

The Minnesota Atheist

Minnesota Atheists

Established 1991

Positive Atheism in ActionSM

Volume 18 Number 4

April 2008

April 20th Meeting

"There are no Christians, only religious wannabes!"

You've heard debates on why there is no god, why Jesus is a myth, and why Nazareth did not exist in the 1st Century. Lee Salisbury will present a perspective that he is surprised isn't used in all debates ... more devastating and irrefutable in defusing the most committed Christian, yet never utilized. If you want new ammo for challenging Christians and provoking them to think, then you'll surely want to hear this..... bring your notebooks!

Lee Salisbury, a former evangelical pastor and guest preacher at Christian conferences in Canada, the USA, Europe, and Africa will let the Bible speak for Jesus and then let you decide the answer. Lee has been a member of Minnesota Atheists for 12 years and is a former



Lee Salisbury

Upcoming events

Sun., April 20 – 1:00 – 3:30 p.m. –
Lee Salisbury presents "There are no Christians, only religious wannabes." Roseville Library.

Thur., May 1, noon-1:00 p.m. –
MN Atheists National Day of Reason celebration at the MN State Capitol rotunda.

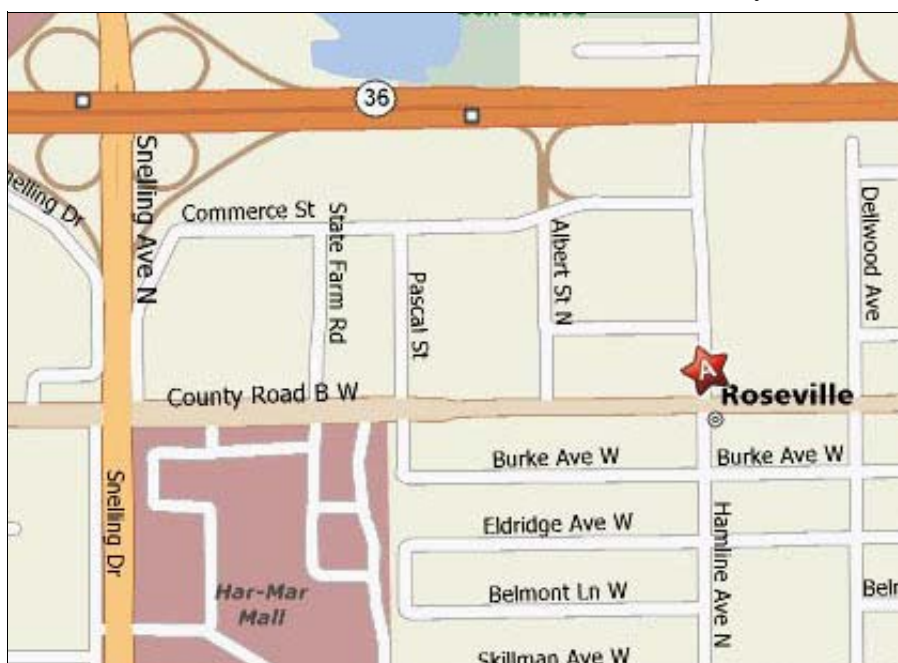
Sun., May 4 – May Day MN Atheists will participate in the parade and booth for May Day in Minneapolis.

Board member. Lee founded the Critical Thinking Clubs of Minnesota in 2001 of which there are now chapters in St. Paul, Minnetonka, Bloomington and Stillwater.

After our meeting, those who wish may join us for dinner at the Panda Garden Buffet.

Meeting: 1:00-3:30 p.m.
Roseville Public Library
2180 Hamline Ave. N.
(Hamline Ave. & Co. Rd. B)
Roseville, MN 55113

1:00-1:15 – Social time.
1:15- 1:45 – Business Meeting.
1:45-2:00 – Break.
2:00-3:00 – Presentation,
3:00 – Social Time



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**Building Fund:
\$102,824.36**

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Annie Laurie Gaylor
Dick Hewetson
Robert M. Price, PhD**

**MNA Meetup members: 237
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

Winning the Intellectual War

By August Berkshire

I'd like to pick up where I left off last time. I stated, "My attitude is that we have already won the intellectual war, now we just have to spread the good news."

I knew this ambiguous phrase would leave some people scratching their heads. "Huh? What does he mean? Half the people in the country are creationists! We haven't won the intellectual war by a long shot!"

So let me clarify: by "intellectual war" I mean the war (logical debate) among intellectuals, who are now overwhelmingly atheists. Ninety-three percent of the members of the National Academy of Sciences are atheists or agnostics (mostly atheists). Less than half of all U.S. scientists believe in a god. Surveys have shown that the more education a person has received, the less likely he or she is to believe in a god. Other surveys have shown that the least religious countries also tend to be the healthiest.

Pick up any science magazine. Whenever they talk about religion, they almost never refer to gods as actually existing, like it's a real phenomenon scientists are investigating. It's almost always "Are humans naturally inclined by evolution to *believe* in gods?" "God" is treated as an illu-



August Berkshire

sion that might have had some evolutionary benefit. Religion is treated as a cultural artifact, like music, dance, or a brand of storytelling.

