

The Minnesota Atheist

Minnesota Atheists

Established 1991

Positive Atheism in ActionSM

Volume 18 Number 5

May 2008

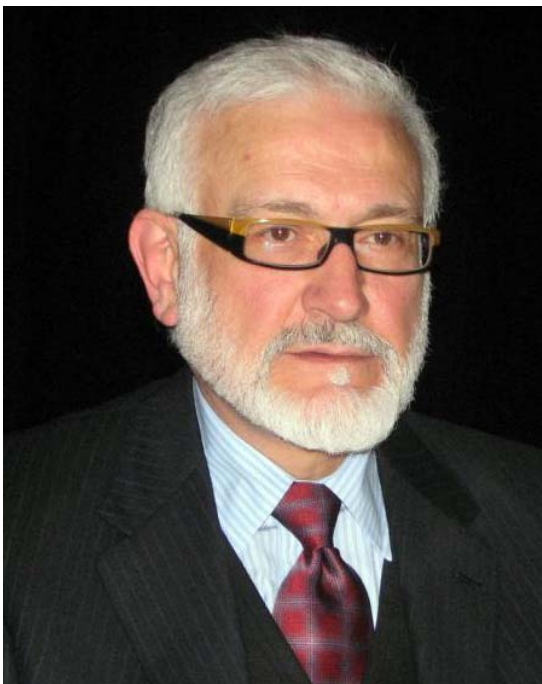
Sunday, May 18 Meeting

Grant Steves: The Joy of Sects?

Cults. The very word may conjure up images of secret societies, bizarre rituals or people in neck ties knocking on your door every Saturday morning.

But are so-called mainstream religions all that different from cults? How are we deluded into believing there is a difference in cults and denominations? How does the maturity of a religion change its status? How does religion manipulate perception to achieve its ends? What can we do for someone involved in a cult?

Grant Steves is a member of Minnesota Atheists' Cable TV Committee and was recently appointed acting Associate Chair. He will be addressing these questions during his presentation at the May 18 meeting. Steves will define and show cults' major characteristics and their similarity to mainstream denominations.



Grant Steves

He will also discuss what attracts a person to a cult, how to prevent recruitment, and how to help those involved. Steves' Th.D. focused on cults and the various major religions (Buddhism, Judaism, etc.), and his thesis dealt specifically with Jehovah's Witnesses. Having been both a member of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Catholic Church, Steves has a firsthand, insightful perspective on

Upcoming events

Sunday, May 18, 1:00-3:00 p.m.
Minnesota Atheist May meeting.
Grant Steves on Cults. See left.

Sunday, May 25, 1:00-3:00 p.m.
Highway clean-up. See page 5.

Saturday, May 31, 10:00-12:00
Blood drive. See page 6.

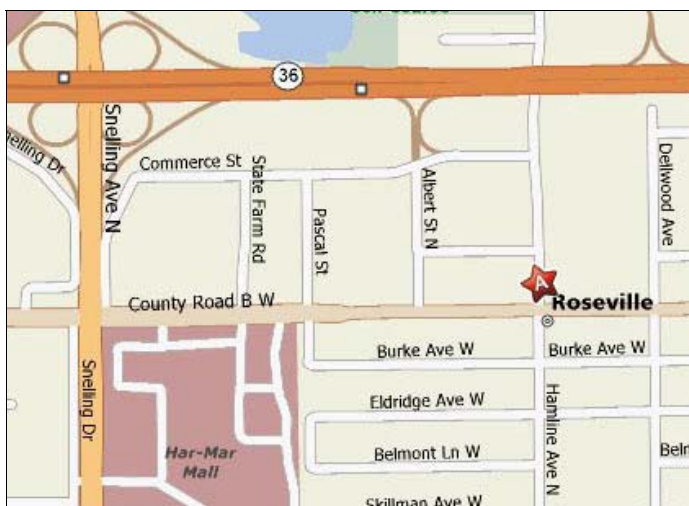
Sunday, June 8, 12:00-3:00
Freethought Picnic. See page 9.

both groups: the former being considered a cult and the latter a denomination. Steves will examine and compare these groups from an atheist perspective.

Steves' presentation will be held at the Roseville Public Library.

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:
\$105,848.58**

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

**MNA Meetup members: 245
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

A Winning Strategy

By August Berkshire

Ridiculing religion is easy. But is it *effective* in changing minds? I would argue that, for the most part, the answer in no. It is too often a cheap, simple way for us to feel superior. I am reminded of the saying: "Mud slung is ground lost." We would, for example, never be invited to speak to students in public high schools or Christian colleges – people who can really benefit from our message – if we engaged in ridicule.

I also see some people resorting to ridicule who are not willing to do the research it takes to come up with better arguments than religious people have. Thus ridicule too often signifies a failure on our part, and can result in a seeming victory for the religious side.

There are some exceptions to this rule. First, there are some religious claims, such as young-Earth creationism, that are so mind-numbingly inane and factually disprovable that they do deserve as much scorn as we can heap upon them. (Keep in mind, though, that evidence is still going to be more effective than ridicule.)

Another exception to the use of ridicule is extremely talented comedians, such as George Carlin, Penn Jillette, and Bill Maher, who were well liked before they took on religion. Also note that the objects of their ridicule tend to be "God" and pompous, hypocritical religious leaders, not the average religious person. (Even so, they tend to alienate as many people as they attract.)

