



The Minnesota Atheist

Marriage Celebrants Law to be Topic at January Minnesota Atheists Meeting

At our January meeting, Minnesota Atheists will be revisiting the issue of Minnesota's law on marriage celebrants, which August Berkshire discussed briefly at our September meeting and at length in the October issue of *The Minnesota Atheist*. Since then, we have met with Minnesota state senator John Marty and have requested further feedback from our community on this issue.

At the January meeting, August will report on our talk with Senator Marty, and Stephanie Zvan will present preliminary results from our feedback survey and discuss the various options for action presented under the survey. (If you haven't shared your opinions with us yet, please take a few minutes to complete the survey at is.gd/MNASurvey.)

The idea of atheist and secular humanist weddings is still new to much of our community. However, there is precedent in Minnesota. A handful of atheists in Minnesota has obtained status as wedding celebrants through religious humanism or their former faiths and have performed ceremonies for Minnesota Atheists members past and present. We'll hear from Shirley Moll and Steve Petersen and from Bjorn and Jeannette Watland, who were married in secular ceremonies by former minister Paul Heffron.

Dale Handeen will tell us about her experience officiating at atheist weddings and about what is involved in becoming a secular celebrant. Additionally, we'll hear from Nicole Infinity, Stephanie Zvan, and others about what motivates their desire to become atheist wedding celebrants.

Our goal at the January meeting is to include as wide a variety of viewpoints as possible on atheist celebrants. If you'd like a chance to share your viewpoint, contact Associate President Stephanie Zvan (apres@mnatheists.org) to get on the schedule. Or stick around and join us at Q. Cumbers restau-

rant after the meeting, where the conversation is sure to continue.

Board Nominations

Nominations for the 2014 Board of Directors will be accepted at the January meeting.

Minnesota Atheists is a non-profit organization run by volunteers who are elected on an annual basis by the membership. The board consists of the president, associate president, chair, associate chair, secretary, treasurer, and three directors-at large. To qualify for the board, an at-large nominee must be a dues-paying member in good standing for at least six months prior to the date of election, and a nominee for any other position must be a dues-paying member in good standing for at least one year prior to the date of election.

Candidates must be nominated by another member in good standing at the January meeting. The nominee does not need to be present. Elections will occur at the February meeting. The 2014 Board of Directors will assume office on March 1st.

If you have any questions, please contact Heather at chair@mnatheists.org or any other board member.

Time and Place

The January Minnesota Atheists meeting will be held at the Southdale Public Library, 7001 York Avenue South, Edina, on January 19th. The meeting will follow our usual schedule:

1:00-1:15 p.m. Informal Gathering Time
1:15-1:45 p.m. Business Meeting
1:45-2:00 p.m. Break
2:00-3:30 p.m. Program

You may attend any part of the meeting you wish. At 4:00 p.m. there will be an optional dinner at Q. Cumbers, 7465 France Avenue South, Edina.

President's Column 2
News and Notes 3
Cryptogram 3
Board Report 4
What's in Store? 4
November Meeting 5
Using Care 5
Book Review 6
So Help You God 7
Religion's a Joke 7
Treasury Report 8
Radio Report 8
Television Report 9
Call for Articles 10
Upcoming Events 10



President's Column • Eric Jayne

Your Membership in Minnesota Atheists Will Help Make 2014 an Unbelievable Year

It's been another great year for the Minnesota Atheists! Since January 2013 we've added over 400 members on our Meetup site and held over 200 events in the Twin Cities area. Our paid membership has increased by more than 10 percent, which brings us up to almost 250 paid members—each of whom plays an integral role in helping us finance our endeavors and administrative costs. With all of the exciting stuff we have planned for 2014, I don't see any reason why we can't expect to get our Meetup membership to over 2000 by the end of the year, and more importantly, our paid membership to over 300. Before we look at the exciting stuff 2014 has in store, let's briefly review 2013.

The Day of Reason at the Capitol in May echoed the theme on our 2013 T-shirt design: One Nation Indivisible. Blake Page from the Military Religious Freedom Foundation addressed nearly 60 people in the state capitol's rotunda with a thoughtful and compelling speech about the importance of keeping religion out of the military and out of all government. The praying crowd outside participating in the Day of Prayer was almost outnumbered by the freethinkers inside.

Our turnout at Pridefest in June was as impressive as ever with more than 40 parade marchers representing Minnesota Atheists, most of whom donned Minnesota Atheists T-shirts while carrying pro-humanist and atheist signs.

We also increased our volunteer activities at different community agencies. Twelve meals were prepared and served at the Family Place shelter in St. Paul, and several thousand pounds of food were packed at the Emergency Foodshelf Network in New Hope. In December about 20 of us donated items including bicycles and clothes to the Youth Express program in St. Paul while also collecting a full carload of gifts for the holiday gift program at Keystone Community Services. Gifts were also collected and donated to the Bridge for Youth shelter in partnership with the Humanists of Minnesota at the yearend winter solstice party.

For the second year in a row we partnered with the St. Paul Saints minor league baseball team for another broad community outreach effort by displaying our playful, fun-loving side.

