

# The Minnesota Atheist

Minnesota Atheists

Established 1991

Positive Atheism in Action <sup>SM</sup>

Volume 18 Number 6

June & July 2008

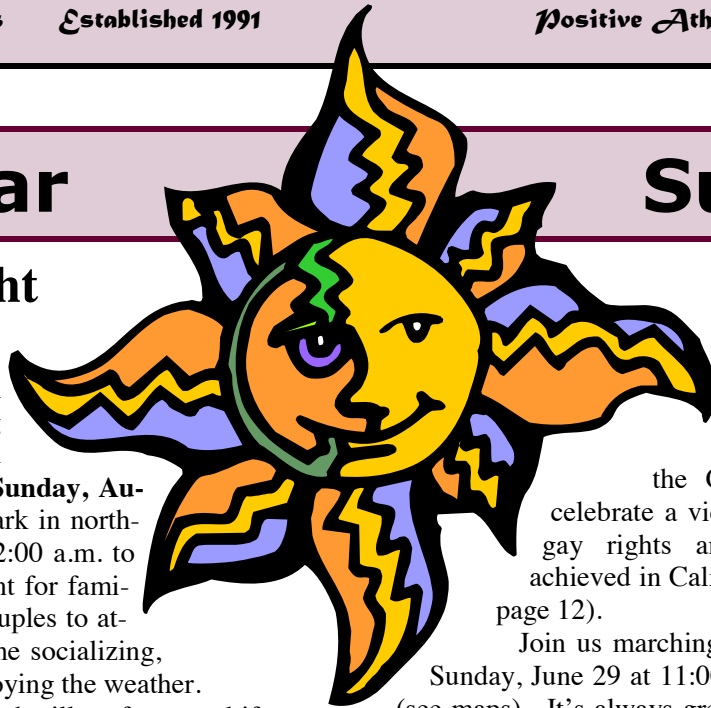
## Secular

## Summer!

### Freethought Picnics

Celebrate summer with us at the two remaining Freethought Picnics on **Sunday, July 20<sup>th</sup>** and **Sunday, August 17<sup>th</sup>** at Columbia Park in northeast Minneapolis from 12:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. This is an event for families, kids, singles, and couples to attend and have a great time socializing, eating, and hopefully enjoying the weather.

The Freethought Band will perform, and if you are a musician, bring your instrument and join the Freethought Ramblers folk group for an informal jam session. If you only have an ear for music, borrow one of our rhythm instruments and sit in. The first Freethought Picnic was a success, so don't miss out the two remaining. See the attachment for more information and directions.

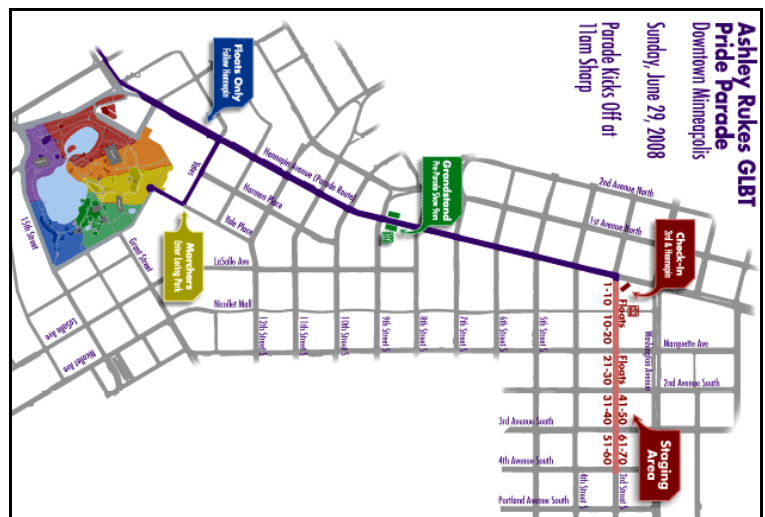
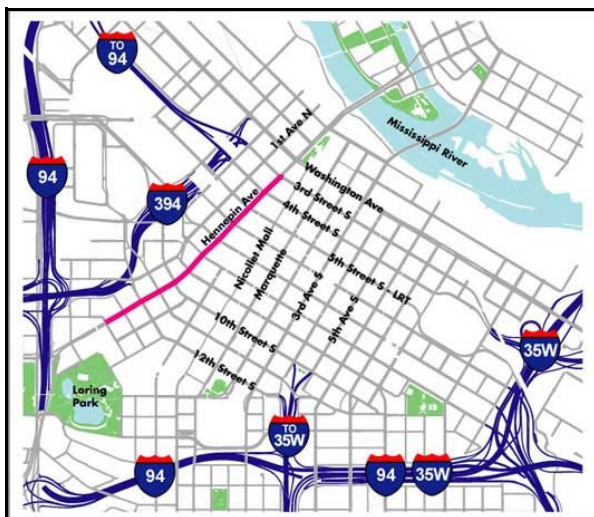


### Gay Pride Parade and Booth

Let's show our support for the GLBT community and also celebrate a victory for the advancement of gay rights and secular values recently achieved in California (see News & Notes on page 12).

Join us marching in the Gay Pride parade on Sunday, June 29 at 11:00, near 3d St. and 3d Avenue (see maps). It's always great to hear the cheers we get! Wear your MN Atheists t-shirt, or we'll give you one.

Help staff the Gay Pride booths (contact Mathew Richardson at [atheistcable@gmail.com](mailto:atheistcable@gmail.com)) and show support with your presence at the festival in Loring Park in Minneapolis on **Saturday, June 28<sup>th</sup> (10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.)** and **Sunday, June 29<sup>th</sup> (10:00 a.m. to 6:00p.m.)** Admission is free, Beer Garden admission is only \$5 per day, and Headline Show tickets are \$8 in advance, \$10 at the gate. See [http://www.tcpride.org/pride\\_events/2008\\_Festival.php](http://www.tcpride.org/pride_events/2008_Festival.php) for more information.