I can't think of a single intellectually compelling argument for the existence of gods, can you? On the other hand, we can demonstrate

why every argument we have ever heard of for gods is inadequate. *We have won the intellectual war.*

So why should *we* be the ones who are getting defensive when logic is on our side? Instead (and I know this is hard), why not relax, put a smile on our faces, and respond, "Well, you know, there is no evidence for that, and here are some problems with that way of thinking..."

I can hear some of you objecting now: "But these people just won't listen to logic!" Let's not be so dismissive out of hand. After all, almost all religious people *believe* they are thinking logically. They really do believe the Argument from Design is a good one. They really do believe it is logically *necessary* for life to have an "ultimate purpose" that transcends death. We must point out to them the flaws in their logic.

For those who won't listen to logic, there is no possible way of getting through to them no matter what we try. Shouting something emphati-

cally or ridiculing them won't work and will only serve to harden their position. If all we can do for the time being with some people is to gently plant a seed of doubt, that is still worth doing.

So if the logic is all on our side, and we have won the intellectual war, why haven't we yet changed society? Well, we have changed it a bit – the percentage of atheists and religious skeptics in the nation has doubled in the last twenty years, from 5% to 10%. And the percentage of atheists and religious skeptics in the younger generation is double the national average, about 20%.

Still, why haven't we done even better? Because religious belief is primarily based on emotion. That's what we always have to keep in mind if we wish to be persuasive.

We have all attended debates where the atheist won on points, but where the audience thought the religious person won because he was a nice, charming guy. We not only have to keep winning on points (no problem, if we know our stuff), we also have to be that nice, charming guy or gal if we really want to make an impact on society.

This does not mean we have to compromise our atheist position in any way. It just means there is almost always more than one way to say the same thing.

Björn Mastiaux, a Ph.D. student in Sociology at Heinrich Heine University, Duesseldorf, Germany, will visit Minnesota April 18-24. For his dissertation he is studying members of secular/atheist organizations in different regions of Germany and the United States. While here he would like to conduct extensive interviews with members of Minnesota Atheists. If you would be willing to be interviewed, contact Au-

gust Berkshire at pres@mnatheists.org or 612-338-4548.

Björn will be attending our April 20th Minnesota Atheists meeting (see page 1) and will be a guest on our Atheists Talk radio program that morning.

Björn Mastiaux



“Atheists Talk” Radio Report

By August Berkshire

In the past month we aired programs nine to twelve of our 26-week contract. Those programs were:

Mar. 9 – American Atheists Press with Frank Zindler; American Atheists conference with Ellen Johnson.

Mar. 16 – Books “Freethinkers” and “The Age of American Unreason” with author Susan Jacoby.

Mar. 23 – Duluth hospital merger and Lake Superior Freethinkers with Bill van Druten.

Mar. 30 – Americans United for Separation of Church and State with Rob Boston; AHA/IHEU conference in Washington D.C. in June with Fred Edwards.

For the second time one of our scheduled guests failed to call in and we were unable to reach her on the phone. While we do the best we can to avoid this, we were again able to fill the entire hour with interesting conversation at the last minute.

Bruce Honnigford has stepped

down as our regular host. He has been replaced by Mike Haubrich, except when Mike conducts an interview, in which case Bjorn Watland will be our host. Other people who continue to contribute to the success of our program are August Berkshire, Cynthia Egli, Scott Lohman, Kristine Harley, Grant Hermanson, George Kane, P.Z. Myers, Jeannette Sorensen and Grant Steves.

We have many ideas for future programs and guests and we welcome your input as well. Contact us at 612-588-7031 or radio@mnatheists.org to let us know how we’re doing and to suggest a guest or program.

We had to purchase our time slot (Sundays, 9-10 a.m.) for \$9,100 and then try to sell ads to defray the cost. So far we have only sold about \$3,000 worth of ads, so your contributions are greatly appreciated (please specify that they are for the radio program). The good news is that we have seen a substantial increase in membership.

Another way you can help is to listen to the radio program live (AM

Volunteer needed for Associate Chair

Bruce Honnigford has decided to resign from the Board of Directors, vacating his position as Associate Chair. The Board is seeking a volunteer to fill this position.

The responsibility of the Associate Chair is to lead Board meetings, Membership meetings and compile the agenda when the Chair, Steve Petersen, is unable to attend. A suitable volunteer must be appointed by the Board and confirmed at the next following Membership meeting.

950 or AirAmericaMinnesota.com/listen) and call (952-946-6205) or e-mail (radio@mnatheists.org) a question to us during the show. We want to hear from you!

Also, don’t forget to support our sponsors, who support our radio show with their advertising: the American Humanist Association, the Humanists of Minnesota, the Secular Coalition for America, Freedom From Religion Foundation, and Q.Cumbers restaurant in Edina.