We again secularized the team by changing the team name to the Mr. Paul Aints—but this time we were able to arrange it so the word *Aints* on the players' jerseys featured the scarlet atheist *A* made popular by the Richard Dawkins Foundation. Even though the Mr. Paul Aints lost for the second year in a row, we had a fun summer evening at the ballpark with tailgating, fireworks, and between-inning, atheist-themed antics.

The game was followed by our second annual regional conference in partnership with the Freedom from Religion Foundation and American Atheists. Our full-day conference featured well-known, big-name speakers as well as two hours of unique morning workshops.

That brings me to the 2014 sneak preview part of this column. It is with a great deal of excitement that I get to announce we will be partnering with the St. Paul Saints for a third year in a row for another Night of Unbelievable Fun. Once more we will be taking over the team for one day during which time they will again be known as the Mr. Paul Aints. The family-friendly game, tailgating, fireworks, and atheist-themed antics will happen at Midway Stadium on Friday, July 11, which is just four days before the 2014 Major League Baseball All-Star Game across the river in Minneapolis. The date works well for us and the St. Paul Saints, and we thought that it would be fun to tap into some of the All-Star game excitement.

We will also be holding our third annual regional conference on Saturday, July 12—the day after our atheist baseball game. The conference will be in downtown St. Paul at River Centre, which is conveniently located on a major bus line and just four blocks from the new Green Line train station at Fifth and Cedar. Sticking with the All-Star theme, we will be offering an impressive lineup of speakers who are considered All-Stars in the freethinking community. We are still in the planning stages for the conference, but I can tell you as of this writing that Susan Jacoby and Rebecca Watson are confirmed speakers.

As we have done for the past several years, we will again meet at the State Capitol Rotunda for the Day of Reason (our response to the

National Day of Prayer) on Thursday, May 1. We'll also participate in the Twin Cities Pride-fest. We'll host a booth beginning on Saturday, June 28th, and join in the parade on Sunday, June 29th.

We will continue to organize more of our popular community volunteer events in 2014 as well. If you're interested in participating, we meet the third Saturday of every month at the Family Place shelter which helps stabilize families who have no permanent housing. There will also be other volunteer events and many other fun social activities listed on our Meetup site including game nights, movie outings, happy hours, book discussions, lectures, picnics, and much more. By the way, if you have an idea for an event please feel free to share your ideas with me or the rest of the Minnesota Atheists Meetup team.

Look for detailed updates on all of these upcoming events on our Meetup site, our website, our Facebook page, and right here in *The Minnesota Atheist*. Most of the events listed on our Meetup site are free, and those that require a fee are relatively inexpensive. These fees cover the cost of the event only; Minnesota Atheists makes no profit from them.

Of course Minnesota Atheists isn't all about having fun. We also take church and state violations quite seriously and we've challenged these violations when necessary. This year August Berkshire is leading the way to challenge state law that omits atheist leaders from becoming wedding celebrants. This will be the topic of discussion at our upcoming January 19th meeting.

Thank you to all of our supporters, donors, and members for making all of our past and future events possible. If you value the service and efforts of Minnesota Atheists, please consider becoming an official member or renewing your membership. There are several different levels of membership starting at only \$35 per year. Members can run for board positions and make board nominations. Moreover, besides the satisfaction of knowing that they're financially supporting Minnesota Atheists, they receive ten-percent discounts for conference admission and select merchandise.

Get ready for an unbelievably fun 2014!



News and Notes • Commentary by George Kane

Disputes Over the Gettysburg Address and Stanton's Comments at Lincoln's Death Stir Religious Debate

November 19th marked the 150th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address. To commemorate the occasion, Ken Burns filmed 61 political and cultural leaders, including all living presidents, reading the speech. From these videos he put together a pastiche, taking a few words from each reading. The film of President Obama's full reading sparked conservative outrage that Obama omitted "under God" in the line "that the nation shall, under God, have a new birth of freedom," although it was not used in the Burns collage.

The omission of "under God" in Obama's reading became one of the top stories on conservative websites like the Drudge Report, The Daily Caller, and the National Review Online. They were sure that Obama was revealing hostility toward Christianity and deliberately falsifying history. Rush Limbaugh said that Obama did it just to be "in the face" of conservatives, to provoke an angry response. Chris Plante, another conservative radio host, speculated that President Obama would not have removed the phrase "under Allah." "How stupid are these people?" Plante demanded, speaking of Obama's advisors. "How dishonest, how fundamentally corrupt, morally and otherwise corrupt, are these people?"

Burns attempted to resolve the issue by explaining that he had requested the president to read from the Nicolay version, Lincoln's first draft. That text did not include the words "under God." Neither did Lincoln's second draft, known as the Hay Copy. Lincoln wrote this version either

on the morning of the address, or afterward on the train ride back to Washington. These are the only two versions ever found from which Lincoln might have read at the Gettysburg battlefield. There were several newspaper reporters who were transcribing Lincoln's oration live, and they all included "under God." Perhaps the reporters compared their notes before submitting their reports to the newspapers, and came up with a collective error. More likely, Lincoln improvised when delivering the speech, and diverged from his script.

Some time later, Lincoln responded to requests for the text of the speech, and wrote the Everett, Bancroft, and Bliss copies. These all included the words "under God," indicating that Lincoln approved of the insertion whether or not he actually spoke the words at Gettysburg.