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**Building Fund:**  
(corrected)  
**\$105,255.30**

### Honorary Members

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

**MNA Meetup members: 262**  
**Life memberships: 31**

### 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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Submit material for the newsletter to editor@mnaatheists.org. Submissions may be edited. Publication is not guaranteed.

**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 **Activity and Visibility**

By **August Berkshire**

Minnesota Atheists has been very busy recently. For the 3<sup>rd</sup> year in a row we held our **Day of Reason** celebration (May 1) in the Rotunda of the Minnesota State Capitol, while religious people were busy celebrating something else outside.



August Berkshire

We participated in the Minneapolis **May Day** festival (May 4) and are set to appear in the Minneapolis **Juneteenth** (June 21) and **Gay Pride** (June 28-29) celebrations. We will also appear in Gay Pride festivals in **Rochester** (July 12), **Duluth** (Aug. 30), and **Mankato** (Sept. 30).

Our **Charitable Works Committee** sponsored two events: our **Adopt-A-Highway** cleanup in Rice, MN (May 25), organized by Deb Doucette, and a **Blood Donation** (May 31), organized by Jack Caravela, Bonnie Marsick, Denise Brewer, and Jeannette Sorensen. Sixteen people showed up at Memorial Blood Center in St. Paul for our first-ever MNA blood drive. Afterwards many of the people went to Leaning Tower of Pizza. The event was advertised through our Meetup as "Blood for Pizza."

We held our first **MNA Pub Crawl** (May 16), on the West Bank in Minneapolis, which was a rousing success, at least according to the police reports (just kidding). It was organized by Bonnie Marsick and was attended by about 25 people. We look forward to doing another one later this summer.

Our **First Amendment Watchdog Committee**, chaired by Bob Schmitz, met for the first time and discussed issues such as the Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy (TiZA) charter school in Inver Grove Heights, which is impermissibly mixing mosque and state.

Our **Public Policy Committee**, chaired by George Kane, has been busy hammering out position papers on topics having to do with separation of state and church, such as taxation of churches, gay rights, reproductive

rights, end-of-life care, censorship, and public school issues. We have always had a consensus on these subjects but we felt it was time to put it in writing.

Our **"Atheists Talk" radio program** continues to give us great visibility. In a typical day our MNA website gets 100-150 hits. On Sundays, when our radio show airs, we get about 500 hits. We get about 1,500 downloads of our radio show podcast shortly after we post it, and another 500 downloads later on.

The radio program has attracted media attention as well. There is an article about Minnesota Atheists in the June 2008 issue of **Mpls./St. Paul magazine** and I recently appeared on **980 AM KKMS Christian talk radio** (May 23).

Our **"Atheists Talk" cable TV program**, under the direction of Steve Petersen and Grant Steves, continues to produce one or two programs a month. Our first cable TV productions aired in 1989 (when we were the Twin Cities Chapter of American Atheists), making this our **20<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of broadcasting**. Art Anderson, who continues to help on our cable crew, was the person who got us started.

Our cable TV program is broadcast in the metro area as well as places like St. Cloud and Rochester. It is available for download as both an audio/visual and an audio-only podcast. Eric Harmon, Grant Hermanson, and Kevin Hardisty videotape our **monthly meetings** and we make them available as podcasts as well.

Thanks to Bjorn Watland and Grant Hermanson for maintaining our **website** and **podcasts** and to Bjorn for posting our **MNA Meetups**.

MNA members Tom Stavros and Mickey McCabe had **letters to the editor** published in their local newspapers on topics associated with atheism. (See page 16.)

Members of the **Building Com-**

**mittee**, chaired by Ron Julien, looked at a prospective purchase in south Minneapolis, but between the selling price and the cost of repairs, it was more than we could afford. Let us know if you see any churches for sale. They make excellent meeting halls and we would like to put one to good use.

We have distributed about 40 **MNA t-shirts** so far to participants in our various events. These cost us \$6-\$7 each and are a great form of visibility and pride for us.

This is the second edition of our **newsletter** published by our new co-editors, Keith Lodemeier and James Zimmerman. Erin Ahlstrom is working with our layout person Tom Ridding on some interesting ideas she has for redesigning the newsletter. Richard Trombley has replaced our long-time photographer Vern Young. Vern says he feels naked without his camera, but enjoys being able to relax and focus all his attention on our speakers and events.

Summer is a time to relax and have fun, and we are happy to participate with the Humanists of Minnesota and the Campus Atheists, Skeptics, and Humanists (C.A.S.H.) to sponsor three **Freethought Picnics** (June 8, July 20, Aug. 17) at Columbia Park in northeast Minneapolis. The potluck picnics will feature the Freethought Band and the Freethought Ramblers. These are very family-friendly events.

Speaking of families, Minnesota Atheists is pleased to once again be providing volunteers for the fifth year of **Camp Quest of Minnesota** (July 27-Aug. 2). The camp is already full-up with campers but they could use some more volunteer adult counselors and helpers.

We can take pride in who we are and what we have accomplished as Minnesota Atheists. There is a lot more for us to do to save the world from itself, and we can have a lot of fun doing it.

## 300 Club

The 300 Club's 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.

To join the 300 Club, please contact Steven Petersen, at (651) 484-9277 or [chair@mnatheists.org](mailto: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 (1+2)**

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**

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**

## April Fund Report

### Building Fund: \$1,194.08

Robin Anderson	\$25.00
Charles Boltuck	\$200.00
Cash	\$66.00
Cynthia Egli	\$20.00
Erik Englebretson	\$200.00
Kevin Hardisty	\$80.00
Guy Harper	\$50.00
Mike Haubrich	\$90.00
Laura Hutt	\$223.08
Douglas Knapp	\$5.00
Christopher Matthews	\$50.00
Robyn Moore, in memory of Ted Moore	\$50.00
Rich & Jill Sinda	\$30.00
Georgia Tsoi	\$55.00

### Radio Fund: \$119.00

Cash	\$34.00
Matthew Dittloff	\$25.00
Erik Englebretson	\$50.00
Steve Ziolkowski	\$10.00

### Visibility (General) Fund: \$211.54

Paul Heffron	\$25.00
Kimberly Hanfelt	\$111.54
Jerrold Larson	\$25.00
Vern Young	\$50.00

## Texas Man Sues Church

In small community on the inner border of Alamogordo, Texas, Gerald Tolmford commenced construction of his future establishment, a tavern, in early 2007. The nearby Tenniel Baptist Church started a prayer campaign to block the bar from coming to fruition. Tolmford continued his work, however, right up until the week before opening in August of the same year when lightning struck Tolmford's bar and it burned to the ground.