So, as a strategy, we are better off sticking to the facts – which, as I pointed out in my essay last month,



August Berkshire

are on our side. I also pointed out that most people believe in a god for emotional reasons. How do we deal with this?

A good piece of advice that someone once told me is to agree with your opponent as much as you can.

With atheism I find this strategy particularly good – it startles religious people and gets their attention! So let's compare two different tactics for dealing with a debate on the afterlife.

As atheists, we always say we want respect. Yet do we deserve respect if we are not willing to respect religious people as fellow human beings?

In the first case, we say that the idea of an afterlife is ridiculous. The religious person crosses his or her arms in defiance and walks away, muttering "Well, that's what I would expect a God-hating atheist to say." We feel good at our easy remark, but nothing has changed.

In the second case, we begin, "You know, an afterlife is a really nice idea." "What?!" thinks the religious person, as his or her defiantly crossed arms drop in amazement. "An atheist who agrees with me?!" "Furthermore," we continue, "heaven wouldn't even have to be perfect to be a nice place to go after we die." Now we really have the religious person's attention: What is this atheist going to say next? "But," we say, "all science points to the fact that our thoughts and consciousness are tied to our brains. That changing our brains (say, through injury or drugs) changes our thoughts. That a disease

such as Alzheimer's that destroys our brains destroys our thoughts." Then we finish with two devastating questions: "How do thoughts that are destroyed in life by Alzheimer's Disease 'come back' after we die?" and "Doesn't it seem more reasonable that belief in an afterlife is a wishful thinking product of our survival instincts?"

I have used this second type of argument many times, presented sympathetically to religious students who have never really thought about the issue. I have seen tears well up in some of their eyes as they suddenly realized that the atheist argument was better than the religious one they were raised with, and they now had no *logical* choice but to give up belief in an afterlife, as much as this pains them emotionally.

Having presented myself as a sympathetic, not a ridiculing, atheist compassionately softens the blow a bit. Having also presented myself as a friendly and happy atheist lets them know that they need not *emotionally* fear the journey to atheism, if that is where their logic is taking them (as it should).

Of course, we should have zero tolerance for the worst cases of religious abuse – such as pedophilia and female genital mutilation. However, even in these cases, an appeal to compassion is more likely to prevail than ridicule. (In addition to outlawing and jailing the practitioners.)

The atheist Bertrand Russell once stated that the two most important things in life are veracity and kindly feeling, but that kindly feeling was the more important of the two:

"... most of the social and po-

(Continued on page 4)

300 Club Members — April 2008

The 300 Club was established by Erik Englebretson Minnesota Atheists at the suggestion of 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 parentheses indicate multiples of \$1,000.

When at least \$1,000 of the pledge has been paid, the person's name will be displayed in bold-face.

We have recently changed responsibility for tracking this information. If we missed your name, or do not you're your information correct, or to join the 300 Club, please contact Steven Petersen, at (651) 484-9277 or chair@mnatheists.org.

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
Any 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 (3)
James Koren
Jerrold & Joyce Larson
June Haiyan Li
Christopher Matthews
Vanita Mishra
Shirley Moll
Rod Monroe
Bob Muldoon
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
Brett Welch
Jim Whitney

April Fund Report

Building Fund:	\$3,024.22
Anonymous	40.00
Bob and Marilyn Nienkerk	250.00
Brett Welch	1,000.00
Christopher Matthews	50.00
Cynthia Egli	60.00
Dan Feyma	20.00
Guy Harper	50.00
James Whitney	25.00
Ken Holmbeck	100.00
Nancy Ruhland	25.00
Robert Muldoon	335.00
Shirley Moll	25.00
Vern Young	50.00
The Wodtke estate	500.00
Cash	17.00

Radio Fund:	\$50.00
Matthew Dittloff	25.00
Shirley Moll	25.00

Visibility Fund:	\$250.00
Vern Young	50.00
Michelle Losey (in memory of Fern Wodtke)	50.00
John Annen	15.00
Marilyn Nienkerk	10.00
Orin Doty	100.00
Shirley Moll	25.00

Susan & John Wiik
Rachel Wilson
Fern & Bob Wodtke
Jeff Wolfe
Vern Young
[Your name here!]

Total pledged so far: \$64,000

Total pledges fully paid so far: \$19,000

(Continued from page 3)

litical evils of the world arise through absence of sympathy and presence of hatred, envy, or fear.... Every kind of hostile action or feeling provokes a reaction by which it is increased and so generates a progeny of violence and injustice which has a terrible vi-

lity. This can only be met by cultivating in ourselves and attempting to generate in the young feelings of friendliness rather than hostility, of well-wishing rather than malevolence, and of cooperation rather than competition" (Bertrand Russell, "The Faith of a Rationalist").

As atheists, we always say we want respect. Yet do we deserve respect if we are not willing to respect religious people as fellow human beings? We can disrespect religious arguments, but we should never forget that we are dealing with fellow travelers on life's journey.

Minnesota Atheists Adopt-A-Highway cleanup Sunday, May 25

Minnesota Atheists will meet to clean up our stretch of road in the Adopt-A-Highway program on **Sunday, May 25th, 1:00-3:00 p.m.**

The cleanup will be on Highway 10 in Rice, MN (northwest of St. Cloud; a 1.5 hour drive from Minneapolis).

Meet at The Old Creamery Cafe, 405 Main St., Rice, MN 56367, 320-393-4100 (west of stoplight on Hwy. 10).