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Another Lincoln-related quote is also the subject of partisan dispute. John Hay, Lincoln's private secretary, recorded that when attending physician Charles Sabin Taft declared that Lincoln was dead, Edwin Stanton, the Secretary of War, proclaimed "Now he belongs to the ages." That phrase has been accepted by most historians, although Dr. Taft recalled Stanton's wording as "He now belongs to the ages."

The dispute stems from an article written in 1927 by Corporal James Tanner, the stenographer recruited to take depositions from witnesses of the assassination. Tanner recalled Stanton's words as "He belongs to the angels now."

It seems odd that anyone would accept such a detail that was not recorded until

62 years after the event. Tanner submitted his article in long hand, so it is possible that "angels" was an error in transcription. Other records of Lincoln's deathbed scene do not record that Tanner was even present. Yet conservative Christians have argued that the "angels" version must be taken as authoritative. After all, they assert, Stanton was deeply religious; but they take it as axiomatic that prior to the modern era, everyone in government was a committed Christian. They also contend that the meaning of "belongs to the angels" is clear, while "belongs to the ages" is somehow muddled and incomprehensible.

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In Pennsylvania, Republican State Representative Rick Saccone introduced House Bill 1728 calling for the motto of the United States, *In God We Trust*, to be displayed in all school buildings. In October, the bill cleared the Education Committee by a 14 to 9 vote. The bill, however, will apparently die because the Republican majority has not scheduled a vote by the House in this session's waning days. Saccone has flaunted a religious agenda throughout his legislative career. Last year he introduced a bill declaring 2012 to be The Year of the Bible.

Minnesota Atheist Notes

The US Motto

As an official motto, *In God We Trust* dates only from 1957. However, the motto *Annuuit Cœptis* on the Great Seal of the United States was adopted way back in 1782. It means *God has smiled on our undertaking*.

George Kane

Freethought Cryptogram

Chl cb gzl rscbcm cb gzl oqqcsgkiogd cb gzl mcwi om gzkq qdsoknm zkyl eliolyln og. Gzld kimc eliolyln gzl tcsin tkm bikg.

—Qksu Gtkoh (Answer on page 7.)

Board Report • Jill Carlson

Minnesota Atheists Board Discusses the Saint Paul Saints Game, Newsletter Changes, New Storage Arrangements, and the 2014 Budget

At the Minnesota Atheists Board of Directors meeting in November, the board debated whether to host another Saint Paul Saints Game in the summer of 2014. The cost to host the game is \$4000, and a \$2000 deposit is required soon to ensure availability. The board agreed to support this mission if Minnesota Atheists is able to secure a cosponsor to guarantee funding of at least \$2000 so that our own financial obligation is limited.

In order to increase the distribution of our monthly newsletter, the board agreed to send a monthly message to all Meetup members with a PDF copy of the newslet-

ter. The board also brainstormed ideas for the newsletter so that it will better meet the needs of the Minnesota Atheists membership. Suggestions included ideas for new columns and revised formatting.

The board voted to end the contract for a storage unit due to another increase in monthly fees. The board discussed the idea of establishing a lending library at a local Unitarian congregation and storing materials that do not get regular use in the homes of members.

Finally, the board voted on topics for future monthly meetings. At the Minnesota Atheists silent auction, August Berkshire

and Erika Klein purchased the privilege of selecting a monthly meeting topic. They have chosen the topic of atheism and animal rights.

Traditionally, the December board meeting is used to make financial plans for the upcoming year, and in keeping with tradition, at the December meeting the board focused its energy on formulating a budget for the calendar year 2014. Decisions were made regarding the use of financial resources for outreach, programming, administrative costs and conference planning. The board also attempted to estimate our yearly income to reconcile our budget.

Minnesota Atheist News

What's in Store for Minnesota Atheists? A New Storage Location for the Minnesota Atheists Library is in the Works

About ten years ago the family of the late Merrill Holste generously donated his extensive library of atheist and humanist books to Minnesota Atheists. Many of these books are rare, out of print, or otherwise very valuable. We named it the "Merrill R. Holste Memorial Research Library."

For many years it was housed in the home of Tom and Jean Riddering in St. Paul. Four years ago they decided to sell their house and move out of state, so we rented a 10x10x10 foot, climate-controlled storage unit for the collection. We also stored books for a lending library, books for sale, audio-visual technical equipment donated by Jerry Rauser, and festival and picnic materials there.

Our initial cost of \$82.20 per month has since escalated to \$182.00 per month (just over \$2000 a year). Therefore, the Minnesota Atheists Board voted to cancel our storage space and disperse its contents as follows:

The Holste Library will be stored at the home of member Ann Zaiser. Our lending library will also be stored there temporarily. On December 8th, we rented a large truck and made the move. We'd like to thank Steve Peterson, August Berkshire, Morgan Christian, Ron Lindeman, Shirley Moll, Heather Hegi, Andy Flamm, Joseph Homrich, Jim Barri, and Ann Zaiser for their help.

We are looking for a librarian and a new home for our lending library. The librarian would bring a selection of books to our monthly meetings and members could also request specific books from a list we would publish on our website. The lending library could be housed in the home of the librarian. Also, there has been some interest from a local Unitarian congregation to house our lending library there for free. (Perhaps this could be the start of putting atheist libraries in churches all over the state.) Both their members and ours could borrow from it, and we would still have a

librarian bring some books to our meetings.

