director-at-Large and Associate Chairperson for the organization. I have been a key player in the Atheists Talk cable TV show, the Freethought Follies, as well as attending many of our events. I am thrilled to be able to contribute my performing talents to our new Atheists Talk radio program and it has received very positive responses.

Every year we add more members, increase our resources and expand our voice in the Twin Cities and across the nation. We provide several valuable services to the Atheist community. I am very pleased to have the privilege of continuing to contribute in this special way and look forward to developing more of my talents in order to assist the Atheist movement during this exciting time in our history.



**Candidate for Treasurer:
Andy Flamm**

I am seeking the position of treasurer for Minnesota Atheists in order to offer my skills and energy to help our organization grow. I have a small business background and am currently the assistant treasurer, so I am qualified to carry out the duties of this position.

Perhaps more importantly, I look forward to serving on the board once again so I can help guide our dynamic organization as we gain members and influence in society. Buying our own building is getting closer to reality each month, our Atheists Talk radio show is up and running, and all signs point toward a positive future for Minnesota Atheists.

I hope to meet and get to know as many of our members as I can during my tenure. Please feel free to contact me by email, phone or – even better – in person to discuss any comments or concerns you have about our finances or any other issues. Thanks!



**Candidate for Secretary:
George Kane**

I am running for secretary, to reprise a role I held for several years, as our term limit bylaw prohibits me to continue as president. I served as the chair the two preceding years, joined Minnesota Atheists twelve years ago, and have been elected to the Board of Directors for the last ten. I have a record of service to and outreach beyond the atheist community.

I am a regular on “Atheists Talk,” both on cable TV and on radio, and was also a frequent interviewer on “Freethought Forum.” In 2000, I started the Freethought Toastmasters Club in Saint Paul, the second Toastmasters Club in the nation formed for the development of Freethinkers. For the last few years, I have written the “News and Notes” column in the newsletter on church/state separation issues.

I graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in 1970 with a Bachelor’s Degree in philosophy.

Get your full color newsletter at the speed of light!

Increase the effectiveness of your Minnesota Atheists membership dues – switch from a paper to an online newsletter.

It costs us about \$22 per year per person to print and mail a paper version of our newsletter. It costs us

nothing to e-mail an electronic pdf version. You’ll receive the electronic version about a week sooner than the paper version and it will be in full color.

If you’re interested in making the switch from the paper to the elec-

tronic version of our newsletter, please contact editor@mnatheists.org. We thank the many people who have made the switch so far.



Candidate for Director-at-Large: Kristine Harley

In the past year, atheists have become much more visible to Americans, who act as if they have suffered some sort of collective amnesia, forgetting our presence in American literature (Twain, Asimov, Lovecraft), in the public sphere (Darrow, Cady Stanton, Gates) and, particularly in the 1950s, as a boogeyman in the American psyche. The shock that the “new atheism” has caused in our national discourse is, while comical, an opportunity.

As a writer I strive to embody the words of Terentius: “I am a human being, so nothing human is alien to me,” and as a student in Library and Information Science I am concerned with the preservation of texts in which I have no faith. This apparent paradox is resolved because I find human beings – their art, music, hopes, and fears – to be far more interesting than the deities in which they believe, and I hope someday everyone will.



Candidate for Director-at-Large: Bjorn Watland

You’ve probably seen me at a few events over the last year. While I have been a member for less than one year, I feel passionately about the mission of Minnesota Atheists, and know there is value in promoting “Positive Atheism in Action.”

We are a minority, and it can be hard to imagine what it would be like for a child to believe there are no gods, despite what his or her family and friends believe.

I know we can be a great social network of adults, but we can also be there for parents and children who do not feel welcome. I want the atheist point of view to become accepted as valid and our arguments to stand on their own merits, regardless of our theological position, or lack of one.



Candidate for Director-at-Large: Jeannette Sorensen

I currently serve on the board for Camp Quest as Chair of the Volunteer Committee. As a younger woman, I seek to attract people my own age to contribute to the diversity of Minnesota Atheists.

I have a vision for the organization that includes even more involvement in the community, including charitable support of either time or money, in the name of Minnesota Atheists. I see this as a good way to spread “Positive Atheism in Action.” While we cannot contribute as greatly as other organizations, by supporting charitable events we begin to dispel a myth about atheists that we don’t care about the community.

My goal for Minnesota Atheists is for us to be seen as caring members of the community and not outcasts to be feared.

Freethought Cryptogram

By George Kane

“NSP EFMMSJ ESMJKSU NSPK YDQJBMN. NSP EFM SMUN ESMJFBM BJ.”

– EKBQ ESUUBMQOSKJW, MGU ESXXLMJFJSK

Last month’s answer: “I do everything in my power to warn people against faith itself, not just against so-called ‘extremist’ faith.” – Richard Dawkins

Treasurer's Report, January 1-31, 2008

**By Andy Flamm,
Assistant Treasurer**

Building Fund: \$2,645.57

Robin Anderson	\$ 25.00
Cynthia Egli	\$ 20.00
Nuzi Haneef	\$ 50.00
Kevin Hardisty	\$ 20.00
Guy Harper	\$ 50.00
Brian Knoblock	\$750.57
Vanita Mishra	\$ 25.00
Shirley Moll	\$ 25.00

Randy Q.	\$500.00
Jean & Tom Riddering	\$ 50.00
Bjorn Watland	\$ 55.00
James Whitney	\$1,025.00
Vern Young	\$ 50.00

Radio Fund: \$2,050.00

August Berkshire	\$2,000.00
Steve Petersen/ Shirley Moll	\$ 25.00
Bjorn Watland	\$ 25.00

**Visibility (General) Fund:
\$1,105.00**

August Berkshire	\$100.00
David Bicking	\$100.00
George Kane	\$100.00
Robert Muldoon	\$ 65.00
Steve Peterson/Shirley Moll	\$ 75.00
Randy Q.	\$500.00
Richard Schauer	\$100.00
Michael Toft	\$ 15.00
Vern Young	\$ 50.00

Minnesota Atheists Building Fund



300 Club

The 300 Club was established by Minnesota Atheists at the suggestion of our member Rod Monroe. Our goal is to get 300 people to pledge to give us \$1,000 each over a four-year period (an amount that averages \$5 per week per donor) to raise a total of \$300,000 for our Building Fund.

The following people have joined the 300 Club so far. We will continue to publish this list as it grows. Numbers in parenthesis indicate multiples of \$1,000. When at least \$1,000 of the pledge has been paid, the person's name will be highlighted in bold.

To join the 300 Club, contact our new treasurer, Andy Flamm, at (612) 782-0716 or treas@mnatheists.org.

- Rod Monroe**
- Kathy Alme
- Robin Anderson
- Anonymous
- August Berkshire (2)
- Charles Boltuck
- Dean Borghorst
- Jack Caravela
- Dan Carnicom
- Richard & LaGretta Dean
- Tom Dooley
- Cynthia Egli
- Norman Ehrentreich
- Erik Englebretson
- Andy Flamm
- Eric Frame
- Dorothy French
- Kevin Hardisty
- Kristine Harley
- Guy Harper
- Mike Haubrich
- Bruce Honnigford

- Laura Hutt
- Geri Jensen**
- Ron Julien
- George Kane
- Brian Knoblock (1+2)**
- James Koran
- June Haiyan Li**
- Christopher Matthews
- Vanita Mishra
- Shirley Moll
- Ted Nagel
- Bob & Marilyn Nienkerk
- Bill Paulson**
- Steve Petersen
- Jerry Rauser**
- Matthew Richardson (3)
- Tom Riddering
- Lee Salisbury**
- Paul Schenck (4)**
- Bob Schmitz
- Alvin Shimek**
- Jon Strand**

- Bill Talmage
- Georgia Tsoi
- Bjorn Watland
- Jim Whitney**
- Susan & John Wiik
- Rachel Wilson**
- Fern & Bob Wodtke
- Jeff Wolfe
- Vern Young
- [Your name here!]

**Total pledged so far:
\$61,000.**

Total pledges fully paid so far: \$15,000.