Food for Thought

On March 30, 61 people attended a Building Fund Raiser event, our all-you-can-eat spaghetti dinner. Sauces provided included meatball, meat, ve-

gan, spicy pork noodles, calamari, Coq au Vin, pesto and olive with spring mint. Also on the bill of fare were garlic bread, salad, gelato and biscotti, all for just \$6.66. The First



Annual Fern Wodtke Memorial Chinese Checker Tournament ended informally, with all participants receiving prizes. The event raised \$1,082.22 for the Building Fund.

Photos by Tom Riddering

MNA Committees

By Andy Flamm and August Berkshire

Minnesota Atheists has established the following committees to help us provide better service to our members and to the community and to get more of our members involved in leadership. We welcome your participation. Please contact a MNA board member (see page 2) to let us know how you can help. (You can serve on more than one committee!)

Atheist Community

Membership Committee:

Works to maintain current membership, solicit new members, welcome new members, and foster a positive atheist community. Secondary role is to solicit donations.

Program Committee: Plans and executes activities for members (most of which are also open to the general public), such as monthly meetings, social hours, picnics, 5th Sunday dinners, Day of Reason, booths and marches at festivals, Winter Solstice Party, debates, etc.

Building Committee: Researches possible buildings to buy, plans for the successful transition to ownership and supervises use of the building once obtained.

Outreach

Political Policy Committee:

Clarifies our political position on issues that pertain to separation of state and church, including vouchers, stem cell research, gay rights, sex education, contraception, abortion, voluntary euthanasia, etc.

First Amendment Watchdog Committee: Takes action against state/church separation violations, including lobbying at the State Capitol.

Public Speaking Committee: Provides free MNA speakers for the media, schools, and events hosted by other groups.

Public Service/Charities Committee: Plans activities that allow atheists to do good works and improve our image.

Media

Web/Podcast Committee: Designs and manages website, including podcasts.

Cable TV Committee: Produces and distributes cable programs.

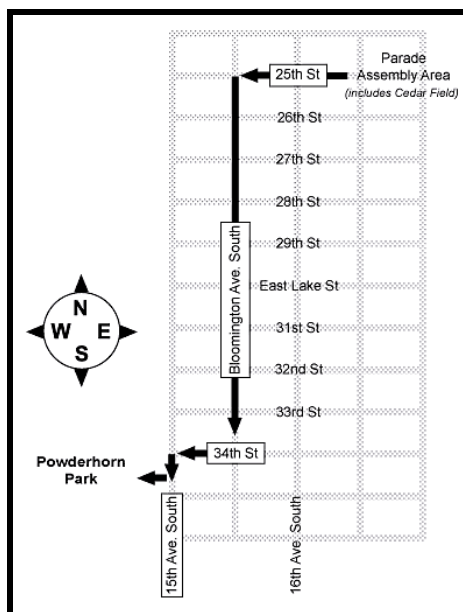
Radio Program Committee: Produces radio programs.

Editorial Board: Produces the newsletter.

March meeting

Minnesota Atheists' March meeting featured Bjorn Watland, Director-at-Large, speaking about Mormonism. By fielding fast flung queries from the audience, Bjorn provided a peek into the mysteries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, whose smartly dressed missionaries scour the globe looking for new converts. Topics covered included the history of Mormonism and its founding by Joseph Smith in the 1830s, the translation of the Book of Mormon, why there are so many Mormons in Utah, how Mormons have been involved in politics, and just what is up with "magic underwear." While not a Mormon himself, and not reared as one, Bjorn has been fascinated with the religion since last April when a pair of missionaries from the church asked him if he believed in Jesus, and he asked back, "historically or metaphysically?" For the next six months, he and his fiancée, Jeannette Sorensen, met nearly weekly with a pair of missionaries and a male member of the local Ward to discuss the Book of Mormon, and to ask questions about the origin stories of the LDS Church, and how they differ from the explanations of anthropologists and historians. It was a helpful dialog, and Bjorn and Jeannette attended picnics with Ward members, and even had dinner with a couple. Mormons were surprised to learn that their morals were the same as those of Bjorn and Jeannette.

our "Get Out of Hell Free" cards. Don't forget to wear your Minnesota Atheists t-shirt if you have one! We also need volunteers to staff our booth in Powderhorn Park during the march. For more information, please contact Steve Petersen at (651) 484-9277 or chair@mnatheists.org.



May Day Parade

Please join us marching in the May Day parade Sunday, May 6, at 1 p.m. The parade begins at Cedar Field (18th Ave. S. & 25th St.) and goes to Powderhorn Park (15th Ave. S. & 34th St.) as shown on the map on the left.

Meet us at Cedar Field at 1 p.m. We'll be carrying a large blue "Minnesota Atheists" banner, and will have signs for marchers to carry. Look for us toward the back of the line in the "Free Speech" section. We always get a lot of applause as we march and have fun handing out

Where are our members coming from?

Following are the comments from on-line members to recent questions concerning how they learned of us and their reasons for joining.

Where did you hear about MA?