The audio-visual technical equipment will be stored at the home of Chris Matthews. Some day, if we have the right type of building, we could set up our own studio to make video recordings, so we would not be limited to the schedule at MTN studios where we currently record our *Atheists Talk* cable television program.

The festival and picnic material will be stored at the home of Steve Petersen and Shirley Moll. The few books we currently have for sale will be stored at the home of August Berkshire and Rachel Wilson. Eric Jayne and Chris Matthews are already handling the sale of our Mr. Paul / Ms. Paula Aints merchandise.

We look forward to the day when we own a Minnesota Atheists Community Center and can have all of this material under one roof. With your help, someday that will become a reality. You can make a donation to our building fund today by using the form on page 11.

Charity Campbell

Small Group Discussion Format Generates Ideas at November Meeting

The Minnesota Atheists November meeting featured small-group discussions on topics such as dealing with religious relatives, death and dying, and morality.

In the discussion about religious relatives, it was agreed that the holiday season is an especially appropriate time to share more about one's religious beliefs with family members, but that atheists are often cautious about doing so for fear that it may ruin the good spirits that the season is supposed to bring. Holidays are something that we atheists still celebrate despite the close association with religion that many of them have. Other types of religious rituals that some of us still participate in include infant baptism and Jewish rites of passage.

The group talking about death and dying concluded that the deceased should still be honored, but that we should try to avoid any talk about religion to their friends and family. Our children should also be taught what we think about death, in contrast to what many others believe. Even if death is seen as merely the end of life, it does not take away meaning from life.

Another group stated that conflicting beliefs about religion are often the result of the way people grew up. Our beliefs about free will, with or without a god, and our actions in many aspects of our life are also the result of how we were brought up as well as our current environment.

And the problem of evil? "It's not our problem, since it's you Christians who are evil!" one participant joked. Theists tend to claim that what is good and bad is defined by their god, usually as revealed in the Bible. Some theists even assume that practices related to their definition of evil are also evil, such as birth control and abortion, and that natural disasters are God's retribution for people's sin and incorrect beliefs. Evangelicals have even blamed the hurricane in the Philippines on the widespread Catholicism of the Filipinos! But we atheists try to take a more logical approach to what is considered evil.

One small group, along with the

entire Minnesota Atheists meeting group, discussed the idea that the origin and maintenance of morality is based upon a variety of factors. Natural processes of evolution, social contacts, and trade help us decide what is good and what is bad. However, there are still grey areas in morality. What if the greater good requires making some people slaves or impels us to engage in a war? Morality has always involved trade-offs, but in recent times more and more people have taken the side of the oppressed. We would like to think that we atheists are among them.

If morality does not come from a god, does the universe come from a god? Just because the universe appears complex does not mean it has to have been designed. In fact, much of the complexity seen on Earth has evolved through natural selection. The watchmaker analogy was thoroughly debunked; something that is not part of nature cannot always be compared to something that is. Moreover, since it appears that there are many different universes, the Biblical account of creation seem sadly lacking. And why does the god of the Bible have to be the designer anyway? Why not Allah or Zeus, who have also been claimed to be the creator of the universe?

All these ideas and many more were part of the small-group discussion format at the November meeting. This format worked very well and gave everyone who came much to think about.

Charity Campbell is a 26-year-old who recently earned a bachelor's degree from Metropolitan State University in St. Paul with a concentration in online communication. She grew up in a strict Christian family, but after doing online research about a year ago, she realized that there really is no reason to believe in a god, let alone the Bible, and considered herself an atheist from then on. She loves events, meetings, and the internet. She hopes to be an online planner and promoter for live entertainment and social advocacy.

Commentary • George Kane

Atheists Should Speak and Act with Care

In his president's column for the November issue of *The Minnesota Atheist*, Eric Jayne lists some of the things for which he is thankful. In this he glides over an inescapable aspect of the English language: whenever we are thankful for something, we must be thankful to someone for it. In his list he does not mention that he is grateful to the members of Minnesota Atheists, the people of Minnesota, the St. Paul Saints, freethinking partner organizations, and our volunteers. People also express their thanks for mild weather, health, and the absence of natural disasters. Who are they thanking? Such use of the term *thanks* acknowledges the existence of a supernatural god, which is why the Thanksgiving holiday is intrinsically religious.

There is nothing wrong, however, with acknowledging things that please us. It is a satisfying expression that probably promotes a wholesome outlook. Atheists should just avoid terms like *thankful* and *grateful* in such expressions.

In the same issue, Bernadette Chlebeck and Phil Cunliffe encourage everyone "to find a cause and show up in your atheist T-shirt" to improve the public image of atheists. I disagree. The justification for charitable activity should be the needs of the people it helps. Charity is only cheapened by self-serving motives.

We disparage organizations like Catholic Charities and Lutheran Charities for their self-aggrandizement; we should not model our conduct after them. It would also be foolish to invite comparison between us and religions on charitable giving because we will surely lose. That competition is rigged: all donations to the churches are counted as charitable contributions. Organizing specifically atheist charities does not fill a real gap. There are excellent secular charities to which we can donate time and money. They have experience and skills that no atheist group can bring to disaster relief and community service.