Church members were rather smug in their outlook following the fire until Tolmford sued Tenniel Baptist on the grounds that the church was ultimately responsible for the demise of his building either through direct or indirect means. Tenniel Baptist vehemently denied all responsibility or any connection to the building's demise in its reply to the court.

As the case made its way into court in March of 2008, Judge Thomas L. Pritchet reviewed the facts. At the initial hearing he commented, "I don't know how I'm going to decide this. It appears from the paperwork that we have a bar owner who believes in the power of prayer and an entire church congregation that doesn't." [Joke submitted by Paul Cocoanto]

## "My Next Life" by Woody Allen

In my next life I want to live my life backwards. You start out dead and get that out of the way. Then you wake up in an old people's home feeling better every day. You get kicked out for being too healthy, go collect your pension, and then when you start work, you get a gold watch and a party on your first day. You work for 40 years until you're young enough to enjoy your retirement. You party, drink alcohol, and are generally promiscuous, then you are ready for high school. You then go to primary school, you become a kid, you play. You have no responsibilities, you become a baby until you are born. And then you spend your last 9 months floating in luxurious spa like conditions with central heating and room service on tap, larger quarters every day and then Voila! You finish off as an orgasm! I rest my case.

## Reaching Out to a Christian Audience

August Berkshire was the guest on "KKMS Live with Jeff & Lee" on AM 980 KKMS Christian talk radio on May 23rd from 5-6 p.m. The hour featured a friendly conversation with August explaining why atheists hold the views they do and posing tough questions to the hosts and callers. The episode can be streamed at

<http://kkms.com/blogs/JeffandLee/11576398/#discuss>.

Jeff and Lee are considering having a representative from Minnesota Atheists as a recurring feature on their show. Additionally, August invited Jeff and Lee to be our guests on a future "Atheists Talk" radio program.



From left: Lee Michaels, August Berkshire, and Jeff Shell.

## Items Wanted for Food Drive

Minnesota Atheists will be organizing a Food Drive this year. We will be collecting non-perishable food items at the Freethought Picnics on July 20, and August 17 this year.

At the end of the summer we will bring the items to a food shelf and volunteer our labor for an afternoon. We will also accept contributions via checks to the Emergency Food Shelf Network.

## Freethought Cryptogram

DLB ORAXEUBADEG IRBVDZFAV CBMZA EV

UPVDBHZBV EAX BAX EV TFGZDZJV.

Last month's solution:

**Remember, atheism is not a worldview itself. Atheism is defined by the view it does not have-- theism.**

— Doug Krueger, "That Colossal Wreck"

## Cable Report

By Steve Petersen

This past May, Grant Steves interviewed Minnesota Atheists member Vanita Mishra, a licensed psychiatrist born in India and raised as a Hindu. They taped two programs on Hinduism.

In June, Grant himself was interviewed by James Zimmerman. The first program was on the topic of “Purpose Driven Thinking” and the second concerned use of the bible as literature in public school classes.

If you have ideas for a program, please contact Grant at [achair@mnatheists.org](mailto: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, Steve Peterson, at [chair@mnatheists.org](mailto:chair@mnatheists.org).



Grant Steves (left) is interviewed by James Zimmerman

**Cable Crew:** Brett Stembridge, Shirley Moll, Steve Petersen, George Kane, Sanjeev Mishra and Grant Hermanson.

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

### Cable schedule

**Bloomington:** Ch. 16. Monday 9:30 p.m. Tuesday 5:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m.. Sponsors: David and Joanne Beardsley.

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

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

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

**St. Cloud:** Ch. 12. Thursday 8:30 p.m. Sponsor: Jack Rich-

ter.

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

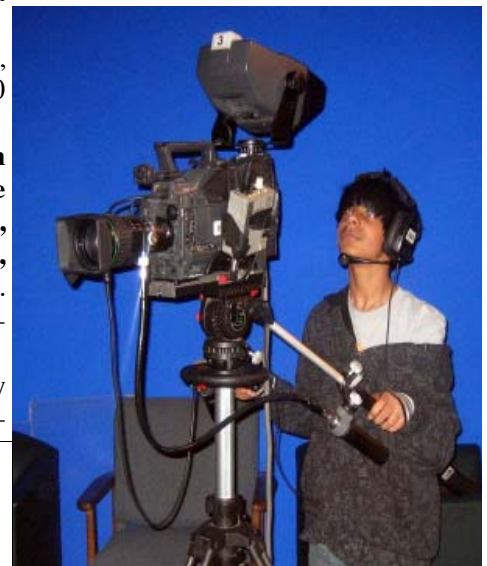
**South Washington County:** Ch. 14. Tuesday 7:00 p.m. Sponsor: Raleigh Nelson.

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



Left: Vanita Mishra

Right: Vanita's son Sanjeev mans the camera.



## “Atheists Talk” Radio Report

By August Berkshire

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

**May 4** – “Worlds of Their Own” with Lois Schade-wald, interviewed by Cynthia Egli.

**May 4** – “ ‘Academic Freedom’ Bills” with Greg Laden, interviewed by Mike Haubrich.

**May 11** – “Women and the Bible” with Annie Laurie Gaylor, interviewed by Grant Steves.

**May 11** – “Founding Mothers of Freethought” with Annie Laurie Gaylor, interviewed by August Berkshire.

**May 18** – “Genetics and Ethics” with Bonnie LeRoy, interviewed by Lynn Fellman.

**May 18** – “Camp Quest of Minnesota” with Rick Rohrer, Laura Arkley, and Sanjeev Mishra, interviewed by Bjorn Watland.

**May 25** – Matt Cherry: Institute for Humanist Studies and rep. to United Nations, interviewed by Scott Lohman.

**May 25** – “Operation Foxhole Atheists” with Blair Scott, interviewed by Mike Haubrich.

We are approaching the end of our 26-week contract with KTNF radio. Our historic atheist radio program, the first in Minnesota, has achieved its goal of bringing information on atheism and science to a wider audience.