Arrive at **noon** for lunch beforehand and/or stay for dinner afterwards if you wish. Gloves and sturdy footwear are recommended. Transportation is available.

Call Deb Doucette (Little Falls) 320-632-9443 or August Berkshire (Minneapolis) 612-338-4548 for more details. Also, call if it looks like it will rain to see if the event has been postponed.

Red River Freethinkers to Take Action Against the City of Fargo

By Keith Lodermeier

Our Friends in Red River are taking admirable action against the city of Fargo for monumental religious favoritism. Literally, monumental. The Red River Freethinkers originally opposed the presence of a Ten Commandments monument on public property in Fargo, but in 2005 U.S. District Court Judge Ralph Erickson ruled that it could remain in its place. Its qualification for remaining: it was already there (specifically, for over 40 years). A deflating exercise in circumlocution, this only causes one to ponder why it was allowed to exist on public property in the first place. Since the question is apparently no longer up for debate, the RRF have opted for equality with a monument of their own.

The proposed monument would tersely review a fact of our country's history which has, for some, evolved into detested and false hearsay: "The government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion." Perhaps many would object to this as being negative and unnecessary. Well, a fact is more accurately described as indifferent, but I will agree that it *should* be unnecessary considering *this* fact from our history: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion."

If already evolved, let's all hope that the latter fact hasn't speciated in the presiding minds of this future Federal court case.

Freethought Cryptogram

BSKSKESB, MHFSQJK QJ GPH M VPBCZWQSV
 QHJSCD. MHFSQJK QJ ZSDQGSZ RA HFS WQSV
 QH ZPSJ GPH FMWS - HFSQJK.
 ZPOL TBOSLSB, "HFMH RPCPJMC VBSRT"

Last month's solution: America has a custom of turning criminals into heroes after their death—like Billy the Kid, Bonnie and Clyde, and Jesus Christ. — Newscaster Kent Brockman, on "The Simpsons."

Hello everyone at Minnesota Atheists!

I would like to let you know that I am back in California, where I am continuing with my research. I did have a wonderful time in Minneapolis and would like to thank you for that. Thanks, first of all, to Cynthia, who not only introduced me to vegetarian Indian cuisine when she hosted an altogether very entertaining Secular Supper on Saturday night, but who I also joined for two very pleasant interviews – one answering questions (on Atheist Talk), the other asking them (for my study).

Many thanks also to Lee, Shirley, Pierre, Joseph, Keith, Stu,

Grant, Jeannette, Norman and Paul (in chronological order) for granting me their time, trust and openness in the interviews I did with them.

I would also like to apologize to everyone I did not do an interview with although they had signed up for one. There was simply too little time.

Not to forget, thank you to everyone who bought me meals and drinks on various occasions, as well as, last but not least, to August and Rachel for being such perfect, generous and caring hosts! I found Minnesota Atheists to be a very diverse, lively and well organized group. I

am sure many isolated atheists would be happy to have a group like yours in their town. Good luck for your building project!

Bjoern



Bjoern Mastiaux

Grant Steves nominated to MNA Board

At its April 16th meeting, the Minnesota Atheists Board of Directors nominated Dr. Grant Steves to fill the position of Associate Chair that was vacant due to the resignation of Bruce Honnigford. MNA members must ratify this appointment at our next

meeting (May 18; see page 1) for it to become permanent.

Grant currently serves on the MNA Public Policy Committee, the MNA Editorial Board (often contributing book reviews), the MNA Cable TV Committee (as producer and inter-

viewer), and the MNA Radio Committee (as an interviewer).

Though he has only been a member of Minnesota Atheists for a year, Grant has made a substantial contribution to our growth and success.

Blood! We want Blood!

Minnesota Atheists has organized a new event for those able and willing. As a group, we are

donating blood at Memorial Blood Center in St. Paul on Saturday May 31 from 10:00 AM to Noon. If you are 17 or older, over 110 pounds, and in good

health, you should be able to donate. Pizza will follow. Come join your fellow free thinkers in giving and you'll receive a Minnesota Atheists t-shirt!

Cable Report

By Steve Petersen

For our April program we converted a talk by Hement Mehta speaking at our meeting a few months ago. We would like to thank Grant Hermanson for editing the talk to fit the cable time frame. Matthew Richardson will not be able to do the cable program for a while because of issues unrelated to Minnesota Atheists. We thank him for his contributions and look forward to his help in the future.

Grant Steves has agreed to be the program producer. If you have ideas for a program please contact Grant at: achair@mnatheists.org. If you would like to help on the cable program or sponsor the program on your cable access station please contact me at chair@mnatheists.org

Cable Crew: Brett Stembridge, Shirley Moll, Steve Petersen, George Kane, Matthew David Wiesner and Grant Hermanson.

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

Cable Schedule

Bloomington: Ch. 16. 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

(Continued on page 7)

Lee Salisbury denies Christians exist!

By Grant Steves

Those acquainted with Lee's humor and style were given a treat at the April meeting of Minnesota Atheists. You left understanding what a Christian wannabe is.

His PowerPoint gave us the facts and the material handed out gave an outline of the presentation. His style of speaking involved interaction with the audience. By calling upon members in a kidding and humorous manner, he engaged the audience and kept us focused on his material.