Oppose House Resolution 888

By George Kane

The very first segment of our first radio program (Jan. 13, 2008) was a discussion of a resolution recently introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives that would endorse Christianity's value to America and its history.

You can view the text of this resolution at <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c110:H.RES.888>;, which is linked on our website. There is an excellent analysis available online at <http://www.talk2action.org/story/2008/1/4/24725/53989> that shows how much historical deceit is written into this bill.

The defeat of this resolution should be important to every American who values the separation of church and state. Please write to your Congressperson to let him or her know that you strongly oppose this resolution. One Minnesota Representative, Democrat Betty McCollum of the 4th District, is on the committee to which this resolution is currently referred. It is important to write also to her, to ask her not to let this bill reach the House floor.

I submitted the following letter to Rep. Betty McCollum:

Please oppose H Res 888, currently before you on the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, which would officially recognize an exaggerated and misleading role of Christianity in the founding of the United States and in deciding its acts of government. I believe that this resolution would constitute an endorsement of religion that would violate the government neutrality required by the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

I am particularly displeased with the third resolve statement, which "rejects, in the strongest possible terms, any effort to remove, obscure, or purposely omit such history



George Kane

from our Nation's public buildings and educational resources." The Establishment Clause must be understood to mean not only that government may not prefer one religion over another, but that it must not prefer religion over non-religion.

There are attempts across the country to imprint government with a Christian brand by placing religious symbols such as crosses and Christmas nativity scenes, and dogmas such as the Ten Commandments, on display in public buildings and parks. The courts have established guidelines for such displays to restrain government from any acts of establishment, to ensure that government remains strictly neutral with regard to religion. Clearly the intent of this resolution is to oppose those guidelines and the prohibition against endorsement of Christianity.

The first resolve statement is misleading in its affirmation of "the rich spiritual and diverse religious history of our Nation's founding and subsequent history, including up to the current day." The whereas clauses of H Res 888 issue no hint of praise for diversity, but effusive praise for one religion only, Christianity.

The portrayal of history in these whereas clauses is hardly factual, but rather a highly selective and biased account driven by the intent to propagandize rather than to educate. I recommend for your consideration a detailed analysis at <http://www.talk2action.org/story/2008/1/4/24725/53989> of the fraudulent historical claims of many of these whereas clauses.

I am afraid that too many Representatives will casually regard this resolution as a benign ceremonial recognition, rather than as the ideologically driven cudgel of a culture

war. Congress should not usurp from historians and educators the role of verifying and interpreting our nation's story. Please stop H Res 888 before it reaches the House floor.

– George Francis Kane, President, Minnesota Atheists

Following is an excerpt from a press release from the Secular Coalition of America concerning H Res 888:

The Secular Coalition would welcome the unbiased teaching of America's religious history, but this resolution presents such a distorted version of that history, real education can't possibly be its goal.

The fact is that the "spiritual and religious history of our Nation's founding and subsequent history" is rife with persecution against Catholics, Jews, Muslims, atheists and other minorities. The Puritans, for example, not only burned witches at the stake, but they also tortured and hanged Quakers.

In 19th Century Philadelphia, Catholic children in public schools were forced to read the Protestant Bible, and their churches were burned when they resisted. Various groups gained political power on explicitly Christian platforms, such as the Know Nothings' anti-Catholic campaign, and the Ku Klux Klan's political and violently brutal campaigns against Jews, Catholics, religious liberals and, of course, African Americans.

Today, military personnel who don't identify as born again Christians are being harassed, and students who opt out of prayers in public school are being bullied. All of this counts as religious history, too, but it's not in the resolution.

The "whereas" paragraphs in this resolution are dishonest: they deliberately confuse the personal religious beliefs of our nation's political

(Continued on page 9)

Honoring the Bible:

House Concurrent Resolution 284

By Brian M. Knoblock

From the 110th Congress that brought you such wonderful Constitution-abiding bills such as H RES 847 (“Recognizing the importance of Christmas and the Christian faith.”) and H RES 888 (“American Religious History Week”) comes this wonderful gem, just introduced in the house: H CON RES 284. This was just submitted Jan. 29, and is “encouraging the President to proclaim 2008 as ‘The National Year of the Bible.’”

This bill acknowledges the 25th anniversary of the 1982 bill that President Reagan signed proclaiming 1983 as “The Year of the Bible.” I’m wondering how much of an uproar there would be if a Muslim congressional members were to submit a bill asking President Bush to proclaim 2008 the “Year of the Koran.” Or, dare I say it, “The Year of Reason.”

At this point in our nation’s history we have a Presidential candidate [Mike Huckabee] who has openly expressed wanting to change the Constitution “so it’s in God’s standards.” We also have a sitting President who believes his “faith-based initiatives” are the ultimate solution to society’s woes. Right now, the current meddling of the two is dividing this nation in ways we haven’t seen in decades. H CON RES 284 simply shows the continuous callous disregard our President and our other elected members of Congress have for not only non-theistic Americans, but for the

other religions in this country that make the United States a diverse country.

Here’s the link to the bill at the Library of Congress:
[http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c110:H.CON.RES.284:](http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c110:H.CON.RES.284)

Letter to Rep. Betty McCullom from MNA President George Kane

In January I wrote to ask you to oppose H RES 888, proclaiming “American Religious History Week.” I now must ask you also to oppose H CON RES 284, submitted January 29th, encouraging the President to proclaim 2008 as “The National Year of the Bible.” This bill is clearly intended to honor Christianity in preference over all opposing religious and nonreligious opinions, in violation of the government neutrality that the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment ensures.

My particular concern in this regard is for the wording “calling upon citizens of all faiths to rediscover and apply the priceless, timeless message of the Holy Scriptures.” Since the only ‘Holy Scripture’ addressed in this bill is the Bible, this clause can only be interpreted as an endorsement of Christianity. As James Madison noted in his “Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments,” civil government is not a “competent Judge of Religious Truth.” I hope that Madison’s remonstrance reminds you and your

colleagues that deference by government to the religious beliefs of each individual citizen is essential to our national founders’ concept of political freedom.

It is certainly misleading to state, as H CON RES 284 does, that “shared Biblical beliefs unified the colonists.” A cursory survey of colonial history will be sufficient to show that religious beliefs were a significant source of division between the colonists, producing political discord and even violence. The divisive effect of government endorsement of religion is even greater today, when our population is much more ethnically and religiously diverse, and when the number of Americans who reject religion has grown so large.

This resolution also errs by singling out for praise “faith, spiritual courage, and moral strength,” which it attributes to the inspiration of the Bible. Faith may be admirable or foolish, and spiritual courage is hardly distinguishable from the physical and intellectual courage. Moral strength may be inspired by any religion or secular philosophy.

H CON RES 284 is deeply disturbing because it will recognize Bible-belief a civil virtue, and state a government preference for Christians over all other citizens. Please do everything you can in committee to stop this bill from reaching the House floor.

(Continued from page 8)
leaders with their public actions; they ignore the fact that our Founders (many of whom were deists anyway) checked their religion at the door when they wrote the Constitution.

Our supporters are contacting their members of Congress and asking them to vote No on H. Res. 888. If

we don’t stop it, next thing you know they’ll be trying to teach the Immaculate Conception in biology class.

Several examples of letters that constituents have written their Representatives can be found at <http://www.talk2action.org/story/2008/1/5/121740/6989>. They

are publicly posted, so the authors would be happy to have others use them, but please use your own words. If you do nothing more than copy and paste, your Representative is likely to dismiss it as a letter-blitz campaign. Let Congress know what you really think.

News & Notes

By George Kane

More than one in five (22%) Americans say they never go to church, the highest ever recorded by the General Social Survey, conducted every two years by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. In 2004, the percentage was 17%.