Because of the show, we have experienced a huge increase in visits to our website and a nice bump in membership. (A big thank you to PZ Myers who promotes our show on his immensely popular blog Pharyngula: <http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula>.)

The cost of renewing our contract will be **\$8,750** for another 25 weeks. If you would like to see our radio show continue, now is the time to support it financially. You can send a check (with “Radio” in the memo line) to Minnesota Atheists, P.O. Box 6261, Minneapolis, MN 55406, or make a dedicated donation with PayPal or a credit card on our website ([MinnesotaAtheists.org](http://MinnesotaAtheists.org)).

Another way you can help is to listen to the radio program live (AM 950 or [AirAmericaMinnesota.com](http://AirAmericaMinnesota.com)/listen) on Sunday mornings, 9:00-10:00 a.m., and call (952-946-6205) or e-mail ([radio@mnatheists.org](mailto: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**, **Freethought Toastmasters**, and **Q.Cumbers** restaurant in Edina.

## The Four C’s of Atheism

By August Berkshire

Like many of you reading this, I describe myself as a flaming liberal. Yet in one area I am a conservative. I am an atheist.

Yes, atheism is a **conservative** position. We make no leaps of faith. We accept statements only so far as there is reason and/or evidence to back them up. Anything else is speculation.

Atheism is also **consistent**. We apply our skepticism equally to all supernatural claims. We do not say, “All prophets, saviors, or gods are false—except ours.” We make no exceptions or special pleadings, and this makes us consistent.

Another benefit of atheism is that it is **contradiction-free**. We don’t have to try to reconcile an all-loving, all-seeing, all-powerful god with the existence of evil. We don’t have to define love exactly opposite to the way we normally define it in order to make it applicable to our god. We don’t have to claim a supernatural designer with poor designs is intelligent.

An atheist also possesses **clarity** in his or her thinking processes. An atheist has the courage to follow the trail of reason and evidence wherever it may lead. If there should some day be a compelling reason or piece of evidence for a god, then we would acknowledge it and change our views. This is also known as intellectual honesty.

One of the aspects of the argument known as Pascal’s Wager is that a person loses nothing by believing in a god. I beg to differ. Accepting Pascal’s Wager means saying that we are willing to abandon reason and evidence as our standards of living, and instead make a leap of faith to... where?

It’s true that by converting (or deconverting) from theism to atheism a person can lose his or her cosmic specialness, meaning in life, and any hope of an afterlife. But you can’t lose what you never really had.

The reality of atheism far outweighs the dream of religion. There is an excitement and beauty to perceiving the world as it really is, and not as a wishful thought.



## Blood Drive a Gushing Success



Over twenty people participated in the first Minnesota Atheists Blood Drive on Saturday, May 31st at Memorial Blood Centers in St. Paul's Midway. Memorial welcomed us with a sign, balloons, a cake, and plenty of other snacks. After eating our dessert, most of us trekked down University Avenue to the Leaning Tower of Pizza to celebrate our two-gallon deposit. For those who couldn't

make it, you can get on our call list for the next round by sending an e-mail with your name, telephone number, and the subject heading "Blood Drive List" to [info@mnatheists.org](mailto:info@mnatheists.org).

Thanks to all those who participated, including the following people: Denise Crosby, Bonnie Marsick, Jack Caravela, Bjorn Watland, Jeannette Sorenson, August Berkshire, Michelle Losey, Mike Toft, Mike Parrott, Bess Vlasisavljevich, Fred Roos, Trish Murtha, Cynthia Egli, Dan Feyma, David Hubmann, Doug Turbak, Norm Barrett, and Tom Riddering.

Photos by Jack Caravela





# Day of Reason

by Steve Peterson

Minnesota Atheists' third Day of Reason was held in the state Capitol rotunda to counter the Day of Prayer event which was being held on the Capitol steps. Representative Phyllis Kahn of Minneapolis welcomed us and the event was covered by Minnesota Public Radio, the Minnesota Monitor and the online Session Weekly and Senate Daily Briefing.

**Clockwise from left: Grant Steves gives 'm hell while Cynthia Egli gives them something to think about. The speakers, from left, Robin Anderson, Paul Heffron, Matthew Richardson, Grant Steves, Steve Petersen, Shirley Moll, Jack Caravela, Bjorn Watland, Fred Roos, Cynthia Egli, Ron Julien, George Kane and August Berkshire.**

Photos by August Berkshire



# May Day Festival



Thirty people participated in our celebration of the Minneapolis May Day Festival on May 4<sup>th</sup>, marching in our parade contingent and staffing our booth at Powderhorn Park. Everyone who participated got a nice new

**Right: Jeannette Sorensen solicits hugs with Tricia Rummenie, brother Michael Rummenie and father Chris Rummenie.**



**Above: Representative Phyllis Kahn (right) joins Tom Riddering (left) and Minnesota Atheists marching.**

**Left: Jeannette Sorensen gets a big hug from an appreciative fan while Bonnie Marsick and Steve Petersen applaud.**

yellow Minnesota Atheists t-shirt featuring our slogan "Positive Atheism in Action." <sup>sm</sup>

A pleasant last-minute addition was MN State Rep. Phyllis Kahn of Minneapolis, who donned a MNA t-shirt late in the parade and marched with us for the last block. She was also spotted later in the afternoon, still wearing our t-shirt. As always, we had a lot of pleasant conversation with festival attendees and gathered a lot of names of people interested in Minnesota Atheists.