American Atheists Web
 Richard Dawkins Web
 Pharyngula (P.Z. Myers' Web)
 Debate in Mankato
 Friend of Ted Moore
 MN Atheist Meetup
 Air America radio
 MA Web
 iTunes Store
 May Day Parade
 Known about you for years
 Already a member

Internet search
 MN Atheist Meetup
 Internet
 Web

Why did you join?

To help.
 - - -
 - - -
 To support rationality.
 Perhaps to help the organization have a stronger voice or presence.
 Why not?
 I am an Atheist.
 Wanted to be around with similar ideas and opinions.
 I am supporting a great organization.
 I enjoyed my first meeting so much I'm looking forward to participating more.
 Want to support you and participate.
 Although, and after supporting national Atheists orgs, I realize now, it is much more important that we all support our local Atheist community where we can be socially connected for a more positive impact in our own community. I can thank Minnesota Atheists.
 To find other Atheists.
 Decided it was time to be more active in the Atheist community.
 To boost members and be involved.
 Concerned about "American Taliban"

Day of Reason

Minnesota Atheists will be hosting a Day of Reason event in the State Capitol rotunda on Thursday May 1 from Noon to 1:00 pm. We will have a program of speakers on the impor-

tance of separation of state and church. After all, it is only reasonable to request our lawmakers to fully enforce the Establishment Clause of the US Constitution.

This event will counter the National Day of Prayer rally outside on

the Capitol steps at the same time.

We look forward to a large gathering of atheists and humanists. For more information please contact Steve Petersen at 651-484-9277 or chair@mnatheists.org

Freethought Cryptogram

LQGBKWL RLO L WAOMCQ CU MABEKED WBKQKELPO

KEMC RGBCGO LUMGB MRGKB NGLMR — PKSG ZKPPH

MRG SKN, ZCEEKG LEN WPHNG, LEN YGOAO WRBKOM.

EGTOWLOMGB SGEM ZBCWSQLE CE "MRG OKQJOCEO."

Solution to last month's Cryptogram:

Folks, I didn't major in math. I majored in miracles.

Mike Huckabee, explaining why he does not drop out of the race for the Republican nomination for president.

American Atheist Convention



American Atheists held their national convention at the Minneapolis Marriott City Center over Easter weekend. It was the first time that the convention was held in the Twin Cities in 20 years, and the most successful American Atheist Convention ever, with 600 attendees. Minnesotans were about 10% of the audience, and most of those were members of Minnesota Atheists.

We were well represented in the program, too. On Thursday evening, the Freethought Band entertained, with skits from past Follies by Cynthia

Egli, Tom Riddering and Rick Rohrer, and Scott Lohman. August Berkshire welcomed the convention the following morning as the president of the host organization, acknowledging the work of the members who helped in any way to make the convention possible.

Friday afternoon, August and Cynthia took part in a debate, arguing that atheist organizations should engage in social activism. On Saturday morning, August and Steve Petersen delivered a slideshow presentation to instruct attendees on how to lobby their

state legislators.

American Atheists put together an outstanding program of speakers for the convention. Richard Dawkins was brilliant and entertaining as always, but I felt that the star of the show was physicist Dr. Lawrence Krauss, who explained the current state of cosmology in his presentation, "Much Ado About Nothing: A Cosmic Mystery Story." On Sunday morning, there was a debate between Frank Zindler, the Managing Editor of the American Atheist Press, and conservative col-

(Continued on page 9)



Opposite page top: Cynthia Egli and August Berkshire (at left) debated conservative atheists about social activism.

Right: Minnesota Atheists' booth is staffed by Mike Haubrich and Jeannette Sorensen as George Kane, Michelle Losey and Norman Ehrentreich look on.



Below Right: (From left) Steve Petersen and August Berkshire present a program on how to lobby on behalf of church-state separation.

Opposite page bottom left: Biologist Richard Dawkins and the plaque given to Minnesota Atheists for helping with the convention.

Below: Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists (left) and Margaret Downey, president of the Atheist Alliance International.



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umnist and radio talk show host Dennis Prager on whether the Jewish god exists.

The attention of the national media was also drawn to the Twin Cities by an incident that Thursday night. Local biologist and blogger, P.Z. Myers was expelled from a preview showing at the Mall of America of the creationist propaganda film "Expelled," even though an interview with him is featured in the movie, and he is thanked in the credits. In a bizarre twist, theater staff did not recognize Myers' distinguished guest, Richard Dawkins, who also appears in the film. Minnesota Atheist Director-at-large Kristine Harley also viewed the movie in the Myers/Dawkins group.

News and notes

By George Kane

An important front in Islam's battle against secular law is opening in the United Nations General Assembly. In December it passed a resolution "Combating Defamation of Religions" by 108 votes to 51 with 25 abstentions. This resolution, proposed by the 56 member states of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), directly limits rights of individuals detailed in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and two International Covenants, on *Civil and Political Rights* and on *Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*.