LifeWay Research, the research arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, based in Nashville, conducted a survey of 1,402 of these “unchurched” adults last spring and summer. Of these, 72% agree that “God, a higher or supreme being, actually exists.” By this count, only 6% of Americans are atheists, but survey results for this issue vary widely depending on how the question is phrased and who asks it. This survey, for example, would miss atheists who occasionally attend church for social or family reasons, or whose conception of “a higher being” might be as vague as the laws of physics. Other surveys have measured the atheist population as high as 16% of total Americans.

What worries the SBC in this survey is that 72% of respondents say the church is “full of hypocrites,” while 44% agree with the statement “Christians get on my nerves.” Just 52% believe that “Jesus died and came back to life,” and 61% say the God of the Bible is “no different from the gods or spiritual beings depicted by world religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.” While these percentages are surely higher than they would be in a survey of Americans who ever attend church, they indicate that large numbers are rejecting the Christian message.

On the battleground between Church and State, a new Ten Commandments display was installed in the Garrard County (Kentucky) court-



George Kane

house. The display has been redesigned to meet the objections of the court that last year ordered another Ten Commandments display removed.

“This is a different one; it is educational,” proffered Garrard County Judge Executive John Wilson. “It’s to

educate the public on the history of the Ten Commandments.” This leaves open, of course, the question of why the state should have an interest in such religious education.

In New Hampshire, the Greenfield Congregational Covenant Church has held worship services in the upstairs portion of Town Hall, for over 200 years, but it is moving now to resolve a violation of the First Amendment.

The Church’s lease, by which it pays no rent, will expire in 2009. Some local residents enlisted Americans United for the Separation of Church and State to argue that this sweetheart deal violated the Establishment Clause because the town was leasing space in the building to the church at well below market value. All other groups are charged \$60 per use.

The congregation is now raising funds to build its own church on a 16 acre plot of land not far from downtown.

In Missouri, State Senator John Loudon has filed a bill that would require state documents to revert to the use of B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domini or “Year of our Lord”) instead of B.C.E. (Before Common Era) and C.E. (Common Era). The bill would require this usage by state employees in their official capacities, but its effect on school textbooks is uncertain. The Missouri School Boards’ Association warned that this bill could be very costly to school districts.

In 2000, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution that denounced the secular dating system as “anti-supernaturalism, religious pluralism and political correctness” and called on members to stick with B.C. and A.D. We wouldn’t want any “anti-supernaturalism” in the schools now, would we?

Parents complained when teachers at Paul W. Bryant High School showed classes “Facing the Giants,” a Christian-themed inspirational film. The parents enlisted the help of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, which wrote a letter to the Tuscaloosa City Schools system. “Parents and taxpayers expect our public schools to teach, not preach,” wrote Barry Lynn, the Executive Director. The school district announced that further showings of the film were suspended.

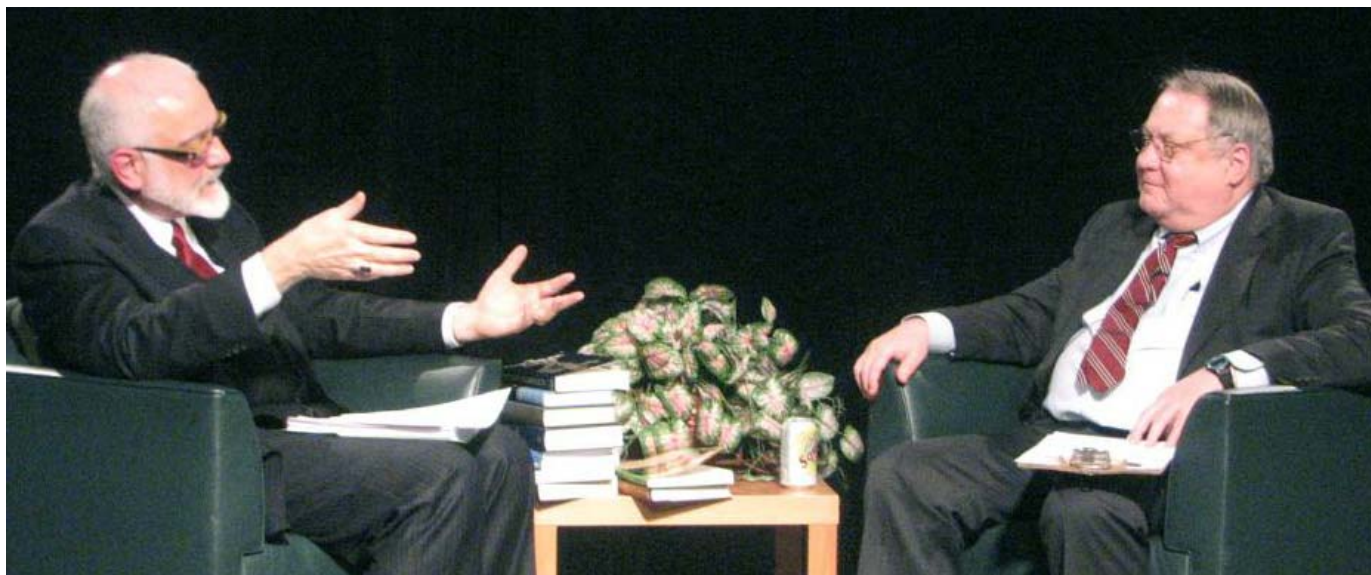
A divorced father went to court in Kentucky to keep his eighth grade son out of a Catholic school. David Ryan, an atheist, asserted in court documents that he feared that the school would indoctrinate his son into a belief system that he as a parent rejects. Kentucky’s constitution states, “Nor shall any man be compelled to send his child to any school to which he may be conscientiously opposed.”

I’ve seen several stories over the past couple of years from Germany, France, Holland and elsewhere in Europe of families of Muslim immigrants who **kill their daughters** who become “Westernized.” Fathers and brothers believe that to restore their family honor they must execute girls who fall from the strict standards of Muslim piety, modesty and propriety. Naturally, in Europe these incidents have evoked deep disgust.

It appears that these honor killings have now reached our shores.

(Continued on page 11)

Cable Report



In the past month we taped two programs with George Kane (right) interviewing Dr. Grant Steves on Cults. Photo by Grant Hermanson

By Steve Petersen

Cable Crew: Art Anderson, Brett Stenbridge, Shirley Moll, Steve Petersen, George Kane, Matthew Richardson, David Wiesner and Grant Hermanson.

Podcasts: MinnesotaAtheists.org. Made possible by Grant Hermanson.

Cable schedule

Bloomington: Ch. 16. Wednesday 10:30 p.m., Thursday 6:30 a.m. &

2:30 p.m.. Sponsors: David and Joanne Beardsley.

Minneapolis: Ch. 17. Saturday 8:30 p.m. Sponsor: Art Anderson.

Rochester: Ch. 10. Tuesday, Wednesday & Thursday 7:30 p.m. Sponsor: Jim Salutz.

Roseville, Shoreview, Arden Hills, North Oaks, Little Canada, Falcon Heights, Lauderdale, Mounds View, New Brighton: Ch. 14. Wednesday 10:30 p.m. Sponsor: Art Anderson.

St. Cloud: Ch. 12. Thursday 8:30 p.

m. Sponsor: Jack Richter.

Stillwater: Ch. 16. Tuesday 7:00 p. m.; Wednesday 9:00 a.m. Sponsor: Lee Salisbury.

South Washington County: Ch. 14. Tuesday 7:00 p.m. Sponsor: Raleigh Nelson.

White Bear Lake, Hugo, Lake Elmo, Mahtomedi, Maplewood, North St. Paul, Oakdale, Vadnais Heights: Ch. 15. Friday 8:30 p.m. Sponsor: Michael Seliga.

(Continued from page 10)

On New Year's Day, Yaser Abdel Said, an immigrant from Egypt, shot and killed his two teenaged daughters, Sarah and Amina, in his cab in Irving, Texas. It is widely believed in the community that this was a traditional Muslim "honor killing." A friend of Sarah's reported hearing the father threaten to kill her when he found out that she had a boy friend at school.