We would like to thank the following peo-





ple for participating and making the event such a success for us: Norm Barrett, Joanne Beardsley, August Berkshire, Jack Caravela, Lynn Fellman, Bing Haubrich, Mike Haubrich, Thomas Jahn, Caleb Johnson, Mike Jones, Ron Julien, Phyllis Kahn, George Kane, Anna Leahy, Michelle Losey, Bonnie Marsick, Linda Massie, Shirley Moll, Mike Murray, Steve Petersen, Tom Riddering, Chris Rummenie, Michael Rummenie, Tricia Rummenie, Lois Schadewald, Bob Schmitz, Jeannette Sorensen, Richard Trombley, Bjorn Watland, and Rachel Wilson.

**Right: MNA photographer Richard Trombley tries to impress Bjorn Watland and Lynn Fellman.**



**Above: Putting positive atheism in action at the MNA booth are (from left) Shirley Moll, Bjorn Watland, Jeannette Sorensen, President August Berkshire, Steve Petersen and Michelle Losey.**  
Photos by Tom Riddering and Steve Petersen

## News & Notes

By George Kane

**The Religious Right** is gearing up an exhaustive effort to forestall same-sex marriage in California. First, they will go all out to get a measure on the ballot this November to stay the court decision. Then they will use the referendum process to amend the California Constitution, a process that can lead to a ballot no earlier than 2012. They received a severe jolt when the Supreme Court of California, where six of seven justices are Republican appointees, ruled *In re Marriage Cases*, S147999 that marriage is a constitutional right of all citizens, not a special right for heterosexuals. Writing for the majority, Chief Justice Ronald George succinctly dismissed every secular argument for a separate institution of Civil Unions:

“A number of factors led us to this conclusion. First, the exclusion of same-sex couples from the designation of marriage clearly is not necessary in order to afford full protection to all of the rights and benefits that currently are enjoyed by married opposite-sex couples; permitting same-sex couples access to the designation of marriage will not deprive opposite-sex couples of any rights and will not alter the legal framework of the institution of marriage.... Second, retaining the traditional definition of marriage and affording same-sex couples only a separate and differently named family relationship will, as a realistic matter, impose appreciable harm on same-sex couples and their children.... Third, it is... probable that excluding same-sex couples from the legal institution of marriage is likely to be viewed as reflecting an official view that their committed relationships are of lesser stature than the comparable relation-



George Kane

ships of opposite-sex couples. Finally, retaining the designation of marriage exclusively for opposite-sex couples and providing only a separate and distinct designation for same-sex couples may well have the effect of perpetuating a more general premise — now emphatically rejected by this state — that gay individuals and same-sex couples are in some respects ‘second-class citizens’ who may, under the law, be treated differently from, and less favorably than, heterosexual individuals or opposite-sex couples. Accordingly, we conclude that to the extent the current California statutory provisions limit marriage to opposite-sex couples, these statutes are unconstitutional.”

**In New Orleans**, U.S. District Judge Carl J. Barbier ruled in a case brought by the American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana against the Tangipahoa Parish School Board that the public school system must stop in-school Bible giveaways. The case was brought on behalf of Jane Roe, a fifth-grader at Loranger Middle School after The Gideons International set up a Bible give-away outside the principal’s office. Judge Barbier ruled that the practice created the impression that the school was endorsing Christianity.

**In Mount Vernon Ohio**, parents took complaints of Christian evangelizing by eighth-grade science teacher John Freshwater to the Board of Education. Freshwater used his classroom to advance religion and to teach his own beliefs from the Bible instead of the approved curriculum. In a recent class he lectured on the meaning of Good Friday and Easter. He has also conducted prayers and engaged in a healing session as monitor for an after-school Fellowship of Christian Athletes

meeting. Federal law prohibits school employees from actively participating in religious clubs on campus.

Of course, evangelizing teachers will always rally Christian supporters. To a crowd of nearly 100 in the town square, Freshwater complained that the school administration’s directive to remove a personal Bible from his desk abridged his First Amendment rights, so he refused to comply with the order. According to Freshwater’s personnel file, he has been warned repeatedly to obey the school district’s policy regarding religion in the classroom.

The most egregious complaint was that, in a “science demonstration,” Freshwater used an electrostatic device to burn crosses onto students’ arms. According to an unnamed parent, “The burn was severe enough that our child awoke that night with severe pain, and the cross remained there for several weeks.

**The Alliance Defense Fund** is recruiting pastors nationwide to defy the IRS prohibition against preaching about politicians, to set up a court case they hope will overturn the federal rules against supporting and opposing candidates. Americans United for Separation of Church and State said that they will notify the IRS of any pastor who joins the protest.

**The Freedom From Religion Foundation** has formally offered \$1,200 for the land under the “Star Hill” cross site in Holmen, Wisconsin. Nevertheless, the village plans to sell the property to the Lions Club for \$100 to maintain the cross. If the sale to the Lions Club goes through, the FFRF plans to sue the village for restricting the sale to groups that promise to maintain the cross on the present site, arguing that this requirement is an unconstitutional endorsement of Christianity. FFRF co-

(Continued on page 13)

## Staff the MNA booth at Gay Pride

If any of our members are interested in helping staff our booth for the Gay Pride Parade in Lorning Park on either Saturday June 28 or Sunday June 29 please contact Matthew Richardson at [atheistcable@gmail.com](mailto:atheistcable@gmail.com).