Book Review • Lewis Campbell

James Bond Meets Darth Vader

The Messiah Game: A Comedy of Terrors, Part I by Tom Flynn. See Sharp Press.

In a far distant future, humans have colonized 42,000 planets in the Milky Way galaxy through a process that is no longer remembered. Only 2,000 of these planets have technologically advanced civilizations. On the other 40,000, people live in essentially neolithic conditions. These planets are designated as Enclave planets and are protected by law from the introduction of outside technology. They constitute a sort of wilderness area for the galaxy.

The 2,000 technologically advanced planets form the Galactic Confetory. Roman Catholicism has become the predominant religion throughout the Confetory, and the Church has established an entire planet for administrative functions, known as Planet Vatican.

The premise of *The Messiah Game* is intriguing, but its execution is disappointing. There are no less than five plots, none of which has any obvious connection to the others. Each chapter takes up a different plot, and following all five becomes a formidable challenge. Four of the plots are loosely joined at the very end, but this half-hearted resolution is hardly satisfying.

Even within each plot, there is very little story development. The bulk of the book is taken up with detailed descriptions of sex and violence which do little to help us understand the characters or move the story along. The main characters do engage in a good deal of dialog, but this largely consists of yelled obscenities, which doesn't add to our understanding of the characters much either.

The Messiah Game is written in an idiosyncratic style charac-

terized by short sentences, few verbs, and bizarre adjectives. A paragraph from the first page is typical:

She squinted into a jaundiced sunrise. The implants tugged gently in her checks. To the north, pink aurora still swirled in the sky. She turned south, upstream. Toward the body.

These short sentences, everywhere. They are so disconnected, choleric. Many of them make no sense until later. They get very tiresome. Especially after several hundred pages.

The book also uses many typographical tricks which fail miserably in their effect. One used several times is "Pain-painPAINPAIN!" Another appears in this ultraviolet passage:

Stifling adjacency congealed. Became bottomless horror. Hideous compacting bondage. "Not like thiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiis!"

You can't help but be impressed by this kind of writing.

Along with the abundance of sex and violence, there is a strong thread of misogyny running through the book. Women are almost invariably described in terms of their sexual attractiveness, but only one man is described in this way. All the main woman characters are markedly violent, and most of them are indifferent to others. Two of them take on casual sex partners and then kill them. Well, it is supposed to be a dystopian novel.

As the name of the book might lead one to expect, there are theological discussions strewn here and there. These

discussions tend to be long and pointless. Just part of one should give you the idea:

"Historically, there are two options for an intellectual in troubled times: you grab hold of some crazy impossible vision. . . . Or you maintain your perspective and start to despair."

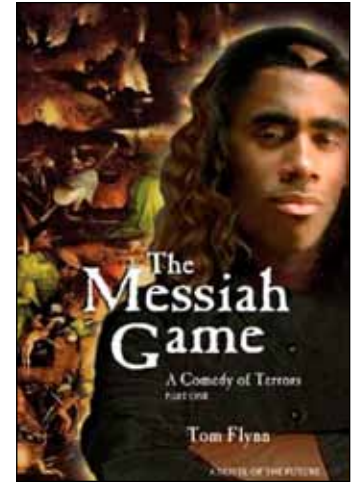
"You believe in the gods?" she asked.

He shook his head sourly. "I believe in what I can see."

"I used to believe," she said softly. . . . "In something, anyway. But it's hard to believe in gods who would allow the Great Dismay. So much pain, so many years—could kindly forces look down on all this and do nothing?"

Since Tom Flynn is the longtime editor of *Free Inquiry*, it seems likely that *The Messiah Game* is intended as an atheist polemic. At best, though, it's a very feeble one. While the religious characters are vain, avaricious, and manipulative, they do not differ much in these characteristics from the other characters in the novel. The one staunchly atheist character in the book is a weak bumbler who is no match for his less introspective, more mystical, and much more violent companions.

The relationship of the Galactic Confetory to the Enclave planets could be seen as an allegory for the relationship of God to the Earth. The Enclave planets typically have a few clandestine residents from the Galactic Confetory whose job is to provide entertainment for the Confetory planets. These Galactic residents are called Spectators. They have special implants that allow their



audience across the galaxy to share their experience exactly. By Galactic law, the Spectators are not allowed to introduce any outside technology, and so the inhabitants of the Enclave planets often die of disease or injuries that would be easy to remedy in the Galactic Confetory. Moreover, if an Enclave inhabitant suspects a Spectator's true identity, the Spectator can order the execution of the inhabitant by invisible spacecraft. The analogy to a wrathful and merciless God is quite striking, but this analogy is never developed in any clear way, and so its potential is lost.

It could be argued that *The Messiah Game* is camp, and that its outrageously poor writing, character development, and plot are intentional. This may very well be so, but that doesn't make it any less tedious or pointless. For satire to work, there must be some real skill in its exaggeration. In *The Messiah Game*, there is none.

While *The Messiah Game* is little more than a litany of explicit, gratuitous sex and violence, with a little explicit, gratuitous theology thrown in to make things exciting, it does have one redeeming quality. It would make a blockbuster of a movie.