Delegations supporting secular government opposed the resolution, as the Portuguese delegate, speaking for the European Union, explained:

"The European Union does not see the concept of 'defamation of religions' as a valid one in a human rights discourse. From a human rights perspective, members of religious or belief communities should not be viewed as parts of homogenous entities. International human rights law protects primarily individuals in the exercise of their freedom of religion or belief, rather than the religions as such."

The OIC plans, by weight of numbers in the General Assembly, to legitimize a broader exemption for Islam from current human rights agreements, the *Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam*. The *Cairo Declaration* makes no mention of existing human rights declarations but states that "The Islamic Shari'ah is the only source of reference for the explanation or clarification to any of the articles of this Declaration." It further declares that the rights described in it come from Allah, so "no one as a matter of principle has the right to suspend them

in whole or in part or violate or ignore them in as much as they are binding divine commandments."

The International Humanist Ethical Union (IHEU) proved that the claim by the Pakistani ambassador that the *Cairo Declaration* is "complementary to" the UDHR is false. It permits nations to outlaw apostasy and blasphemy. In some Muslim nations, those offences are punishable by execution.

The *Cairo Declaration* expressly restricts the rights of non-Muslims and women...

It further declares that the rights described in it come from Allah, so "no one as a matter of principle has the right to suspend them in whole or in part or violate or ignore them in as much as they are binding divine commandments."

The *Cairo Declaration* expressly restricts the rights of non-Muslims and women. It further stipulates that a person may only express their opinion in a manner "as would not be contrary to the principles of the Shari'ah," and that freedom of expression may not be used to "weaken faith." If *Cairo* passes in the General Assembly, religious liberty will disappear from internationally recognized human rights.

The OIC late in March struck another blow in the United Nations against the freedom of speech. The Human Rights Council has a "Rapporteur" who has primary responsibility for producing an annual report on restrictions placed on the freedom of speech around the world. The OIC turned this job description on its head in an amendment to the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression which requires him to report on "abuses" of freedom of expression to discriminate against racial and religious groups. The

amendment cites Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states that "any advocacy of ... religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law." Under the Special Rapporteur's new mandate, in consideration of the Cartoon *Intifada*, he would report not on the death threats against the cartoonists who caricatured the prophet Muhammad, on the economic boycott of Danish products and the Muslim nations that tried to pressure Denmark to suppress the *Jyllands Posten*; rather, the Rapporteur would report the cartoonists and the newspaper for inciting the hostility and violence directed against them and condemn the Danish government for its failure to suppress publication. Roy

Brown, spokesman at the UNHRC for the International Humanist and Ethical Union, commented, "We have just witnessed the death of the Human Rights Council, and with it the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

The Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders has produced a short film that is highly critical of the Koran and Islam. According to Wilders, *Fitna* proves that Islam is a violent and intolerant religion. When he posted a promo for the movie on YouTube, the Musharraf government cut off access to that site in Pakistan. Wilders intends to release *Fitna* on the internet, but his web site has been suspended by his domain host, Network Solutions, which fears reprisals like the Cartoon Intifada.

The European Union was then reluctant to publicly support Denmark, since several European leaders were apparently intimidated by the wrath of Muslims in their own countries and

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around the globe. The EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights assures all European citizens the freedom of expression, however. "*Fitna*," the name of the film, means "test of faith in times of trial" in Arabic. It fittingly presents a test to European leaders, of whether they are committed to uphold and defend the fundamental value of Western society.

Although he is unknown in the United States, **Magdi Allam** is recognized in Europe as a leading Muslim critic of Islam. The Egyptian-born Allam is deputy editor of Italy's top newspaper, the *Corriere della Sera*, and an outspoken opponent of Islamic terrorism. But he is likely to lose whatever influence he has in the Muslim world because, like Salman Rushdie and Ayaan Hirsi Ali before him, he has renounced Islam. On Easter Sunday he was baptized as an adult convert to the Roman Catholic Church by Pope Benedict XVI.

Allam was given a death sentence in a 2003 *fatwah*, but his security concerns will be even more serious after this apostasy.

Saudi Arabia plans to retrain its 40,000 imams, in an effort to counter militant Islam. The plan is part of a wider program launched by the Saudi monarch a few years ago to rein in militant clerics.

The powerful, ultraconservative religious establishment continues to exert a reactionary influence over Saudi society. For example, a prominent cleric recently called for the beheading of two liberal writers who had questioned the orthodox view that Muslims cannot change their religion.

In Turkey, a senior prosecutor has gone to the courts asking that the ruling AKP party be closed down for violating the guarantees of secular government in the Ataturk-era constitution. Abdurrahman Yalcinkaya also asked for 71 party members, includ-

ing Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul, to be banned from politics for five years. The Islamic party, which won a landslide victory in last June's national elections, recently ended the constitutional prohibition against women wearing the Muslim head scarves in college.