It is Lee's contention that a person who claims to be a Christian has a high standard to meet. He started by noting how people say all they need to do is 'believe' in Jesus and that will get them a passport to heaven. A belief that is based on the following verses: John 3:16, 11:25, and 3:16. Lee went on to show how that was not the standard set by Jesus by showing how he condemned groups that failed to meet his standard: Rev. 2: 4-5; 2: 14, 16; 2: 19-23; 3: 1-2; and 3: 15 – 17.

Some of the areas we were challenged to look at for hypocrisy were:

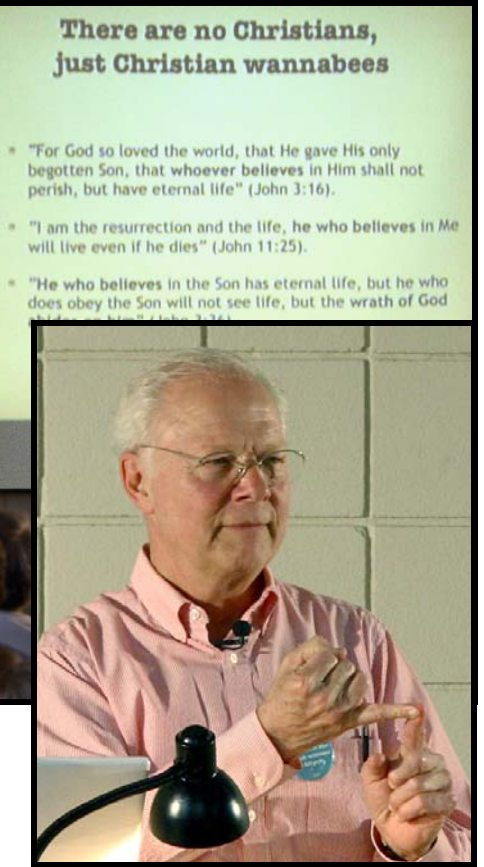
- 1) the concern a follower has about food and clothing;
- 2) the materialism of followers on earth;
- 3) the taking of the words of the Bible literally or metaphori-

- cally;
- 4) the command to do the same works that Jesus did (John 14:12);
- 5) the command in regard to divorce; and
- 6) the signs of being a Christian (Matthew 5: 1-12, John 15: 10, etc.)

Having presented the standards and the case for a Christian beyond just belief, Lee turns to the comments of atheists of the past:

Mark Twain: "Faith is believing what you know ain't so."

Thomas Pain: "The study of theology, as it stands in Christian churches, is the study of nothing; it is founded on nothing; it proceeds by no authorities; it has no data; it can demonstrate nothing; and it admits of no conclu-



sion."

The Pain quote sums up Lee's opinion. He concluded with the following comment, "If God judges humanity based on a person's integrity, honesty, and truthfulness....Heaven would be filled with those whose standardsreject mythical Biblical stories inundated with contradictions and errors, i.e., thoughtful atheists and agnostics.

For those not in attendance, you missed an excellent presentation that no review can capture.

Photos by Richard Trombly

(Continued from page 6)

Salutz.

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

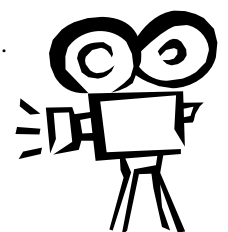
South Washington County: Ch. 14. Tuesday 7:00 p.m. Sponsor: Raleigh Nelson.

White Bear Lake, Hugo, Lake Elmo,

Mahtomedi, Maplewood, North St.

Paul, Oakdale, Vadnais Heights: Ch. 15. Friday 8:30 p.m.

Sponsor: Michael Seliga.



‘Atheists Talk’ Radio Report

By August Berkshire

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

April 6 – “The Beagle Project” with Peter McGrath & Karen James, interviewed by Mike Haubrich.

April 13 – “Expelled from *Expelled*” with P.Z. Myers, interviewed by Kristine Harley.

April 13 – Atheist artist Lynn Fellman, interviewed by Bjorn Watland.

April 20 – “There are no True Christians” with Lee Salisbury, interviewed by George Kane.

April 20 – German researcher on atheism Bjoern Mastiaux, interviewed by Cynthia Egli.

April 27 – “Faith-based Government Earmarks” with Rob Boston of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, interviewed by Grant Steves.

April 27 – “National Day of Prayer / Reason” with Steve Petersen and August Berkshire.

We have found that our audience likes a mixture of critiquing religion and talking about the positive things atheism and science have to offer humanity.

Minnesota Atheists member and artist Lynn Fellman, who was interviewed on our April 13 program, has joined our Radio Committee as one of our program planners and interviewers. After dropping out for personal reasons, we welcome the return of Grant Steves as one of our interviewers as well.

Other people who continue to contribute to the success of our program are August Berkshire, Cynthia Egli, Scott Lohman, Kristine Harley, Mike Haubrich, Grant Hermanson, George Kane, P.Z. Myers, Jeannette Sorensen, and Bjorn Watland.

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 are more than halfway through our 26-week contract with KTNF radio. The time is coming soon when we will consider renewing our contract. We really need your financial support if we are to continue this project. The program costs us **\$9,100** for half a year.

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

Stimulate the economy by supporting MNA

Are you wondering what to do with the recently announced tax rebate? Are you sick of looking at currency that has “In God We Trust” on it and want to get rid of it? The \$600 rebate is exactly the price of a life membership in Minnesota Atheists.

Coincidence? We think not! Show the world that we have our own “surge” strategy by becoming a life member of MNA or donating the money to our building or radio fund!