## Minnesota Atheists clean-up!



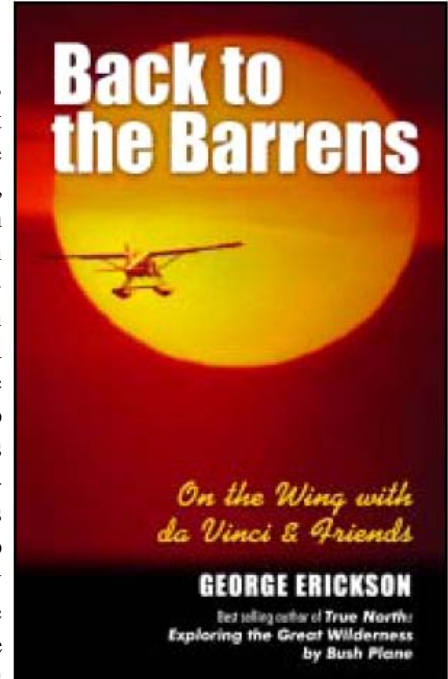
Cleaning up Minnesota Atheists' adopted stretch of highway near Rice MN Rob Taylor, Deb Doucette, Rachel Wilson, August Berkshire and Denise Brewer Photo by Steve Petersen

## BACK TO THE BARRENS: On the Wing with da Vinci and Friends

George Erickson

"a terrific book...." Clive Cussler  
328 pages, Many photos, maps

George Erickson has spent the last thirty-eight summers traversing the northern provinces, Quebec, the Northwest and Yukon Territories and Alaska. In *Back to the Barrens*, he, returns to the far north in search of new sights and stories to tell. Like Service and London, the giants who have captivated millions with tales told across a flickering campfire, he invites new readers to climb into the Tundra Cub II and fly off to a land where the northern lights shimmer, the rivers run cold, and cares slowly wither and die.



Profits from this book will be donated to Minnesota Atheists

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(Continued from page 12)

president Annie Laurie Gaylor said "It would make far more sense to auction off the cross and star. The problem isn't Village ownership of the Hill. The problem is Village ownership and maintenance of religious symbols."

The Florida legislature is considering a specialty license plate with a design that includes a Christian cross, a stained-glass window and the words "I Believe."

If the plate is approved, Florida

would become the first state to have a license plate featuring a religious symbol that is not part of a college logo. Legislative approval will almost certainly spark a court challenge.

An Indiana plate with the national motto "In God We Trust" has been deemed legal by the courts, arguing that it is similar to other specialty plates.

In Amsterdam, the Dutch political cartoonist known as Gregorius Nekschot, was arrested in a

criminal investigation for his work that insults people on the basis of their race or belief and for inciting hatred. The prosecution could lead to four years in prison under Dutch hate crime laws.

Nekschot is best known in Holland for his cartoons that mock Muslims and leftists. He was arrested with a great show of force by 10 policemen, who also seized his computer, sketches, CDs, DVDs and telephone.

## A Follow Up to The Joy of Sects

by Keith Lodermeier

At our May 18<sup>th</sup> meeting, Minnesota Atheists member Grant Steves began by undoubtedly disappointing some audience members by clarifying the spelling of the ‘s’ word in the title of his talk. S-e-c-t-s. As with almost any subject, sex was in the penumbra, specifically the justification of polygamy in cults, but Steves did not dwell on the pun in his explication of cults. Instead, he offered an interesting look at the differences and similarities of cults and major denominations and drew from his own experience with both; Steves is a Jehovah’s Witness turned Catholic turned atheist.

The predominant analogy Steves drew was this: a cult is to a child as a denomination is to an adult. A cult is a fledgling religion which requires social and political recognition and acceptance to mature into a full-blown religion, i.e., popularity makes the man or woman.

Steves astutely described the characteristics and idiosyncrasies that cults are likely to possess such as a strong, charismatic leader; elements of their own language or vocabulary, e.g., “transubstantiation,” “Eucharist” (Catholicism), “thetan,” “enturbulence” (Scientology), faux Elizabethan English (Book of Mormon), etc.; an ethos grounded in “good works” which adulterates a cult’s absurdities and gives doubting members something to fall back on; etc. Steves illustrated the frightening power of cults by citing the specific demographic vulnerable to their solicitation: everyone. We



Dr. Grant Steves speaks on childish sects.

Photos by Richard Trombley

tend to think of education as a prophylactic for superstitious thinking, but Steves referenced a large constituency of the targets of Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church as being college students. If budding intellectuals are susceptible, who isn’t?

A couple cult tactics mentioned include “love bombing,” a bombardment of affection toward a member, and taking advantage of the bereaved. For the latter, Steves offered an example he recalls from his Jehovah’s Wit-



ness upbringing: read the obituaries, send out condolences to the bereaved, and hope the gratitude stimulates new membership.

To end the talk, Steves discussed the murky aspect of getting out of a cult. For many members, a cult saturates, if not engulfs their life causing emotional, psychological, intellectual, spiritual, and physical dependence (not in the sense of physical addiction but simply having no where to physically go). Helping a friend or family member get out of a cult is a difficult task. Intellectual criticism is ineffective for someone whose mental foundation mandates a dogmatic logical fall-back. The most effective thing we can do is appeal to them emotionally—that is predominantly why people are attracted to cults in the first place. We can offer our love and support and undermine the threats made by the cult such as being shunned, damned, or missing their chance to be saved from their cult’s version of Armageddon. We can reassure a member that our support will be there unconditionally and that Armageddon is nowhere in sight.



Lazy summer daze...

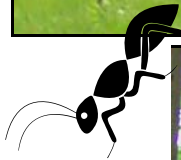
# June's picnic fills stomachs and builds community

Right, After the **Freethought Ramblers** finished entertaining, a spontaneous folk jam breaks out. More jams are planned for the July and August picnics, so bring your musical instrument or borrow one of our rhythm instruments and strum along.



Below, Ron Julien, Jeannette Sorensen, Bjorn Watland and Brett Stembridge try their hand at bowling on the green.

Photos by Nathan Curland



The summer picnics bring four secular organizations together for food, music and conversation.



## No Discrimination Against Christians

*The following letter by MNA member Mickey McCabe was printed in the Savage Pacer newspaper on May 31, 2008.*

This letter is in response to David Anderson's letter bemoaning the "discrimination" of Christians in our society. The United States is a predominantly Christian nation. In fact, over 75 percent of the population identify themselves as Christians. The non-religious sector, while growing, constitutes less than 14 percent of the population.

In addition, it is almost impossible to be elected to public office without some profession of faith in a higher power. Only one Congressman in the U.S. House is openly atheist, and our presidential candidates have been falling over themselves pandering to the faithful during this election cycle.