In Denmark, in response to the police uncovering a plot to execute the cartoonist who had caricatured the prophet Mohammad with a bomb in his turban, leading Danish newspapers

In Denmark, in response to the police uncovering a plot to execute the cartoonist who had caricatured the prophet Mohammad with a bomb in his turban, leading Danish newspapers demonstrated solidarity by reprinting the cartoon.

demonstrated solidarity by reprinting the cartoon. Osama bin Laden described the drawings as part of a "new crusade" against Islam, in which he said the pope had played a "large and lengthy role." He threatened major attacks against Europe in reprisal.

Given President Bush's express support for government promotion of Christian church activities, I am quite surprised by an increase of IRS audits of church compliance with prohibitions against political campaigning. More churches are crossing the line on which their tax exemptions depend, between permissible issue advocacy and partisan politics. The number of complaints to the IRS over church politicking has reached an all-time high over the last three or four years. A 2006 poll found that about a third of Roman Catholics and white evangelicals and 42% of black Protestants said politics and social issues had been discussed from the pulpit at least "once every month or two.

Perhaps the White House is permitting the IRS to proceed because liberal churches are flaunting political

restrictions as often as conservative ones. Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr., for example has promoted parishioner Barack Obama's candidacy from the pulpit of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ. The IRS is now investigating Trinity's national parent, the United Church of Christ, for a speech Sen. Obama gave to 10,000 people at a church conference in June in Hartford, Conn., in which he promoted his candidacy and parts of his platform.

But while the agency has issued dozens of warning letters aimed at halting advocacy for political candidates, it has only twice revoked a church's tax-exempt status since the tax law was amended in 1954, a spokeswoman said.

Controversy at the Naval Academy Chapel in Annapolis, Maryland: For 40 years, the Sunday nondenominational Protestant service has begun with a color guard dipping the flag of the academy and the American flag before the altar. When it was pointed out that the United States Flag Code says the flag "should not be dipped for any person or thing," the practice was discontinued. They received so many complaints after they did so that the illegal flag dip has been reinstated.

Attorneys for Army Specialist Jeremy Hall and the Military Religious Freedom Foundation refiled their federal lawsuit against Major Freddy Welborn and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, adding a complaint alleging that Hall's promotion was blocked in response to his original suit.

Hall alleges that he was denied his constitutional right of assembly while he was deployed in Iraq when he tried to form an atheist discussion group, and was punished for refusing to join in Christian prayers. He says in the new complaint that his promotion was blocked after the commander of the

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1st Infantry Division and Fort Riley broadcast an e-mail around the post announcing Hall's suit.

In Los Angeles, a state court ruling could potentially end nearly all home schooling in the state. The county petitioned to have two home-schooled children enrolled in public or private school after an older sibling accused the father of abuse. A lower state court ruled against that idea, citing a constitutional right held by parents to educate their children at home. The California Appellate Court for the second district disagreed and reversed that ruling, declaring that "parents do not have a constitutional right to educate their children in their own home."

An estimated 60,000 to 200,000 children are currently being home-schooled in California, but the court ruling could be used to require parents to get credentials, requiring a five-year course of study and multiple exams. Home-schoolers are 'in shock' over court ruling, as the parents would then have to learn something.

When Calvin Christian School asked the Edina Housing and Redevelopment Authority for \$1.5 million in bonds to finance new building construction, the Minnesota ACLU leapt into action. They sent a letter pointing out that, even though the construction would add non-religious space to the building, "a reasonable observer could easily conclude that this program is designed solely to advance the religious purposes of Calvin Christian School." The Housing and Redevelopment Authority voted 4-1 against the proposal because of concerns over violation of the principle of separation of church and state.

In-box

The following two letters were published in the New Ulm Journal, in response to letters opposing the right to abortion.

I am writing in response to the letter by Phil Drietz in your Wednesday, Feb 27, 2008 edition. ("Abortion rejects common decency").

There are many fallacies in Mr. Drietz's arguments, which I would like to point out.

I would like to think that there are probably well meaning people on both sides of the issue of the debate about abortion. I would also like to think that not everyone who feels uncomfortable about abortion is a religious nutcase. But by the same token, I don't think it's fair to label everyone who supports abortion rights as a supporter of murder!

There is much to be said in favor of sober and thoughtful dialogue on any controversial issue. But Mr. Drietz instead chooses to use emotion laden words such as "murder" and "tortured and dismembered." I also feel that he attempts to demonize people who seek abortions and doctors who provide these services. I can imagine that he finds the video that he watched, presumably of a late term abortion, to be highly disturbing. I would presume that hardly anyone would derive any pleasure of watching such a video. But it is also inaccurate to assume that this video shows a callous woman in cahoots with an evil doctor to "torture and dismember" her unborn. The statements that Mr. Drietz makes are not thoughtful, but rather are designed to either inflame or guilt-trip the reader into agreeing with his point of view.