Membership Source Report

By Steve Petersen and Shirley Moll

The question keeps coming up: What is the most effective source of our membership? This is a mixed bag of information. However, we do attempt to track all contacts when we have reliable information. As of February of this year, thanks to Bjorn Watland, anyone joining through the web site must fill in a source question. We also purchased special non-profit software that has contact tracking information fields. We looked back at the contacts on our active mailing list and following are the numbers and the source information we have to date.

The total number of contacts for this report is 90; there are more contacts but they might not have joined and were moved to our marketing list. Now that we have an accurate way of checking the source of members, we will update this information periodically.

Newspaper editorials -	2 members;
Radio program -	6 members and 4 trials
Referrals -	3 members
Podcast -	3 members and 1 trial
Website -	5 members
Meet-up -	1 member;
American Atheists -	8 members and 43 trials
Convention	
Public events -	1 member
Other -	11 members
There have been 40 new members added to our organization so far this year.	

Minnesota, the Secular Coalition for America, Freedom From Religion Foundation, and Q.Cumbers restaurant in Edina.

A GOOD TIME WILL BE HAD BY ALL:

Freethought Picnics

Sunday

- June 8
- July 20
- August 17

The shelter area is reserved from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm.

- The official start of the picnic is noon.
- Jam session to follow, so bring a musical instrument.

June Picnic Sponsored by:

- ▶ Campus Atheists
- Skeptics & Humanists
- CASHumn.org

July Picnic Sponsored by:

- ▶ Humanists of Minnesota
- 651/335-3800
- HumanistsOfMN.org

August Picnics Sponsored by:

- ▶ Minnesota Atheists
- 612/588-7031
- MNAtheists.org

Families, kids, singles, and couples – all are welcome.

You are cordially invited to join us at our summer picnics. The picnics will be held at Columbia Park, located off of Central Avenue in northeast Minneapolis. **All are welcome.**



Lots of friendly people.
A play area for the kids.
Lively discussions for the adults.

♪ The **Freethought Ramblers** folk group will entertain you in June, and the highly acclaimed **Freethought Band** will perform in July and August. ♪

Bring some picnic food to share. The shelter area has electricity, sink and electric hot plate. (Don't forget to bring your own beverage, plate, and utensils.)

COLUMBIA PARK is located in northeast Minneapolis.

- ▶ Take Central Ave NE (MN Hwy 65) to Columbia Pkwy.
(Between 36th Ave and 37th Ave)
- ▶ Turn west onto Columbia Pkwy.
- ▶ Proceed along Columbia Pkwy (0.35 miles).
- ▶ After you go under the railroad bridge, you will see the park on your left.
- ▶ Take the first left onto the service road (you will see a sign for "800 Columbia Blvd"). Proceed to the second parking lot on your left (0.2 miles).

News & Notes

By George Kane

The Olympic Torch has left Mt. Olympus and is being flaunted around the world in a quadrennial public relations buildup to the Olympic Games. This year the ritual is being marred by demonstrators trying to extinguish the flame and to focus attention on the recent suppression of demonstrations in Tibet. Organizers have responded by massively increasing police security, and by diverting the torch from its announced routes, disappointing the crowds that came out to see it.

But why, I wonder, are these demonstrators so passionate about Tibet, and why should we care? Public assembly to advertise grievances is not everywhere a political right. It is always possible to claim human rights abuses; after all, we have our own. But that should not obscure the confrontation going on over the fundamental transformation of Tibet.

What we are seeing on the streets of Lhasa is a battle of monastic rule out of the Middle Ages against the forces of secularity, modernity, and economic development. Which side provides better hope to alleviate the poverty of Tibet's peasants? Tibet's GDP is about what the United States spends in Iraq in 3 weeks.

Tibet's greatest asset is the Dalai Lama, a highly educated and charming man running the government in exile. But not even he claims that Tibet should be an independent nation. If Tibet continues under monastic rule it can be nothing more than a museum masquerading as a nation.

The conflict in Turkey's government between the religious Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the constitutional requirement for secular government is coming to a



George Kane

crisis. The Constitutional Court has agreed to hear a case that the Islamic AKP intends to abolish secular government, based on public statements by party leaders. The suit asks the court to dissolve the AKP and to bar AKP chairman and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President

Abdullah Gul and 69 other senior party officials from government office for five years. Turkey's chief prosecutor Abdurrahman Yalcinkaya filed the suit in March, and observers expect that it will probably win the required 2/3 vote of the judges.

The AKP, which won 341 out of 550 seats in the National Assembly

[Rob Sherman's] testimony drew national attention because of Representative Monique Davis's outburst of anti-atheist bigotry.

in last summer's elections, clearly represents the democratic will of the nation. It is strong enough to amend the constitution, but the provision guaranteeing secular government is irrevocable. If the party were to defy the court, the military would intervene to enforce the verdict.

When Rob Sherman testified before the Illinois House State Government Administration Committee, he hoped to call attention to a multimillion dollar state payout to benefit a Baptist church. Instead, his testimony drew national attention because of Representative Monique Davis's (D-Chicago) outburst of anti-atheist bigotry:

"I don't know what you have against God, but some of us don't have much against him. We look forward to him and his blessings.... I'm

trying to understand the philosophy that you want to spread in the state of Illinois.... This is the land of Lincoln where people believe in God.... What you have to spew and spread is extremely dangerous.... It's dangerous for our children to even know that your philosophy exists.... Get out of that seat! You have no right to be here! We believe in something. You believe in destroying! You believe in destroying what this state was built upon."