With these facts in mind I think it is very disingenuous to try to suggest that Christians are in some way being discriminated against in this country. While it is true that the courts have, so far, kept the teaching of creationism, in its many guises, out of the public school science classrooms; their decisions have been based on the U.S. Constitution and not some activist agenda.

Mr. Anderson goes on about all of the cases of academic discrimination against anyone who questions evolution, but he offers no concrete evidence for any such discrimination such as names and dates. It is obvious that he has just returned from the movie "Expelled" and rushed to his keyboard to dash off his indignant letter without actually looking into whether any of the movie's accusations are true. They're not.

The movie "Expelled" was produced with one purpose in mind: to cast doubt on the scientific theory of evolution and to make it seem as though there are many in the scientific community who question its validity and are being persecuted for their beliefs. Judging by Mr. Anderson's letter, it seems to have hit its mark. The fact that the producers had to lie to achieve this seems to be irrelevant to many people.

In fact, a recent poll by Michael Berkman at Penn State showed that one in eight high school biology teachers still teach creationism in their classrooms. I would ask Mr. Anderson to explain why these teachers are still holding their jobs in light of all of the rampant discrimination against Christians in the classroom.

The truth is there are no such cases of discrimination. The truth is the majority of biology teachers in the U.S. are Christians just like the rest of the population. They teach evolution in biology class because that is the only scientific theory that explains how life on earth could go from simple to complex. Period. Whether they themselves believe that God had a hand in the process is irrelevant.

**Mickey McCabe. Savage**

## Bible doesn't deserve the respect it gets

*The following letter to the editor by MNA member Tom Stavros of St. Cloud appeared in the St. Cloud Times on May 11, 2008. Some clarifications, in brackets, have been provided by Tom Stavros.*

Having read the Tuesday letter [by Dennis Campbell] "Babies are born male or female, not homosexual," a number of thoughts come to mind.

First, the argument that something is recommended or forbidden in the Bible has become tedious.

The book was written by numerous authors over millennia and compiled in about 325 CE from a large number of writings available at that time. It includes the superstitions of primitive peoples strug-

**If the Bible is the inerrant word of a God, why is there so much confusion over its interpretation?**

gling to survive. Most of the things in these writings have little relevance to the modern world.

People, including this letter-writer [Campbell], use the cafeteria style to decide which verses are to be followed. If the Bible is the inerrant word of a God, why is there so much confusion over its interpretation? If it was important to him, he could have made his meaning clear, thus avoiding all the problems that differing interpretations cause. After all, there are many sects with the Christian label, each claiming it has the "true" interpretation of God's word.

If the entire Bible were to be interpreted literally, we would be putting to death unruly children, killing non-virgin brides and people who work on Sundays (ministers?). We also would engage in mass murder, cannibalism, slavery, male castration and many other atrocities that "God" committed or had done in his name. Eating shellfish and wearing clothing [made of two or more materials] are forbidden activities.

There are more than 600 proscriptions on "correct" behavior in the Old Testament alone. If the Bible is God's inerrant word, all are to be obeyed?

If all do not have to be obeyed, it can't be inerrant. Then why obey any based solely on biblical authority? [You can't have it both ways.] The Bible, if one is given to close and thoughtful reading, is not a book that deserves the respect it gets. **Tom Stavros**



# The Spiritual Revisal of Obama and McCain

by **Brian Knoblock**

As the 2008 Presidential Primary season draws to a close, both the presumptive Democratic and Republican nominees have had their opportunities to further erode away at the wall that is supposed to separate Church and State. Both having received endorsements from prominent preachers or other deeply religious public figures have made it clear which side they're on. From whichever side of the political spectrum this is seen, it furthers the argument that religion and politics have become too dangerously linked.

For the past several months, Senator Barack Obama has had to choose his words carefully regarding several inflammatory statements from his former pastor of the Trinity United Church of Christ, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Wright's comments about the United States government developing AIDS, and other observations, were bringing Obama's patriotism into doubt, more so than whether he was wearing a silly flag lapel pin or not. And the replays of his fiery sermons made for excellent cannon fodder for pundits and journalists, creating the perfect storm to churn up the election waters. Understandably, it is difficult for Senator Obama to stand before his supporters and the American public denouncing the words of somebody who has been apart of his life, spiritual and otherwise, for two decades. And it was probably impossible to have the Illinois Senator's pastor not be seen as a significant influence on his quest for the White House. But religious figures have too often distorted the image a candidate is trying to present to his or her electorate.

On the other side of the fence, Senator McCain seems to be having his own problems with religion in his politics. McCain has sought out and fully acknowledged the endorsement of two hate-spewing religious leaders. The



**Brian Knoblock**

Arizona senator has received the endorsement of John Hagee, whose most egregious comments include blaming the devastation of Katrina on a GLBT pride parade and an anti-Catholic rant that certainly makes one question why anybody would accept his endorsement, let alone seek it out himself. To top it off, appearing on stage next to McCain was Ohio megachurch leader Rod Parsley, an individual who wants to see Islam destroyed to the benefit of his own religion.

The endorsement of these two religious spokespersons makes one think McCain would be the perfect conservative candidate to all evangelicals across the country. However, while former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee was still in the Primary race, the ordained minister narrowly beat McCain in several "Bible Belt" states including Georgia, Louisiana, Alabama, and Tennessee, then significantly in Kansas. And despite the Republican nominee having made promises to his evangelical voters that he would stock the Supreme Court full of right-leaning justices, and that the Faith Based Initiatives started by President Bush would continue, the evangelical flock seems hesitant to endorse McCain.

It is not unusual that an elected official ends up not being as left-leaning or right-leaning as we believed he or she was during the election campaign. Who would have thought that Bush-appointed Judge John E. Jones would have given the secular community a win in the Dover, Pennsylvania Intelligent Design case? A healthy dose of skepticism in a politician, much like all aspects of life, is very important for choosing somebody for the highest elected official in the country. However, the balking by the evangelicals seems to be because their appointed choice for a nominee is not the

hard core conservative that would erase over a hundred years of social progress in this country regarding medical research, individual rights and many, many more.