I am willing to consider that many individuals who are uncomfortable with abortion are probably driven by compassion (although a good number may also oppose abortion purely on religious grounds). However, most reasonable people will probably agree

that an abusive adult beating in the brains of a toddler cannot be equated to a frightened 14-year-old victim of rape choosing to have the resulting pregnancy terminated, as Mr. Drietz would like us to believe. Similarly, in the case of late term abortions, I doubt that a pregnant woman who has lovingly and willingly maintained a pregnancy for seven months would suddenly decide that, since she has nothing better to do one afternoon, why doesn't she just run over to the doctor's office and get an abortion before she heads off for her manicure? I would assume that in most cases late term abortions are very difficult and heart-breaking decisions that families are forced to make. I do not think it is reasonable or kind at all to accuse these unfortunate people of murder!

Unplanned pregnancies happen. Sometimes people fail to use birth control, sometimes the birth control fails. Sometimes planned pregnancies go tragically wrong, with potentially disastrous health risks to either the mother or the fetus or both. These are some of the reasons that people who support abortion rights feel strongly that issues such as pregnancies, termination of pregnancies and size of families are decisions that are private, and should be for women and their doctors to decide. Mr. Deitz seems rather contemptuous of "a woman's right to choose." I think that this is not a political slogan, but a right that both men and women deserve, to decide what to do about their lives, which includes vital reproductive rights and decisions.

Surely Mr. Drietz understands that an unplanned pregnancy has consequences for both women and men.

Also, one may choose to vote for, or not vote for the DFL, but once again this should be based on sober thought, not by name calling and

(Continued on page 13)

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equating the DFL to murderers.

A reasonable approach to decreasing the number of abortions is to educate people about effective birth control and to make birth control easily available. Unfortunately, many people who are the most vocal against abortion are the very same folks who are against birth control, which leaves women, and for that matter men, in a terrible predicament.

Compassion is an admirable quality. But along with compassion for the unborn, it would be wonderful if people who are against abortion extend some of that compassion to the 14-year-old pregnant rape victim, or to the devastated couple who find out in the 7th month of pregnancy that the baby whom they were waiting to welcome into this world has a malformed brain and skull and will live just for two days, with a great deal of suffering, and then will die.

The “already born” of our fellow humans deserve compassion too.

Vanita Mishra, New Ulm

Same old accusations

Steve and Vickie Kuehn’s March 7, 2008 letter continues in the same histrionic vein as prior letters of these sort, full of wild accusations, and supercilious judgments hurled at the decency and morality of people, especially women, whose lives and circumstances they know and care nothing about.

They are entitled to their opinions. But the rest of us are not obligated to accept their irrational statements as serious and thoughtful dialogue.

Parroting “Abortion is murder, and all who partake are murderers!” while turning a deaf ear to any dissenting opinion, is not conducive to intelligent dialogue. It is reminiscent of a schoolyard squabble in which a child

plugs its fingers in its ears and screams to drown out the other child’s response.

While it may be true that the majority of women seek abortions for reasons other than rape, I fail to see how this somehow discounts these tragedies. Are the Kuehns seriously suggesting that we force a 14-year-old child who is pregnant by her incestuous father to carry his child to term? Should we force the married mother of a toddler, who finds out that because of medical reasons her pregnancy can cost her life, to carry the pregnancy to term even if it means her

Banning abortions will not reduce or eliminate them; it will simply drive them underground, back to the horrific days of back alley abortions by quacks, and to the ensuing tragic consequences.

death?

I agree that people should plan their families carefully. The best way to reduce abortions is to educate people about birth control and make it easily available. However, thanks to the abysmally failure-ridden “abstinence only” sex education programs taught in many schools, there are millions of young people who are growing up with very little knowledge of how to protect themselves against unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Sometimes the best birth control methods fail. Contraceptive pills may be unaffordable to many. Some doctors refuse to prescribe, and some pharmacists refuse to fill birth control prescriptions because of religious dogma.

Studies show that along with dropping out of high school, having a baby as a young teenager may doom a young girl to a life of poverty. No young person should be punished like this.

Other scare tactics used include

spreading false information, such as abortion causing cancer or serious psychological problems.

While adoption may be a good solution for many people, it is a private decision for a woman and her family to make.

I doubt that the cute, smiling and obviously well fed and cared for babies that are displayed on “pro-life” billboards that adorn our highways represent the “real life” poor kids that wait forever to get adopted. I don’t see a huge line of “pro-life” individuals tripping over themselves to rush to adopt babies born to crack addicted mothers or babies with serious birth defects.

I am sorry that the the Kuehns had to go through a tragedy 16 years ago. I respect their right to not terminate their pregnancy. But they should extend the same courtesy of autonomy to other people. Not everyone may have the re-

sources to make the decision they did. It is no more right for them to force other people to carry pregnancies than it would have been for other people to have forced them to have had an abortion.

It is ethically wrong to force another human to be an incubator of an unwanted pregnancy. In some countries where abortions are illegal, women who show up in hospitals after a botched back alley abortion are promptly handcuffed to the hospital bed, and the entire area is treated as a “crime scene.”

I do not think this is what we want.

Banning abortions will not reduce or eliminate them; it will simply drive them underground, back to the horrific days of back alley abortions by quacks and to the ensuing tragic consequences.

The “already born” of our fellow humans deserve compassion, too.