In December, I reported in this column that U.S. Sen. Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa) had subpoenaed the financial records of six mega-churches with media ministries. On Dec. 6, the day of the deadline to comply with the subpoenas, only two

of the six had complied. These were Kenneth Copeland Ministries of Newark, Tex., and Joyce Meyer Ministries from Fenton, Mo. The investigation should become interesting in the months ahead.

Since Minnesota Atheists is a nonprofit, tax-exempt educational organization, we do not campaign for or against any candidates. We will, however, report the statements of candidates regarding the separation of church and state. In keeping with that educational obligation, I note this quote from Governor Mike Huckabee: "I have opponents in this race who do not want to change the Constitution. But I believe it's a lot easier to change

the Constitution than it would be to change the word of the living God. And that's what we need to do is amend the Constitution so it's in God's standards rather than trying to change God's standards so it lines up with some contemporary view of how we treat each other and how we treat the family." [ThinkProgress, 1/15/08]

Finally, a bill has been introduced in Britain's House of Commons to disestablish the Church of England. As with bills in the U.S. Congress, Britain assigns a number to each bill. This bill's number is, deliciously, 666.

5th Sunday Breakfast in December

46 people attended our 5th Sunday Breakfast in December. We raised a total of \$1,500, including a \$1,000 donation.

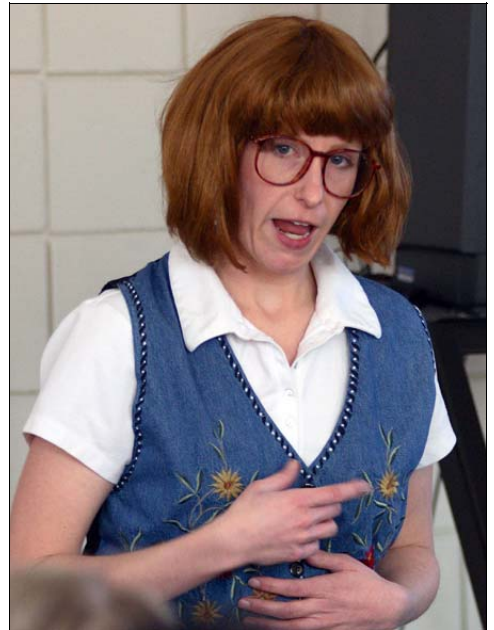
This will be the last breakfast we have on a 5th Sunday because they coincide with our live radio program on Air America Minnesota. From now on we'll be having 5th Sunday dinners.

Thanks to the following people who helped with food, setup, and cooking: Art Anderson, August Berkshire, Cynthia Egli, Dan Feyma, Ron Julien, George Kane, Shirley Moll, Steve Petersen, Matthew Richardson, Rachel Wilson, and Fern Wodtke (delicious homemade bread!)

Photos by August Berkshire.



January meeting



Above and below: The talented and hilarious Jen Tuder performed her one woman, multi-character show about a teacher who, with nothing to lose on her last day, decides to give her students the straight story on sexuality.

“Sex across the Curriculum!” was a smash hit at last summer’s Minnesota Fringe Festival and it packed the Roseville Library activity room.



Left and below: Founding member Bob Neinkerk (left) was surprised with a cake for his 80th birthday. Shown with Bob is fellow octogenarian and long time MNA photographer, Vern Young.



Inbox...

Pioneer Atheist

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Minnesota Atheists for awarding me the honor of a lifetime membership. One of the highlights of my 80 years is promoting freethinking and being instrumental in the organization of Friends Free of Theism in the Fall of 1982, which evolved into Minnesota Atheists. I am very proud of the organization Minnesota Atheists has become. Thanks to all the officers and members for their commitment and dedication.

– Bob Nienkerk

Mixed marriage

I catch your programs periodically on TV here in St. Cloud and am encouraged by your fair and frank Christian vs. non-believer presentations. I consider myself agnostic, but with a devout Irish Catholic spouse and 3 kids, I try not to make any waves. I'm basically a closet agnostic – out of the closet only to my wife and she doesn't want to hear much of it.

I do enjoy your programs and consider them a valuable resource for inquiring minds who are in search of nothing more than the truth.

Please put me (not my wife) on your mailing list. Thanks.

Name withheld by request

Atheist family values

I just started listening to your podcasts and can't wait to have discussions with my husband about them. Is it possible to mike the audience so we can hear the questions? I feel like I'm missing good information. Thank you for making these available through iTunes.

– Jody Carey

[We are investigating the possibility of having an audience microphone. – Ed.]

Atheist weddings?

My daughter is an atheist and in

a serious relationship. Her and I have discussed several times about why do big weddings always have to be in a church and very religious? How can my daughter get information about non-religious ceremonies? I think she would be more comfortable about getting married if she wouldn't have to include all the stuff she doesn't believe in.

Thank you for your help in advance.

– Tina

[We responded to Tina with some ideas and asked her or her daughter to call us for more information and support. – Ed.]

Pdf newsletter

Currently I am receiving your newsletter by mail and I would like to have it switched over to having the newsletter sent to my email account.

Thanks so much! You guys rock!!!

– Stacie McCormack, student, Univ. of Wisc., Stout

Duluth Skeptics Meetup

Do you know if there are atheists in or around Duluth that would be interested in a Meetup? I have set one up here: <http://skeptics.meetup.com/159>. Maybe you could let any interested members know.

– Andy Jonson, ax@ateisten.se

Atheists in Staples, MN?

I live in Staples, MN, and am wondering what (if any) MNA functions, meetings or groups might exist in my area. If anything exists within about 60 miles of Staples (such as in Brainerd/Baxter, Wadens, Sauk Centre, Little Falls, Long Prairie, etcetera), I'd love to know about it.

If no such thing exists, well, I'd like to know what it'd take to start something of that sort in my area, as I'm a firm supporter of atheists having the same rights and privileges to assemble and conduct such things as any

of my local church-based gatherings, of which there are many.

– Frank Atkisson

[We put Frank in touch with an activist member in Randall, MN. If you would like to get in touch with Frank, contact MNA at info@mnatheists.org or 612-588-7031. – Ed.]

“Creation Science 101”

You may enjoy the clever “Creation Science 101” by Roy Zimmerman, available on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIwiPsgRrOs&feature=related). A fellow member passed it to me and it really brightened my day.

– Morgan Smith

“Man sees ‘mark,’ cuts off hand”

Thought you folks may appreciate this article: cnn.com/2008/US/01/09/hand.cut.off.ap/index.html.

– Eric Peterson

Love your website

Just like to say how great your website is. Keep up the good work.

– John Rutley, United Kingdom

Special thanks!

I visit your site as often as I am able (all time is precious, as we only have one life to live). The information you proffer, i.e. articles, comments, points of discussion/interest, and referrals to other websites, is one of the best I have found. Your site gives me a “sense of community” and reinforces my personal conviction that humanity is still alive in these theocratic troubled times in the US. Thank you! And yes, I have registered for the upcoming American Atheists Convention. With it being so close, how could I not participate?!

– Bonnie L. Olson

Without a prayer

Remember all those behaviors that you were taught in order to teach you submission? Kneeling, genuflect-

(Continued on page 15)

Some thoughts for the future

By Matthew Richardson

I have reconsidered running for the board, but I want to discuss some issues that are important to me.

Basic membership with voting rights should cost no more than \$20 for individuals. As a member, you would get the newsletter e-mailed to you, which would be better than the hard copy because all photos would be in color. If possible, I favor eliminating the hard copy completely. However, for those who wish to continue receiving the hard copy, that would cost an additional \$25.

Students could be regular \$20 members or \$10 non-voting members. I would eliminate the Household rate.



Matthew Richardson

Households would pay as two individuals.

The cost of printing and mailing the newsletter is about \$25 a year, whereas e-mailing it costs us nothing.

I want to form small discussion groups to bring new members together with a few seasoned members. It hurts all of us who have chosen to be active with Minnesota Atheists to have new people join, attend one or two meetings, and then we never see or hear from them again. Personally, I like people; when I can, I like hearing their views on many topics. Just about everyone who walks in the door has an interesting life – a life with experiences that I've shared myself.