Sherman, unruffled, completed his testimony. That night, Keith Olberman on MSNBC's *Countdown* awarded Davis his nightly "Worst Person in the World" designation. Sherman announced on his blog that Representative Davis had called him

and apologized, but a public apology is in order. Her remarks were an insult to all atheists.

In a significant victory over school employees who pray with students, the U.S. 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals in Philadelphia sided with the East Brunswick School Board against a New

Jersey high school football coach who kneeled during student-led team prayers. The lawyer for Coach Marcus Borden is considering an appeal to the Supreme Court.

The Center for Inquiry sent out an alert about errors in the high school civics textbook *American Government, Institutions and Policies*. In a 25-page report they detailed errors in global warming, the legality of school prayer, the *Lawrence v Texas* SCOTUS decision, the influence of the concept of original sin on the constitution, the meaning of the Establishment Clause, and the significance of denial of a writ of certiorari. The report calls for "immediate correction" of the errors.

Your turn: It's time for lifestyle rebellion

St. Cloud Times, April 19, 2008 <http://www.sctimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2008104190017>

By August Berkshire,
Minnesota Atheists

Times Writers Group member Mike Williamson believes we should turn to the Bible and Christianity as a cure for modern-day sexual immorality ("It's time for cultural rebellion" April 11). Really?

Williamson condemns, as we all do, the sex crimes alleged to have been committed by a 32-year-old man against a 13-year-old girl in Becker.

But what does the God of the Bible tell the Israelites to do after conquering the Midianites and killing every man? "Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man" (Numbers 31:17-18).

How are children treated elsewhere in the Bible? It is permissible to sell your daughter into servitude (Exodus 21:7). Disobedient sons are to be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 21:18-21). And, anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death (Exodus 21.17).

When young people mock the baldness of God's prophet Elijah, Elijah calls upon God to send two bears from the woods to attack the youths. God obliges, and the bears maul 42 young people (II Kings 2:23).

In the town of Sodom, Lot offers his two virgin daughters to the mob outside his home, rather than turn over two visiting angels (who, being emissaries from God, presumably could have made a miracu-



August Berkshire

lous escape) (Genesis 19:8).

Williamson advocates virginity until marriage. Is this because the Bible says non-virgin brides should be stoned to death? (Deuteronomy 22:13-21). Finally, there is the Bible's God-ordained ritual of male circumcision, often performed on infants and children with little or no anesthesia.

Williamson talks about "the creator's good plan for man and woman in the lifelong covenant of marriage." But, according to the Bible, God has no problem with polygamy (Genesis 29:17-28; II Samuel

are ostensibly biblical God-believers. Why should we be surprised at these facts, given the Bible's endorsement of patriarchy and women and children as property?

Yes, as Williamson advocates, it is time for a rebellion – but a rebellion away from Christianity.

We must get rid of the "sinful, forbidden fruit" aspect of sex, which only serves to make it more appealing to young people. We need comprehensive sex education for our young people – abstinence-based, not abstinence-only.

If we look to European countries, which have largely replaced Christianity with secular humanism, we find that young people engage in just as much sex as Americans of the same age, but it results in far fewer pregnancies and STDs. Ignorance and bliss do not go hand-in-hand.

Religion has failed, yet continues to do damage to society. It's time to try something new, something that tends to improve the

lives of people wherever it is embraced: atheism (the disbelief in arbitrary, "supernatural" authority) combined with humanism (which includes ethics based on compassion and evidence).

A lifestyle based on God-belief collapses when no evidence for gods exists. A lifestyle based on atheism and humanism has a greater chance for success because it is reality-based.

This is the opinion of August Berkshire, president of Minnesota Atheists, the state's oldest, largest and most active atheist organization.

But what does the God of the Bible tell the Israelites to do after conquering the Midianites and killing every man? "Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man"

3:2-5) or a married man having concubines (II Samuel 5:13; I Kings 11:3; II Chronicles 11:21).

What other "family values" might we learn from the Bible? According to Jesus, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).

Thus the mythical biblical gods of Jehovah and Jesus would be the last place we would want to look for family advice.

Many of the polygamous cults in this country that abuse women and children are Bible-based. The male clergy that sexually abuse children

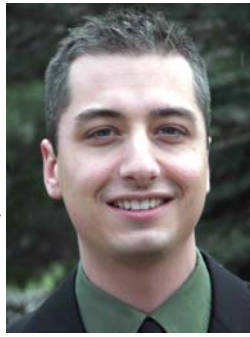
Expelled: No Intelligence Involved (A Review)

By Keith Lodermeier

With an admittedly closed mind, I went to see *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*. But my mind was not sealed off to the issue of Intelligent Design on account my precious atheism or beloved Darwinism. If any new or compelling ideas had been brought to my attention during the tedious hour and a half, I would be willing to admit it. But the arguments were so predictable and tired that I could have written the script before attending the movie.

However, there are a few tactics employed that I did not predict, such as depicting science as a gateway to atheism, which is probably true, but more important, defining atheists as, at best, undemocratic, intolerant curmudgeons and, at worst, Hitlers. And believe it or not, Ben Stein, the host, made a visit to Dachau for effect. Even though I did not expect the creators of *Expelled* to damage their cause with the argument that Darwinism and atheism justify evil, it is indeed tired, and therefore, unworthy of a detailed response.