Commentary • Jo Marsicano

Avoiding “So help you God”

When I walked into a Minnesota courtroom this past October 31st at the Hennepin County Government center in downtown Minneapolis to have my name legally changed, little did I know I would be faced with my first public dilemma since recently reclaiming the word *atheist* for myself. I knew I'd be asked by the judge what my motives were for changing my name, to make sure I wasn't trying to hide out from the law or from creditors, but I just wasn't expecting that formal oath I'd heard so many times in courtrooms over the years, covering court proceedings as a journalist. Had I thought of it ahead of time, I would've prepared an answer and even talked to the judge's clerk about it ahead of time.

As it was, however, I was asked to raise my hand and swear an oath to tell the truth, “so help you God.” I was stunned and disturbed. Here's the encroaching theocracy right in front of my face, I thought to myself, administered by a court of law of all places. I felt so disheartened.

My two witnesses, friends of mine I'd not yet come out to as an atheist, were sitting right next to me, and others were in the courtroom waiting for their own hearings. I wanted to avoid the embarrassment and possible disruption in the proceedings of an unplanned challenge to court procedure, so I answered, “I do,” but felt like a hypocrite and a coward in the process.

I knew I'd have to talk to court officials about this when I could gather my thoughts and be articulate about it. A couple weeks later, I called the judge's clerk, left him a voicemail relaying my concerns and asking how, in the future, I could request an alternative oath. I assumed he'd simply restate my concerns to the judge, Susan Burke, get back to me about my question, and that would be the end of it. To my pleasant surprise, the judge wanted to talk to me directly. When we spoke, I told her, “I'm an atheist. The language at the end of the oath, ‘so help you God’ is religious language. We don't live in a theocracy and I should not be asked to swear such an oath in a court of law.”

She explained to me that “so help you God” is part of the boilerplate oath language handed to the district courts by the state, is not meant to be religious, but is a term

people commonly understand to underscore the seriousness of what they are about to say in court. But she also said people can ask for different oaths; for example, some people wish to “affirm” rather than “swear.” She said there are other endings to the oath the district courts are free to use, such as “under penalty of law.” She said she was intrigued by my comments (perhaps no one had raised the theocracy issue with her before), she was glad I'd come forward, and she'd rather have someone speak up rather than go away feeling bad about their experience in court. I told her I appreciated her speaking directly to me about this.

As it turned out, I needed to schedule a follow-up hearing in front of the same judge and she asked me if, when I returned, an acceptable oath ending would be, “under penalty of law.” I said yes. When I scheduled the follow-up hearing with her clerk a couple weeks later, I wanted to make sure I put in my request for the alternative oath ending, knowing that with so many people scheduling hearings, I didn't want my earlier conversation with the judge to have gotten lost somehow. The clerk said the ending “under penalty of perjury” would be used (instead of “under penalty of law”) and I said, “Great, thank you.”

Then he said something I wasn't expecting at all—that his understanding was that this new oath ending would be the one the judge would use in all her cases, from now on. You just never know what you can create by coming out of the closet as an atheist and speaking to someone in power.

By the time you read this, I will have had my second court hearing, and will have sworn the new and better oath. It's better because it's a secular oath, created by a secular government, administered in a secular court of law. Perjury means to lie under oath, and I suppose, someone could argue I lied under oath the first time, when I swore to tell the truth “so help you God.” Atheists should not be pressured to, in effect, perjure themselves to avoid social embarrassment in a public courtroom or to avoid the perception they're troublemakers.

We all have the right to a secular oath in our Minnesota courts. So before your next court hearing, don't be afraid to call the judge or the court clerk and ask for one.

Religion's a Joke

Funny You Should Come to Me

One day Benjamin got a telephone call from his son Abraham, who had just turned twenty-one.

“Dad, I've struggled and struggled with this, but I've finally decided to convert to Christianity,” Abraham said.

Benjamin was shocked and upset by his son's call, so he went to see the Rabbi.

“Rabbi, I've done everything I could. I raised my son in the faith, I took him to Synagogue every Saturday, we had a wonderful Bar Mitzvah celebration. All the relatives came and he got dozens of gifts. I even had him join the National Conference of Synagogue Youth. Tell me, where did I go wrong?”

The Rabbi shook his head slightly and looked thoughtfully at Benjamin. “It's funny you should come to me,” the Rabbi said. “I have a son Moishe who is just Abraham's age. I too raised him in the faith and took him to Synagogue every Saturday. We too had a wonderful Bar Mitzvah celebration. All the relatives came and he got hundreds of gifts, including a full scholarship to Yashiva University. I too had him join the National Conference of Synagogue Youth. He even served on the chapter board. But just yesterday I got a call from him saying he'd converted to Christianity.”

Benjamin was even more shocked than before. “What did you do?” he asked the Rabbi.

The Rabbi said, “I talked to God.”

“And what did God say?” Benjamin asked.

“‘Funny you should come to me. . . .’”

Cryptogram Answer

One of the proofs of the immortality of the soul is that myriads have believed it. They also believed the world was flat.