Although it might not be possible to completely avoid bringing faith into the sphere of the general election, the level to which the rhetoric has reached in this Presidential election cycle has made the wall supposedly separating Church and State much less visible. Hopefully as November approaches, and as the stories regarding Wright, Hagee, and Parsley fade into the background where they belong, we can begin to solve our country's problems.

Both Obama and McCain have recently denounced the endorsements, or disavowed the opinions expressed in the sermons of these religious figures, but their actual motions have come after many weeks. Meanwhile, the American public has had a long time to hear their damaging works repeated over and over again, painting a picture of both nominees which predicts more of the same religious politics to this nation's highest office.

## Seeing Things That Aren't There

*The following dialogue between two characters occurred on the CSI: Crime Scene Investigation TV show, in an episode called "Go to Hell." The episode first aired on CBS TV, October 11, 2007.*

Reverend Rhodes (Exorcist): "Mr. Grissom, do you believe in a separate, living evil?"

Grissom (Investigator): "You're a primitive man on the savannah. You see something move out of the corner of your eye. You assume it's a hyena. You run; you live. If you assume it's the wind and you're wrong, you die. We have the genes of the ones who ran."

*Submitted by August Berkshire*

## ***The Secular Conscience: Why Belief Belongs in Public Life*** **By Austin Dacey, Prometheus Books, 240 pages**

### **Book Review by Grant Steves**

*The Secular Conscience* is a highly commendable statement on the need to reclaim the moral compass from the religious right and left. The assumption that only the religious people have a moral compass is blatantly false. Because the Pharisaic religious people pray in public and make a show of their moral compass, does not mean in fact their real morality is better than a secular person who does not make this show. It is important that secularists must declare their moral beliefs and the basis for their beliefs.

Dacey's *The Secular Conscience* goes a long way in helping to rescue the moral compass for the secular believers. It is in the openness of a democratic society that we are most apt to discover what the opening of conscience is. His argument is that science, governed by openness, has resulted in the development and refinement of ideas. As an example of an open source method, he references the London Think tank Demos' ten characteristics: 1) Transparency, 2) Vetting of participants only after they've got involved, 3) Low cost and ease of engagement, 4) A legal structure and enforcement mechanism, 5) Leadership, 6) Common standards, 7) Peer review and feedback loops, 8) A shared conception of goals, 9) Incrementalist – small players can still make useful contributions, and 10) Powerful non-monetary incentives. When applied to science it is non-sectarian and non-authoritarian. The product resulting is a 'public – good.'

Conscience, he argues, should share many of the key features of the open source methods. It allows for the ethical assumption made to be scrutinized by a public and not just by the private individual thoughts. I



**Grant Steves**

would suggest forums and blogs on the Internet are achieving this dialogue to some degree. When former Iranian President Khatami appeared at the United Nations, he expressed an "earnest hope that through such a dialogue, the realization of universal justice and liberty may be instituted." While he was expressing this his country was stomping out free press (over 150 newspapers were suppressed), imprisoning more people of conscience than any other government, and conducting state-sponsored terrorism. Dacey would argue that in this religiously based organization (the government of Iran is a theocratic state) the dialogue of conscience was shut down, and it became a dictator of ethics and values.

Even in our own country, where we sponsor the economic theory of the free market place developed by Adam Smith, we do not reflect as favorably using his economic theory on questions of conscience, as his earlier work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, did. The open society, the free market place is for the development of ideas. Here the dialogue on ethics looks at the consequences of ethical actions realistically and not prejudicially. For example, acceptance of gay marriage or civil unions has been discussed but the prevailing sentiments have been from authoritarian sources that pre – judge. The dialogue does not ask what happens differently from not having this ethical choice. Does this really undermine marriage more than legalized divorce? Do we really undermine sexual behavior or choice any more than the religiously guided system we have now?

An open dialogue of conscience allows and encourages this discussion. Dacey believes that liberty and privacy

are not the circumventing of public dialogue on what is right and good but are, in fact, necessary to put our private conscience in the public dialogue and prepare us to reason on our position's validity. Our "freedom of belief does not free her from examination; it frees her belief for examination."

It is this examination of these beliefs that helps us to discover the principles – the common standards – by which we can evaluate our beliefs. For Dacey "religious experience is not a reliable guide to truth" because it does not allow for the judgment of reason and the opinion of dialogue.

This book is a strong argument for secular ethics based upon a public conscience. Liberals must not concede the public morality to the private individual or religious groups. Rather they must examine their beliefs in tolerance when it tolerates those that are intolerant. He argues we must call to account those who would support intolerant beliefs or acts against others. It is easy to condemn the KKK or Nazis for their bigotry. It is more difficult to call to account the moderates who keep silent about the atrocities done in society. Whether it is the silence against jihads, killing others because of the blasphemy against religion, or murdering a young gay man, moderates must speak out.

In the end Dacey observes that, "Secular ethics begins with the reality of love, the desire for the good of the other for the sake of the other". This is a foundation for a conscience that, "unites thinking persons and free peoples across ethnic, national and creedal lines, and in its unfolding through public conversation, our moral lives are measured out." It is lifting up the secular liberal conscience to a public sphere where all ethical systems are examined for validity.

## 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.

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday, 1-3:30 p.m., **Minnesota Atheists monthly meeting**. (Beginning again in September.)

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

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

1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> 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.

2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Monday, 5-7 pm., **Happy**

**Hour North**. La Casita, 1925 Perimeter Road, Roseville, just west of the Rosedale mall. George Kane, (651) 488-8225.

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

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

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

4<sup>th</sup> 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.

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

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

4<sup>th</sup> 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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[www.mnatheists.org](http://www.mnatheists.org)

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**“I believe all Americans, no matter their race,  
no matter their sex, no matter their sexual  
orientation, should have that same freedom to  
marry. Government has no business imposing  
some people’s religious beliefs over others.”**

— Mildred Loving, defendant in the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1967 *Loving vs. Virginia* case that struck down state laws against interracial marriage, in a speech delivered June 12, 2007 (marking the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that case). Mildred Loving died May 2, 2008.

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