People who join our group do so to be in close communication with fellow atheists. We want to facilitate that. We have not been doing enough to make that a reality for all who join.

And then there's the Winter Solstice Party. In past years, we have celebrated this event at hotels. Hotels are expensive and take most of the profit from our hard work. There is a cheaper, better alternative. When I was a member of an atheist group in Washington, D.C. in the 1980s, we rented space in a motel, with room for about 80 people, and had catered food brought in – sandwiches, meat-cuts, puddings, cut fruit – all really nice. But what was best about the affair is that I actually got to meet many people and had a great time talking with them.

(Continued from page 14)

ing, the begging pose with hands clasped, bowing head, calling the witchdoctor (priest) father, confession, etc. Well prayer (begging) is one of those submission behaviors. One prays to a master and prayer establishes a master-slave relationship, a master-slave paradigm.

Prayer destroys the self and is a destroyer of self-confidence and taking responsibility for one's self. Prayer is very destructive behavior. So I do not view it with neutrality.

So what if other people do it? So LOTS!! It is one of those things that degrades society for everyone. The degrading of one person by prayer affects everyone around them as well.

Religion teaches many destructive behaviors. Those destructive behaviors often break people and cause destruction all the way to war. The mental hospitals, prisons and chemical dependency units in the U.S. are full of Christian inmates, not atheists.

– Paul Keller

Thank you!

To all of you who are making your radio show possible, a huge thank you for being bold and honest and out there! The interview with Richard Dawkins was marvelous. The discussion about House Resolution 888 was imperative to bring to the attention of all who revere our country and are proud to live here. The historical information about the wonderful man who was Ingersoll was fabulous to hear! Please continue exposing what is happening in our country and how to combat these forces for the protection of all of us.

Would you please consider doing an expose of the Baha'i Faith – which claims to be the newest Abrahamic Religion and promotes unity & equality, but is just as divisive and secretive as all the rest?

Thank you! Sincere best wishes for a long successful show!

– Patte Lanus

Checking in in Mankato

Just got the email note about Sunday's launch of the one-hour show. Terrific! I had better participate and

join instead of just lurking down here in Mankato! Some day I might even make it to a TC event.

Check is in the mail.

– Walt Anderson

Congratulations on your 1st Air America program

Thanks, guys. Sure do appreciate it. Plan to listen every Sunday morning – sure beats going to church!

Larry

Congratulations! Atheists Talk!

My husband and I just finished listening to Atheists Talk. We are in such need of balance for atheists because we see religion promoted in the newspapers and on the radio but atheists don't get a fair opportunity to debate.

This is an excellent new show and we were very happy to hear Richard Dawkins interview. I didn't know that there was going to be a convention in March but now that I heard it mentioned on the show my husband and I will be sure to attend. Fantastic show!

– Deb H.

Rochester Area Freethinkers (RAFT)

Those who don't profess faith unite in shared experiences

By Jeffrey Jackson [Rochester, MN] *Post-Bulletin*, Jan. 9, 2008

www.postbulletin.com/newsmanager/templates/localnews_story.asp?a=322093&z=31

[Following is a synopsis. To read the complete article, go to the website listed above.]

Bill Kass once considered becoming a priest. But when he went through his a Catholic school and confirmation class as a teenager, Kass

he said.

Kass, one of the founders of the Rochester Area Freethinkers, can now be seen with a T-shirt with a much different message: "Your friendly neighborhood atheist."

Rochester Area Freethinkers

summer of 2002, a group of agnostics, atheists and freethinkers began to meet.

When the Freethinkers get together for their monthly meetings, the group shares its experiences or discusses issues such as intelligent de-



Members of RAFT gathered for a Winter Solstice Party on Dec. 21st. Back row, from left, on couch: Merlyn Schutterle, Jen Peeters, Karl Wolff, Onalee Star Post, Daniel Post. Middle row, seated: Gary Jensen, Laura Scheinoha, Bill Kass, Hannah Kass, Éowyn Rain Post, Sarah Ann Post. Front: Tom Scheinoha.

began challenging things that he had been taught. "I always got myself in trouble by asking the wrong questions," he said.

Answers such as "some things are not meant to be understood" – did not satisfy him. When his mother was excommunicated from the Catholic church for getting divorced, Kass found it even more difficult to accept the beliefs of those who said that God loves him and yet condemned his mother to hell. "It raised questions,"

meets monthly at the Rochester Public Library. Its participants come from various faith backgrounds: Lutherans, Catholics, a Quaker, a few Pentecostals, and a Mormon from Utah.

Being an unbeliever, Kass said, is not easy. When Kass moved here from Duluth in 2001, he began to look for other like-minded individuals. He made contact with the Minnesota Atheists organization out of the Twin Cities, who put him in contact with others in the Rochester area. In the

sign and separation of church and state. The group stresses tolerance of people's beliefs or disbeliefs.

Kass compares the current discrimination against freethinkers to that which gays encountered prior to the 1970s. "A co-worker the other day told me she feels sorry for me," Kass said. The co-worker proceeded to say that all unbelievers were "evil," adding, "except for you, Bill."

MNA's "Atheists Talk" radio program in the news!

Our "Atheists Talk" program, begun on Jan. 13, 2008, has been making news. A Dec. 27, 2007 on-line-only article in the *Star Tribune* (see below) spread like wildfire on the internet. At one point a Google search of the article's first sentence yielded 12,000 sites, including the Huffington Post blog and msnbc.com.

Then on Jan. 14, 2008 the *Pioneer Press* printed a huge story with several photographs of us in the radio studio (see below). The article was reprinted in the *St. Cloud Times*, the *Rochester Post Bulletin*, the *Duluth News Tribune*, the *Winona Daily News*, the *La Crosse Tribune*, the *Jamestown [North Dakota] Sun*, and wcco.com.

We were also interviewed on local FOX channel 9's Sunday morning news, Focus on the Family's internet radio, and "Gary in the Morning" internet radio from Pennsylvania.

Minnesota Atheists radio program to debut on Air America Radio in January

By Tim Harlow *StarTribune.com*
December 27, 2007 startribune.com/local/12851441.html

(Below is a synopsis of the article. To read the complete article, go to the URL above.)

Called "Atheists Talk," the live radio broadcast featuring news, interviews, listener call-ins and special guests is believed to be the first show of its kind in Minnesota, said August Berkshire, a spokesman for the Minnesota Atheists.

The show will air Sundays from 9 to 10 a.m. on AM 950. The first guest will be Oxford professor, evolutionary biologist and world-renown atheist Richard Dawkins.

Berkshire said the radio pro-

gram will reach a larger audience.

"Fewer people are watching public cable access, but they are listening to talk radio." "We really want to expand our audience and this will allow us to reach people all over the state of Minnesota."

The radio program will have interviews with local atheists and humanists discussing such topics as humanism, atheism, religion, science, society and separation of church and state.

"We are not interested in ridiculing anybody or converting people," he said. "We just want conversation and dialog with the public. We applaud Air America Minnesota for allowing us to bring diversity to the airwaves."

Officials at Air America Radio Minnesota were assured that the program would remain positive and informative. "We decided to give it a try," said Kevin Hansen, a station spokesman. "We are a progressive talk station and we think this will be a nice addition to go with the variety of content we have on this station."

New Sunday radio show hopes to erase the stigma of atheists

By Alex Friedrich *Pioneer Press*
Jan. 14, 2008 (Reprinted in *Rochester Post Bulletin*:
postbulletin.com/newsmanager/templates/localnews_story.asp?a=324128&z=31)

(Below is a synopsis of the article. To read the complete article, go to the URL above.)

Each Sunday morning, as Twin Cities Christians prepare for church, a handful of people will gather at an Eden Prairie radio station to spread their gospel: There is no God. They're the voice of Minnesota Athe-

ists.

The program, which debuted this weekend, will air Sundays from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. on KTNF-AM 950 Air America. It promises an array of interviews and special guests, news reports, round-table discussions and call-ins. "We want a seat at the discussion table," said program founder August Berkshire. "This is our way of doing it."