Vanita Mishra, New Ulm

As in Europe, Christianity is losing its influence on Americans

This editorial was published in the Stillwater Gazette on March 17, 2008.

by Lee Salisbury

A recent survey by the *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life* details religious life in America. Based on interviews with more than 35,000 Americans, the *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* finds that religious affiliation in the U.S. is diminishing.

The study shows 28 percent of American adults have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion - or no religion at all. Forty-four percent of Protestant adults have switched Protestant affiliation. Catholicism has experienced the greatest net losses. While 31 percent of Americans were raised in the Catholic faith, today 24 percent describe themselves as Catholic. Catholicism's losses would be considerably greater were it not for the offsetting impact of Latin American immigrants.

The survey found that the 16 percent of people (which translates to 42 million) who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith today is more than double the number who say they were not affiliated with any particular religion as children. Among Americans ages 18-29, an even greater 25 percent say they are not currently affiliated with any particular religion.

The dissatisfaction with Christianity is certainly understandable. Its allegedly omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God has recently proven to be totally indifferent, if not completely inept. Where was this God on 9/11, or when Katrina struck New Orleans, or when tornadoes obliterate so many predominately Christian towns like Greensburg Kansas?

Why didn't this god alert Minnesota's Christian Governor Pawlenty that the Interstate 35 bridge was about to collapse? America's dollar proudly proclaims, "In God we trust" yet under Christian President George Bush the dollar has lost 50 percent of its God entrusted value and America appears headed for a serious recession with a million homes in foreclosure.



Lee Salisbury

The track record of the Christian God, whose major attribute is purportedly love and faithfulness for his people, shows he is no more caring than Allah, Vishnu, or any of the dozens of other savior-gods of history. (Maybe if this god were a she, things would be different.) A bible full of contradictions, inconsistencies and errors plus no credible first century historical confirmation of a Jesus of Nazareth or for that matter a town called Nazareth compounds Christianity's credibility.

Why is secularism growing and Christianity declining? Perhaps because Christian faith demands unquestioning allegiance to fantastical stories and mind numbing dogma which squashes an intellectually stimulated minds. More and more people are asking questions that demand rational evidence-based answers. Christianity like any religion provides nice philosophical platitudes, but they are shallow and dissatisfying to a mind free of "don't dare ask" religious restraints. The free thought mind-set is like a butterfly hatched from its cocoon, free to think, reason and explore any and all there is to discover. Thus, cosmologists and astronomers find the cosmos to be 13 billion years old and biologists find the theory of evolution unites all fields of biology under one theoretical umbrella. As a college student said, "a man without religion is like a fish without a bicycle."

Does this mean religion and Christianity are useless? I do not think so! However, it does mean people need to put religion and Christianity in proper perspective. All religions are simply the institutionalization of mythology. Mythology is valuable in the sense that its heroes, whether Jesus, Zeus, Dionysis, Horus, Mithra, or Zoroastrianism's Ahura Mazda have magnificently inspirational stories that inspire us mortals. Their humble beginnings, miracles, teachings, deaths and resurrections are allegories that inspire and teach life's

lessons.

Seen in this light, our attitudes should appreciate myth's allegories, yet give greater credence to everyday nature's rhythms of existence. Winter is the time of death. Nothing grows, all appears dead. But, winter is always followed by spring. Resurrection time happens year after year, soon trees will blossom and birds sing. No matter how bleak life appears, a resurrection of a new start is on the way. The vast majority of us humans need new starts from time to time.

Where religion and its adherents inevitably foul things up bringing division and animosity in society is when they declare their particular brand or denomination of religion the one and only true religion. This childish exclusivity sending heretics and non-believers to an eternal hell and damnation exposes its true man-made fabricated origins.

Fear is the tried and tested motivator of the ignorant and gullible masses. Clergy who preach love, mercy, grace, hope, and forgiveness benefit society. Clergy who preach prejudice against blacks, women, Jews, gays and non-theists are a detriment to society.

After a long history of religiously motivated wars and two World Wars that killed 40 million people, Europeans have largely rejected Christianity. Europe's churches are museums mirroring outgrown meaningless traditions. Even in Italy with its Vatican and Papal splendor, only 27 percent of Italians consider religion important.

Like Europeans, Americans too are wising up. They have had it with the condescending divide and conquer tactics fomenting religious and political polarization.

As with Daniel's King Nebuchadnezzar myth, the handwriting is on the wall. The question is: which Christians will wake up to reject the literalized myth and which Christians will faithfully hang on to their spiritual fire insurance policies hoping for an afterlife of heavenly bliss of eternally strumming harps and singing How Great Thou Art?

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. (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>.

CHECK THE WAYS YOU WANT TO HELP ATHEISM GROW

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**Gentle rain
Falls on me
And all life folds
Back into the sea;
We contemplate
Eternity
Beneath the vast indifference
Of heaven.**

**– Warren Zevon, songwriter.
Excerpt from the lyrics for “The Indifference of Heaven”**

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