The creators also take numerous potshots at scientists and prominent atheists, a strong sign of one, underdeveloped communication skills, and two, an argument lost. This is largely done with clever editing of interview footage of zany scientists and also by flashing frequently to low budget black and white clips from 40s and 50s cinema in which socially anti-quated characters are meant to represent the intolerant curmudgeons. In an interview with Stein, Richard Dawkins is made out to sound as if he believes ID to be plausible. Playing Devil's advocate, Dawkins suggests that even if it is proven that life on Earth was intelligently designed, it



Keith Lodermeier

only begs the question, who or what designed the designer? Dawkins' answer to this hypothetical question was a Darwinian process of slow change over time which was inadequately represented in the manipulated footage.

Aside from the petty tactics, which really are the strongest aspects of the movie, *Expelled* basically has one chopstick leg to support the weight of an impossible load: having an open mind to alternative theories of life's origins, i.e., Intelligent Design. This translates to: not teach the controversy, but *fund* the controversy and give our leading scientists the freedom to believe what they want despite a lack of evidence. The problem with

***Expelled* basically has one chopstick leg to support the weight of an impossible load: having an open mind to alternative theories of life's origins, i.e., Intelligent Design.**

teaching the controversy is that it makes the erroneous assumption that one exists in the scientific community. It also puts a theory with no evidence, no proposals on application, and which has an obvious religious agenda, on par with a theory supported by mountains of convergent evidence. Funding the controversy does the same thing but on a larger scale creating a grand illusion.

Also, promoting open-mindedness about alternative theories of life's origins demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the sciences in question. Evolution does not attempt to explain how life came to be but how it changed over time. The *Expelled* creators should have either decided on what subject they are objecting to (evolution, abiogenesis, theology, etc.) or just leave the science to

the scientists.

This IDea is passed off by repeating phrases such as "freedom of speech," "America is a free country," "if we don't have freedom, what *do* we have?" etc., ad nauseum, either from footage of Ronald Reagan (with Pat Robertson clapping in the background) or by someone in an office with a picture of Reagan on the wall.

If ID had any initial data to support its grand hypothesis, then we should be compelled to fund an ID program. This is simply not the case. In fact, it has proven to be the opposite. A case in point is Michael Behe's irreducible complexity argument, particularly concerning flagella, which I will not recite here other than that flagella can be explained much better by a Darwinian process than by the magic and alchemy of ID.

Darwin himself won over the scientific community (then an almost unanimously creationist population) with a very unpopular idea not by employing political rhetoric but with a theory supported by convincing evidence. ID has had its chance and has failed at this prior to *Expelled*. The case has been decided and is still closed. ID is still "breathtakingly inane," as John E. Jones, not an intolerant curmudgeon, but a conservative judge appointed by George W. Bush, has put it. *Expelled* has only marred ID's chances of reopening the case for appeal.

Intelligent Design is a clever and innovative tool to keep creationism alive, but *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* fails to address what the title implies, that Intelligent Design theory is worthy enough for the academy to take it seriously. Thus, there was no intelligence involved in the making of this movie.

For a thorough debunking of Expelled's claims, see www.skeptic.com.

What's sauce for the Muslim is sauce for the Christian

By George Kane

Katherine Kersten, the conservative columnist for the *Star Tribune*, has called attention to religious practice and training at a publicly funded charter school. She has not previously shown interest in church/state separation issues, but she has been a vocal critic of local Muslims for issues such as cab drivers refusing fares who possess alcohol and cashiers refusing to handle pork products.

So it is not surprising that her curiosity was piqued when she read reports concerning Islamic practices at the Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy in Inver Grove Heights. The *Minnesota Monthly* reported that "head scarves are voluntary, but virtually all the girls wear them" and that the school has a central carpeted prayer space. The *Pioneer Press* claimed that the student body prays every day, and a parent quoted in the article bragged that during Ramadan, all students fast from dawn to dusk.

Indeed, there is a lot about this charter school that should raise concern for violations of the First Amendment. The school building doubles as the headquarters of the Muslim American Society of Minnesota and also houses a mosque. The school's principal and executive director are both imams. Nearly all of the students stay after school to receive instruction in Islam, including prayer and worship, in programs presented by the Muslim-American Society. The school busses do not leave until those programs are over.

The school did not give Kersten permission to visit, but she learned of other school-sponsored religious activity from a Republican activist who had worked there as a substitute teacher. Amanda Getz said that on Friday, the Muslim holy day, there was a school assembly in the gym after lunch. Her duties required her to

take the fifth-grade students to the bathroom, four at a time, to perform their ritual foot washing.

There is abundant reason for the state to investigate violations of the separation of church and state that could threaten the school's charter and public funding. After Kersten's columns, the Minnesota Department of Education and the ACLU of Minnesota have both begun investigations. But many of the encroachments of religion into the public schools that Kersten deplores in these columns were demanded by conservative Christians who in the past denounced "hostility toward religion" in public schools.

Foreign language immersion schools provide a popular curriculum to give students fluency in a second language. There are charter schools providing immersion programs in Spanish, French, German, and even Chinese. Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy was formed as an Arabic language immersion school, which had the effect of drawing a student body from only Muslim families. This resulted in a monolithic market for the extra-curricular classes provided by the Muslim American Society of Minnesota. According to an Academy brochure, 77 percent of TIZA parents say that their "main reason for choosing TIZA ... was because of after-school programs conducted by various non-profit organizations at the end of the school period in the school building."