Berkshire said the nonpartisan show will try to dispel myths about atheists – no, they're not a bunch of grumps trying to outlaw religion – and warn people about what concerns them: a supposed erosion of the separation of church and state, and the government's discrimination against nonbelievers. Hot topics will include anti-gay-marriage laws, restrictions on embryonic stem-cell research and creationism in schools. Occasional special segments will cover atheist history, science and book reviews, and there will be short interviews with local atheists.

It won't be a rant-fest, Berkshire said. "We're not trying to convert people," he said. "We're trying to engage them in a discussion. We want people to realize atheists are their neighbors, family, nice people, and that they should get to know us."

A backup host will be Bjorn Watland, a 25-year-old computer-systems analyst from Minneapolis. He said he joined the organization last year as a form of support when his mother "flipped out" upon learning he was an atheist. Mom has recovered, he said, but atheism still carries a stigma – even among those in his generation. "The biggest thing I want to get out of the show is tolerance of the atheist perspective," he said.

Atheists in Print

Your turn: Others should delve into info about religions

By Jack Richter, Sartell

The following opinion was published in the St. Cloud Times, January 19, 2008.



Jack Richter

There have been a number of letters in the Times recently about atheism that accuse or imply atheists “have not done their research” when it comes to religion.

On the contrary, all of the atheists, agnostics and secular humanists I know across the country have done extensive reading, research and investigation into the origins of not only Christianity, but also Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and many other religions.

In addition to re-searching all of the world’s religions, we have also delved with a critical thinking mind into the areas of paleoanthropology, DNA research, biology and world history. We have studied the ancient civilizations of not only Israel and Rome, but the Persian, Greek and Babylonian empires. My personal studies have taken 10 years of research.

What have atheists found after many years of critical and discerning study of the Bible and its origins? We have found that the mythological figure of “Jesus Christ” was based on other mythical pagan savior gods from Egypt, Babylonia, Greece and Sumeria.

The mythical gods of “Horus,” “Krishna,” “Mithra” and “Dionysus” all had the same crucified and rising from the dead “experience” “Jesus” did. They were all supposedly “born” in a cave, attended by “shepherds” and were born from a “virgin impregnated by a ghost.” They all had a

“star” to announce that birth, which was also Dec. 25, which was the date assigned to the Jesus myth based on the Winter Solstice, which was originally celebrated by the pagans who were murdered by the Christians when they refused to conform to the new Christian “belief system.” All of the mythical gods were attended by three wise men or kings.

Atheists do not believe in a heaven or a hell because the entire concept of an afterlife was invented along with gods and goddesses by the Egyptians and the Greeks.

The Greek myth the river “Hades” became the concept of

Atheists consider honesty and integrity the highest value, and they find Christianity and other religions seriously lacking in both.

“Hell.” The persona of “Satan” is from the Egyptian God “SET” who was the God Horus’ (prototype for Jesus) mortal enemy.

It is no coincidence that the Israelites borrowed heavily from the ancient Egyptians in the areas of mythology when they set up their belief system and wrote the myths, fables and lies that compose the Bible. The Israelites were neighbors to Egypt after all.

I would like to ask Christians critical of atheists if they are aware of all of the errors and contradictions in the Bible? Errors such as the fact that the four synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John differ in their accounts of the resurrection story? Contradictions like Judas hanging himself in the Gospel, but throwing himself into a field in the Book of

Acts? Why would we have no record of Jesus’ life from the age of 12 all the way to the age of 30?

And then there are the beliefs about women being created from a man’s rib, and that the earth is only 6,000 years old as well and dinosaurs lived here at the same time as “Adam and Eve.” Or more currently, if there was a god “blessing the Iraq war” why is it failing so miserably?

I believe in “Lucy,” a skeleton, carbon [radiometric] dated and scientifically authenticated I can see with my own eyes, rather than “Eve” or “Mary,” who were obvious literary creations.

I believe in humans working together and helping each other for the betterment of this world. Because

I believe in the seen rather than the unseen and unproven, I can face death with bravery and more importantly, I can face life with honesty, clear thinking, human empathy and more passion than I ever could when I was a “believer.”

Atheists consider honesty and integrity the highest value, and they find Christianity and other religions seriously lacking in both.

I have actually read some of the works these writers have suggested. Now I invite these believers to read “The Christ Conspiracy” by Acharya S and “Deceptions and Myths of the Bible,” by Lloyd Graham. They should provide a good start on a journey of critical and rational thinking.

This is the opinion of Jack Richter, a Sartell resident who is a former Catholic and fundamentalist Baptist who now embraces atheism and is a member of Minnesota Atheists and American Atheists.

(Continued on page 19)

No Winter Blues Here! – Changes at MNA

Winter may amount to “more of the same” elsewhere in the state, but here at Minnesota Atheists some exciting changes are taking place.

Vern Young, our photographer for about twenty years, will be focusing on relaxing and enjoying our meetings since he has turned the job over to **Richard Trombley**. Vern celebrated his 80th birthday six months ago and will remain our backup photographer. **Eric Harmon** looks forward to being active video-taping our events.

The editorship of this newsletter will be turned over to **Grant Steves**. Though he has been a member for less than a year, Grant has already made significant contributions to our newsletter, cable program, and radio program.

Jack Caravela, our treasurer and webmaster, will turn over the former job to **Andy Flamm** and the latter job to **Bjorn Watland** (with help from **Grant Hermanson**). Bjorn has already made significant changes to our website, making it easier to donate money, sign up for Atheists Weekly E-mail, and view upcoming events.

But Jack isn't getting off the hook that easily. The MNA Board has recently formed a MNA Charities

Committee to investigate how we can better help society. Jack will chair that committee. He will be joined by **Vanita Mishra**, **Jeannette Sorensen**, and **August Berkshire**. (Are you interested in joining the committee? Contact Jack at 612-782-0716 or jackc@usfamily.net). And, we still expect Jack to continue to post his delightfully smarmy comments on news of the day on our website.

Our MNA board of directors will see some changes this month, with four people leaving and four new people being added. **Jack Caravela**, **Matthew Richardson**, **Ron Julien**, and **Vanita Mishra** have decided not to run for office this year. We thank them for their contributions to the board and look forward to their continuing support of Minnesota Atheists.

Two of the new additions have served on the board before: **August Berkshire** and **Andy Flamm**. Most exciting is the fact that the two newcomers, **Jeannette Sorensen** and **Bjorn Watland**, are people in their 20s who have been members for less than a year, and who can bring fresh perspectives and energy to the board.

Our new radio program will be supported by the talents of **Cynthia Egli**, **Grant Steves**, **George Kane**,

Bruce Honnigford, **Kristine Harley**, **Bjorn Watland**, **Grant Hermanson**, **Steve Petersen**, **PZ Myers**, and **August Berkshire**.

Finally, thanks to others for their continued and valuable service to MNA: board members **Cynthia Egli**, **Steve Petersen**, **George Kane**, **Bruce Honnigford**, and **Kristine Harley**, cable crew members **Steve Petersen**, **Matthew Richardson**, **Art Anderson**, **Brett Stenbridge**, **David Wiesner**, **Shirley Moll**, and **Grant Hermanson**, social events coordinators **Bob & Marilyn Nienkerk**, **Fern Wodtke**, and **George Kane**, mailing list coordinators **Steve Petersen** and **Shirley Moll**, Atheists Weekly E-mail editor **George Kane**, newsletter layout and design person **Tom Riddering**, and book sales person **Rachel Wilson**.

Although our radio program will now occupy the time of most of our cable program hosts, we would like to keep the cable program going with new hosts. (Are you interested in being on TV? If so, contact Steve at 651-484-9277 or spetersen175@comcast.net.)

A rejuvenating spring has indeed come early to Minnesota Atheists. But then, we always were ahead of our time!

(Continued from page 18)

Factors such as reason, proof bring us to atheism

By August Berkshire, Minnesota Atheists, Minneapolis

The following letter was published in the St. Cloud Times, January 05, 2008.