—Mark Twain

Chris Matthews

October- November Treasury Report

Radio Fund

August Berkshire	\$300
David Nason	\$200
Allison Malloy	\$100
Paul Gramstad	\$50
Arthur Searcy	\$50
James Wright	\$50
Susan Christiansen	\$25
Herbert Davis	\$20
Shirley Moll	\$20
Mark Paquette	\$20
Steve Petersen	\$20

Total Radio Fund \$855

General/Visibility Fund

Chris Matthews	\$2,000
Michael Abbott	\$120
Vanita Mishra	\$100
Thomas Dooley	\$75
Valerie Gingras	\$70
Michelle Tjernagel	\$49
Sean Carstensen	\$47
Justine Hartz	\$32
Gerald Erickson	\$25
Sarah Gerold	\$21
Eleanor Rittenour	\$15

Total General/Visibility Fund .. \$2,554

Building Fund

Wayne Varner	\$215
Cumulative Total	\$131,764

Total Income \$3,624

Top Expenses for September

Newsletter Printing	\$1,839
Radio Show	\$1,640
Storage	\$351

Correction

In the article by Charles Coventry, the zoo he visited was the Minnesota Zoo, not Como Zoo.

Radio Report • Steve Petersen

Karen Stollznow Featured on Atheists Talk Radio

The *Atheists Talk* radio show is broadcast live every Sunday morning from 9:00 to 10:00 on KTNE, 950 AM. A live stream and podcasts are available through the Minnesota Atheists website at mnatheists.org.

Recent shows are summarized below.

Deliverance at Hand—James Zimmerman on Atheists Talk #242, October 27, 2013

When James and Jennifer Zimmerman began to have doubts about their faith as members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, a Circuit Overseer suggested that they carry out research to help rebuild their enthusiasm for Jehovah and The Truth.

This turned out to be a mistake by the church, because James and Jennifer carried out their research a bit too enthusiastically. Their research led to agnosticism and a realization that the people who have The Truth do not, in fact, have the truth.

On this show, James talked about his new book, *Deliverance at Hand!: The Redemption of a Devout Jehovah's Witness*, which explores his experiences in the Jehovah's Witnesses and his decision to leave them behind.

Perv: The Sexual Deviant In All of Us—Jesse Bering on Atheists Talk #243, November 3, 2013

Jesse Bering holds a PhD. in developmental psychology from Florida Atlantic University. He is a frequent contributor to *Scientific American*, *Slate*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *Discover*, and author of the books *Why Is the Penis Shaped Like That?* and *The Belief Instinct*. We were pleased to welcome Dr. Bering back to *Atheists Talk* to discuss his newest book *Perv: The Sexual Deviant In All of Us*.

50 Great Myths About Atheism—Russell Blackford on Atheists Talk #244, November 17, 2013

On this show, philosopher Russell Blackford and bioethicist Udo Schüklenk returned to *Atheist Talk* to tell us about their new book *50 Great Myths About Atheism*.

Think: Why You Should Question Everything—Guy P. Harrison on Atheists Talk #246, December 1st, 2013

Author Guy P. Harrison returned once again to discuss science, skepticism, and critical thinking. His recently released book, *Think: Why You Should Question Everything*, defines what skepticism is and challenges readers to explore the differences between science and superstition.

God Bless America—Karen Stollznow on Atheists Talk #247, December 8, 2013

For this show, the Australian linguist Karen Stollznow turned her attention to the foibles of American belief as she talked about her newest book, *God Bless America: Strange and Unusual Religious Beliefs and Practices in the United States*.

A Better Life—Chris Johnson on Atheists Talk #248, December 15, 2013

Chris Johnson joined us to talk about his new book profiling atheists from the US, Canada and UK: *A Better Life: 100 Atheists Speak Out on Joy & Meaning in a World Without God*. Among those he interviewed are A.C. Grayling, Steven Novella, Daniel Dennett, Rebecca Watson, Christopher Hitchens, James Randi, Carolyn Porco, Julia Sweeney, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, James Watson, Jessica Ahlquist, Richard Dawkins, and Steven Pinker.

The *Atheists Talk* radio show is produced by Minnesota Atheists. The October through December shows were created by Brianne Bilyeu, Carl Hancock, George Kane, Scott Lohman, and Stephanie Zvan. Original music was composed and performed by Brent Michael Davids.

If you would like to participate in the creation of the show, please contact us at radio@mnatheists.org.

To learn more about *Atheists Talk*, visit us on Facebook and at twitter.com/atheiststalk.

Atheists Talk radio costs about \$900 per month to produce. Please consider making a denotation by using the coupon on page 11 or by visiting mnatheists.org/join-and-donate/radio-fund.

Cable Television Schedule

Podcasts

Atheists Talk is available via both iTunes and YouTube. For more information see the Minnesota Atheist website at mnatheists.org. Podcasts are made possible by Grant Hermanson.