So the charter school can quite reasonably argue that they are simply providing to the children the services that the families demand. The school distinctly lacks ethnic and cultural diversity, with 83% of the students Black, and only 2% White. The religious breakdown is not provided, but it would be an odd school choice for a non-Muslim family. If there is an admissions bias to select children from the most observant Muslim families,

it would not be difficult to put together a very religious student body. The Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy has an enrollment of 300, but a waiting list of 1500.

Investigators should require proof that prayers during the school day are indeed student initiated, but with such a monolithic student body it is quite likely that the school is in compliance with this requirement. As closely as the Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy resembles a state-funded madrassah, investigators may yet not be able to find any violations.

The case is similar to that of the 1994 case *School Board of Kiryas Joel v. Grumet* where a school district was drawn around a village of Satmar Hassidic Jews creating a publicly funded Orthodox Jewish school. The court, in an opinion by Justice Souter, held that the funding of a school district designed to coincide with the neighborhood boundaries of a religious group constitutes an unconstitutional aid to religion. In this case, however, a religious school was created by funding a school specializing in a particular language, so it may be impossible to find any unconstitutional act by government.

To atheists, it seems obvious that publicly funded schools should stay completely away from religion, but it may be an eye-opener for Katherine Kersten and her Christian readers. I thank her for her vigilance against threats to secular government from Islam, but I hope that Christians can see that the entanglement of public schools with religion is wrong, regardless of what religion it favors. The doors to student-led prayers and after school worship and religious study were opened by Christians, but in the Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy, they don't like the result. The lesson they should take is that public school can only provide a neutral religious environment when it is religion-free.

Review of Marc Hauser's *Moral Minds*

By Grant Steves



Grant Steves

If all moralities were rooted in the Bible or the god of the Bible, we would have the solution to all moral questions. However, did the morality of indigenous people's from the Australian aborigines to the Amazon tribal groups develop their morality from the Bible? In both cases, they were not exposed to the Bible to any degree until the 19th century. Millions of people were never exposed to the Bible as a source of law and wisdom until the 20th century. Nevertheless, we know from historical accounts that the phrase, "do unto others, as you would have them do unto you," is universal. The principles of fairness and justice are in all cultures but are not derived from holy writ. Where do these principles come from? How have they come to be?

The book, *Moral Minds* (2006) by Marc Hauser (professor of Psychology and Biological Anthropology at Harvard University), proposes that morality has evolved. He believes that the answer to what is moral is not to be found in a burning bush but in the study of how we have evolved. The theory that he develops is descriptive of morality evolving. Professor Hauser provides a description of the unconscious and inaccessible principles that operate our moral judgments. At no time does he provide a directive as to what people ought to do. This is a book descriptive and not prescriptive of morality.

It becomes apparent that an understanding of his major influences helps the reader. His theory is constructed on the general insights of: Noam Chomsky's linguistic analysis; John Rawls' theory of justice and fairness developed in the PhD thesis

of J. M. Mikhail; Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning; and M. Hoffmann's study on empathy and morality. From these influences Professor Hauser believes we are born with abstract rules or principles with nurture entering the picture to set parameters and guide us toward the acquisition of particular moral systems. These abstract rules or principles incorporate "a universal moral grammar, a toolkit for building specific moral systems." Our knowledge of this system (somewhat grounded in Noam Chomsky's grammatical formulations) will enable us to understand the moral domain. However, Hauser has not fully developed the

with animals to support his theory. He uses the example of the Rhesus monkey to generalize about human behavior. It is acknowledging that what is observed is subject to interpretation. It is observed that when a Rhesus monkey sees a fellow monkey in pain, when they are eating, they will stop eating to prevent this pain from happening to the other monkey. This could be a form of empathy and the reaction a form of compassion.

We also see this in the feeding habits of the vampire bats. When a bat fails to find food and returns to the colony, the others will feed it. This could be considered a form of altruism or tribal preservation. The test of this theory was observed when the bats returned and fed a bat that was not related to their tribe.

These examples from animal behavior may be generalized to human behavior by noting that many animals have developed what appears to be a morality.

If taken from an evolutionary point of view, we might conclude this behavior is innate, and that it evolved. That would mean to nurture, in the case of humans, refines the application of moral principles that we find within our genetic system by our evolutionary ancestors.

Hauser cautions, however, that this is descriptive and a theory, but it is a theory that is getting considerable attention in several books: *The Evolution of Morality* (2006), Richard Joyce; *The Moral Animal* (1994), Robert Wright; *Empathy and Moral Development* (2006), Martin Hoffman; and *Primates and Philosophers* (2006), Frans de Waal. It would be advantageous for the atheist community to explore some of these books in this developing area of moral evolution.

The principles of fairness and justice are in all cultures but are not derived from holy writ. Where do these principles come from? How have they come to be?

grammar and moral refinement, but it has clear possibilities.

If you were to agree that fairness is one of the basic moral responses (this was derived from John Rawls' *Theory of Justice*), you could believe it is one of the components of the moral grammar. For example, fairness or justice seem to have evolved into a complex political concept; but in its less complex form, in human relations, it is about the treatment of others in an equitable manner. Hauser views fairness through George Lakoff's ten-tiered taxonomy. Fairness is how we treat distribution, opportunity, rights, responsibility, and power. How we permit each of these to be applied brings about fairness. Power is treated fairly in a democratic manner.

Hauser draws upon research

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>.

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