This is in response to the Jan. 1 letter “Debate will rage on, but I know whose side I’m on.” As an atheist, I “hope” the Christians are



August Berkshire

right, too – I hope there is an afterlife.

The problem is that, according to Christians, in order to achieve this heaven we must abandon reason and evidence as our standards of living and instead make a leap of faith into their theology.

(Heaven, it seems, is an exclusive club available to only the “right” kind of believers.)

However, there are several versions of Christian theology. (They

disagree on dogma and they disagree on what is ethical.)

Which one shall we choose? What will be our guide? Reason and evidence? If so, we’re back to a lack of evidence and unreasonable claims. We’re back to atheism.



How to Present Atheism, A Rejoinder

By Mike Haubrich

First, I find it wearying that atheists focus on religion. I do acknowledge that we see ourselves as bulwarks against the weakness of magical thinking; however I think that life is a rich pageant of experience and has so much more to offer than discussions of whether or not one has the correct answer when it comes to religion. And so with the perspective that many of us belong to atheist groups as a reaction to societal pressure to express religious preferences, I would like to respond to Grant Steve's column in the most recent edition of the Minnesota Atheist newsletter.

I read Robert A. Heinlein's book *A Stranger in a Strange Land* when I was a teenager. The protagonist is a human, Valentine Michael Smith, who was orphaned on Mars and raised in the Martian ways. He was taught pure logic and how to approach all aspects of life through reason. Upon rescue he was brought back to Earth and the government placed him in the home of a novelist, Jubal Harshaw. Jubal was a sensualist who taught Mike how to enjoy life's richness in all its passions including sex, music, gourmet food and entertainment. Jubal also tried to teach Mike how to laugh, but Mike never understood humor. When he finally laughed, it was because he realized that laughter is born of misfortune.

It may be our own misfortune or the misfortune of others, but according to Heinlein all humor has some basis in pain. The pain may vary in degree, he claimed, but if all jokes are analyzed there is at a root level the pain of another being. I wince at broad generalizations and I don't know whether psychological studies have shown any indication that Heinlein's position is based on fact or impression. I do think that he has scratched a nerve regarding humor.

This is where the ridicule of creationists and the religious comes from. There is at some level, in most of the atheists I have spoken to, a frustration at the absurdities of religious thinking. It

is on this basis that I disagree with Grant Steves' position on how to present atheism. Ridicule is okay, and it is an instrument I feel comfortable as an atheist to use as a tool of my expression.

There is a time and a place for ridicule, of course, but I bristle at the suggestion that atheists need to be continually high-minded about how we approach religious intrusions into our lives. We needn't always be beating our heads at the wall trying to use logic and reason to persuade the religious that atheism is the natural way to think and live. Many times, the best we can achieve is "an agreement to disagree," while the other party simply walks away thinking that they have achieved a small victory of sorts.

Comedy is a tool. Sarcasm is a tool. Wit is a tool. I challenge a Positive Atheist to honestly say he or she didn't laugh when they saw Monty Python's movie *The Life of Brian*. Humor is a tool that can be used as a scalpel or a blunt instrument when needed. Ridicule and anger have their rightful places in our discussions.

As atheists we fill a broad spectrum in our chosen approaches and I don't think we need to conform to a specific ideal. If you are faced with someone that hates atheists because some of us are outspoken in our ridicule of aspects of religion, then it is your own challenge to prove them wrong for living with such broad stereotypes. I do think it is dangerous to try to present a unified front of reason and love towards our religious brethren, because then it takes on the appearance of uniformity of thought.

And that, my friends, is part of the reason that many of us turned from religion in the first place.

Positive Atheists should at least recognize that reason doesn't influence faith. None of us can account for the backgrounds of people who practice religion, and we can't know nor can we always figure out why they hold onto something that reason demonstrates so completely to be fanciful. It may be that

nobody can possibly be completely rational. Even computers are limited in their rationality by their programmers, and they are much better at logic than people are precisely because they don't actually "think." Computers respond to instructions and that is all they can do. People who try to be completely rational forget that such is an impossible task. We can't reason the world to enlightenment, and if we try we will end up talking to ourselves most of the time because when it comes to religion, reason is rarely a factor.

Consider the possibility that a number of people who hold onto religion do so for social acceptance and not necessarily for a belief in God. Don't you think that humor will cause them to wonder if perhaps their religious belief isn't a bit silly and then reexamine it?

There is no single way to present atheism, because there is no single way to experience it. I don't want someone to expect me to live it their way. I am smart enough, I am mature enough and I am adult enough to know when to ridicule and when to reason. I have friends who are Christian, and I have tried to reason with them only to find that they want to hold on to something as ridiculous as Intelligent Design. At that point I will tease them and deride Intelligent Design, because reason has been exhausted. And we remain friends for all that.

Finally, I fear that if we as the Minnesota Atheists stick solely to Positive Atheism we will continue to struggle to attract and retain new members. While I am certainly not young myself, I can see that our group is aging and we are not getting replenished by younger members quickly so that we can maintain a healthy group. Pushing for a Positive Atheism groupthink will drive away potential members who are seeking a group that respects free, yet thoughtful expression.

[To ridicule or not to ridicule? Let us know what you think. Send submissions to editor@mnatheists.org. — Ed.]

His Dark Materials by Philip Pullman

Book review by Jeannette Sorensen

While reading Philip Pullman's trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, you need to remind yourself that these books were marketed toward children. There are some strong themes, including violent death, which are uncharacteristic of children's novels. However, with references to physics, philosophy and theology, they are easily enjoyed by adults. While I won't talk about the plot of each book, there were some interesting themes that I thought worth discussing:

Daemons: This is the physical manifestation of one's soul as an animal. What I found interesting is that when a person's daemon dies, the person dies or becomes catatonic. Is there something inside people that makes them people? If Terry Schiavo had a physical daemon, the decision to starve her to death would have been easier to make. Unfortunately, for her, her family, and her insurance company, seeing is believing, at least when it comes to human consciousness.

Dust: This is Dark Matter in our world. Dust is conscious. The Church believes it is the manifestation

of original sin, making it the target for ultimate destruction. One character says, "for all the Church's history it's tried to suppress and control every natural impulse. When it can't control them, it cuts them out. It tries to obliterate every good feeling." Maybe our universes aren't so parallel after all. The Church makes a big deal of separating children from their daemons because Dust is less attracted to children. Thus, by cutting the child away they would never know original sin and live their lives as mindless servants to the Magisterium. That would NEVER happen in our world.

Finally, we get to the controversy...

If people thought the first book in the trilogy, *The Golden Compass*, was controversial, then wait until they make a movie about the third book, *The Amber Spy Glass*. First off, this book reveals the Christian Heaven to be a lie. The children visit the land of the dead, only to find out that every one that has ever died lives in a bleak, bland world... kind of like Indiana without the racism. Then there is the criticism of organized religion. Mary

Malone, the character I related most to, says of Christianity, "The Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing lie, that's all."

Mary Malone could possibly be my number one literary hero. Her character left the Church and described it in a way every atheist can relate to. It was hard for her because she let down her family. "It felt as if something *they* all passionately believed in depended on *me* carrying on with something I didn't." I envy those atheists out there who have a supportive family. For the majority of us, we are made to feel as if we did something horribly wrong, and the only way to right our crime is to lie about the way we feel. However, Mary Malone also describes the relief, the huge weight off her shoulders, with my favorite line of the book, "Now I can do something with my whole nature, and not just half of it."

I recommend *His Dark Materials* not only to atheists, but to people who simply like a good book. The story is suspenseful and there is love, redemption, and all those other good things that make something worth reading.

The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality

by André Comte-Sponville (Author), Nancy Huston (Translator)

Book review by Greg Peterson

This book is a joy to read. For all the religionists who complain about the screeds of Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris, if you want to find out what many atheists are really like, Comte-Sponville's book provides a beautiful window. He is convinced that no god exists, and offers compelling reasons for this conviction, but he could not be more kind to persons of faith. In fact, he says that the only thing that separates him from most Christians is "three days" – the

span between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

The author makes a case that many of the key goals of Christians and atheist humanists like him are very nearly identical, as they are rooted in love. He allows that exceptions exist, such as the Roman Catholic prohibition on condom use, which he finds at best sectarian and at worst unloving.

Atheists used to a bitter bunker mentality will find much to imitate in Comte-Sponville's attitude, and relig-

ionists should find much to admire. This is a challenging book, but the challenge is intellectual and not personal. Comte-Sponville does not attack, cast aspersions, question motives or sincerity – he just quietly presents a reasonable, soft-spoken case for a godless lifestyle that is worth living primarily because it taps into what is best in humanity, without ever pretending that humanity is itself divine.

The creationism farce and its dangerous implications

By Lee Salisbury, *Stillwater Gazette*, January 17, 2008

Rev. Lenard Huebscher's Jan. 10 piece on the *Gazette's* Church & Faith page slanderously maligning evolution sadly demonstrates an utter lack of understanding of the scientific method – especially as it pertains to evolution.

Creationists promote two basic assertions: 1) that they are the ones who know true science; and 2) that it is they and they alone who are the guardians of true faith in the written and revealed word of their deity. Both are of concern as surely as they are false, but it is the first assertion that we must deal with here.

Creation "science" rejects every fundamental precept upon which actual science functions, from empiricism to falsification. Creationists reject empiricism, the very heart of science, and instead embrace fanciful biblical legends of a "talking snake" and a 6,000-year-old solar system all in a vain attempt to justify their immutable doctrinal beliefs.

Creationists know their a priori conclusions in advance, independent of any scientific inquiry. They then massage their superficially scientific assertions to justify their desired answers/doctrine. The circularity and philosophical bankruptcy of this perspective is obvious. They beg the question, presuming to be true the very thing they claim. In other words, they are going to believe what they want to believe regardless of the facts, i.e. religious fanaticism.

Over the past 150 years scientists of relevant disciplines – such as cosmologists, astronomers, geologists, biologists, zoologists, and paleontologists – repeatedly confirm evolution a valid theory having the same reliability as the theory of gravity. According to a 1991 Gallup Poll there



Lee Salisbury

are about 480,000 scientists working in the relevant fields of earth and life sciences. Of those, only about 700 consider creationism valid. This means that less than 2% of relevant scientists consider creationism good science.

Scientists arrive at their conclusions by the scientific method of extensive trial and error testing of hypotheses until results produce a verifiably testable theory, in this case the theory of evolution. In contrast to creationist/religious theory, scientific theory is always tentative and subject to change as new evidence dictates.

It is bad enough that creationist churches are freeloaders, taking advantage of the public's good will by skirting their fair share of real estate taxes. But, worse yet, they use creationism as a rhetorical facade, as a lever through which to gain political and personal power. Creationists exploit the faith of well-meaning Christians (and those of other religions) to further their own purely political, financial and otherwise selfish goals at the expense of reality.

Creationism is a tool crafted to a very specific end; it is nothing more than an ancient regurgitated ideology bereft of merit, and loathsome in its intentions. America's 29th ranking in science education can partially be attributed to the purposeful ignorance of our "men of the cloth."

Make no mistake, creationism intends to redefine science, and replace it with a hollow shell of supernatural speculation and deceit. And why, you might ask? The answer is not hard to fathom. Religion has ever been a crutch of despots and all those who seek to secure their eminence at the expense of all others. History is unequivocal in teaching

this lesson, and yet as blind as we are we seem to have failed to learn it.

The creationist attack on the teaching of evolution devalues science, cheapens theology as well as condemning America's students to an inferior education, ultimately hurting their professional opportunities, not to mention diminishing America's leadership in science and technology.

Creationists aim to not only destroy science in an effort to protect their creationist fairy tales, they mean to redefine the United States of America, eviscerate the Constitution, and effectively dismantle American democracy by instituting religious indoctrination in the schools and halls of public policy making. They mean to supplant all of these things with a form of oligarchy wrapped in the shrouds of a redefined science and legalistic religion. And if one doubts this, one need only consult the publications of such notable creationist organizations as the Institute for Creation Research and the Discovery Institute, to name but a few. Creationists are quite explicit in their stated goals, and there is little room for doubt as to their true intentions.

This is what creationism is. Thus revealed, the need to fight it on all fronts, scientific, philosophical, theological, administrative and judicial, is made even clearer. There is no higher imperative if we mean to preserve America's intellectual freedom.

Lee Salisbury was an evangelical pastor for 14 years preaching across the globe. After taking a sabbatical leave in 1986, he for the first time began objectively to examine Christianity and the Bible. His conclusions differ significantly from what he was formerly required to believe. He welcomes comments at leesal@comcast.net.

Things to do, places to go: A calendar for atheists

Sundays, 6:00 p.m., **Atheist/Agnostic AA**, Men's Center, 3249 Hennepin Ave. # 55, Minneapolis, Jason Herrboldt, MplsAtheistAgnosticAA@yahoo.com.

3rd Sunday, 1-3:30 p.m., **Minnesota Atheists monthly meeting**. (See page 1.)

4th Sunday, 8-11 a.m., **Breakfast Social**. Old Country Buffet, Holly Shopping Center, Hwy 47 and Mississippi St., Fridley. Private room.

5th Sunday, **Fundraiser Dinner for Building Fund**. Price: \$6.66. (March, June, August, November 2008)

1st and 3rd Monday, 6 p.m., **Freethought Toastmasters Club**. Larpenteur Estates apartment complex, 1280 Larpenteur Ave. W., St. Paul. (Park directly in back and follow sidewalk to Party Room.) Roger Belfay, (651) 222-2782 or George Kane, (651) 488-8225.

2nd and 4th Monday, 5-7 pm., **Happy Hour North**. La Casita, 1925 Perimeter Road, Roseville, just west of the Rosedale mall. George Kane, (651) 488-8225.

2nd and 4th Monday, 5-7 p.m., **Happy Hour South**. Davanni's Restaurant, 2312 W. 66th Street (corner of Penn Ave. and 66th St.), Richfield, Bob/Marilyn Nienkerk, (612) 866-6200.

1st Tuesday, 11:30 a.m., **Lunch Social**. Old Country Buffet, Co. Road B2 between Snelling and Fairview, Roseville. Bob/Marilyn Nienkerk, (612) 866-6200.

3rd Wednesday, 11:30 a.m., **Lunch Social**. New China Buffet, 105 85th Ave. NW, Coon Rapids. Bill Volna, (612) 781-4273.

4th Wednesday, **Meal and a Reel**, Uptown, Minneapolis (Hennepin Ave. and Lake St.) 6 p.m. meal, 7 p.m. movie. George Kane, (651) 488-8225. Details in Atheists Weekly E-mail.

Thursdays, 7 p.m., **Campus Atheists, Skeptics and Humanists (CASH)** general meeting. 3d floor Coffman Memorial Union, 300 Washington Ave. S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455. Contact cash@cashumn.org.

1st Thursday, 6-9 p.m., **"Atheists Talk" TV taping**. MTN, Studio A, 125 SE Main St., Minneapolis. Steve Petersen, (651) 484-9277.

2nd Thursday, evening. **Rochester Area Freethinkers** monthly get-together. Bill Kass, hawthorn64@hotmail.com or (507) 259-4237.

4th Thursday, 6:30 p.m., **Minnesota Atheists board meeting**. Location varies. George Kane, (651) 488-8225.

To sign up for Atheists Weekly E-mail (AWE), send a request to awe@mnatheists.org.

To sign up for Minnesota Atheists Meetups, go to <http://atheists.meetup.com/493>.

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“Believers insist on keeping ‘In God We Trust’ on our currency. Where are the nonbelievers who want to replace it with ‘There Is No God’? Secularists don’t expect the government to take their side – only to practice neutrality. They think 1) all Americans should be free to practice the religion they choose and 2) none should have the active assistance of the government.”

– Steve Chapman, *Chicago Tribune* columnist,
“The religiosity test: Doubters need not apply,” *Star Tribune*, January 2, 2008, p. A9.

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