Cable

- Bloomington Community Access Television, Channel 16. Sundays, 11:00 p.m. Sponsored by David and Joanne Beardsley.
- Burnsville Community Television, Channel 14. Broadcast on an erratic schedule. Check www.burnsville.org/index.aspx?NID=484 to see if any showtimes are scheduled. Sponsored by Kevin Hardisty.
- Eagan Community Television, Channel 15. Broadcast on an erratic schedule. Check www.eagan-tv.com/index.php/channels/channel-15 to see if any showtimes are scheduled. Sponsored by Kevin Hardisty.
- Minneapolis Television Network, Channel 75. Mondays, 7:00 p.m. Sponsored by Steve Petersen.
- North Suburban Access Corporation, Channel 21, serving the Moundsview area. Wednesdays, 10:30 p.m. Sponsored by Shirley Moll.
- Rochester Public Access, Channel 10. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, 7:30 p.m. Sponsored by Jim Salutz.
- Saint Cloud Public Access, Channel 12. Thursdays, 8:30. Sponsored by Tom Stavros.
- Saint Paul Neighborhood Network, Channel 15. Wednesdays, 5:00 p.m. Sponsored by Jim Wright.
- Suburban Community Channels, Channel 15, serving the Maplewood area. Saturdays 8:00 p.m. Sponsored by Michael Seliga.
- Valley Access Channels, Channel 18, serving the Stillwater area. Check valleyaccesschannels.tv for showtimes. Sponsored by Lee Salisbury.

From left to right, Scott Lohman, David Breeden, August Berkshire, and Stephanie Zvan at a recent recording of *Atheist Talk*.



Cable Television Report • Steve Petersen

Sunday Assemblies Discussed at Recent Cable Show Recording

The topic at a recent recording of *Atheist Talk* was Sunday Assemblies. This is a movement started in England designed to attract atheists to weekly social gatherings of music, dance, speakers, and community that have a feel of church but without religion or dogma. Stephanie Zvan interviewed Rev. Dr. David Breeden of the First Unitarian Society in Minneapolis, Scott Lohman, President of the Humanists of Minnesota,

and August Berkshire of Minnesota Atheists. These three organizations all have something to offer atheists interested in Sunday Assemblies and something to lose if Sunday Assemblies were to become active in Minnesota.

The *Atheist Talk* cable television show is created by George Kane, Brett Stembridge, Shirley Moll, Steve Petersen, Les Stordahen, Grant Hermanson, and Art Anderson.

Minnesota Atheist Notes

Sunday Assemblies

Sunday Assemblies were started by the British comedy team of Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans. Their first Sunday Assembly was held in January 2013 at a deconsecrated church in North London. This initial event attracted more than 300 people, and regular meetings in North London continue to attract hundreds of people.

Sunday Assemblies are similar to traditional church services, but make no reference to God or religion. They include sermon-like talks, a variety of music, and social activities.

Since the first meeting in London, Sunday Assemblies have spread to over 30 cities in the English-speaking world, including Dublin, Melbourne, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Jones and Evans have played an important part in the spread



Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans

of Sunday Assemblies by conducting a comedy tour of forty cities to promote the idea.

You can learn more at the official Sunday Assembly website, sundayassembly.com.

Call for February Articles

We welcome contributions from all readers of *The Minnesota Atheist*. While we cannot guarantee that your submission will be accepted for publication, we will carefully consider anything that is related to atheism. We would especially like to receive contributions which provide profiles of individual atheists and which report on atheist-related events in the wider community.

Because we are a 501(c)3 tax-exempt organization, we cannot print articles that support or oppose a specific candidate, but we can print articles that support or oppose specific causes.

A good size to aim for is about 500-1000 words, and no more than about 2000 words, which comes to two pages in the newsletter. We can use text in most common formats such as Word, WordPerfect, and OpenOffice, but not Apple Pages.

We encourage you to include photos or other artwork along with your submission. To reproduce well, images should be at least 300 pixels in each dimension. We can use most common image formats, including tiff, jpg, and png.

Please send submissions to the editor, Lewis Campbell, at lfc-813@sevenpathswebdesign.com by 11:59 p.m. on January 25th. All submissions may be edited for style and length.

Several past contributors have asked for the opportunity to review the edited version of their submissions before publication. We would be happy to work with contributors in this way, but we will need a few extra days to do so. If you would like to review the edited version of your submission, please indicate this in the email accompanying your submission and send your submission by 11:59 p.m. on January 20th.

We look forward to receiving your submissions. Without contributions from readers like you, *The Minnesota Atheist* would be needlessly constrained in its breath and depth.

Upcoming Events

Atheist/Agnostic Alcoholics Anonymous. Sundays, 6:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., Men's Center, 3249 Hennepin Avenue South, Suite 55, Minneapolis. Meets in the basement. Open to all genders.

Atheist Altruists—Blood Donations! Saturday, January 18, 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m., Memorial Blood Center, 737 Pelham Boulevard, St. Paul. Space is limited so please sign up on meetup.com.

Atheist Altruists—Lunch/Brunch at The Egg and I. Saturday, January 18, 11:00 a.m., Egg and I, 2550 University Avenue West, St. Paul. Lunch/Brunch at The Egg and I following blood donations. You don't have to donate blood to come out to lunch, but please sign up on meetup.com.

Atheists Talk television show recording. First Thursday, 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., MTN Studio A, 125 Southeast Main Street, Minneapolis. Contact Steve Petersen, 651-484-9277.

Blasphemer's Brunch. Second Saturday, 10:30 a.m., Pizza Lucé, 800 West 66th Street, Richfield.

Burnsville Book Club. Wednesday, January 8th. Dinner 6:30 p.m., meeting 7:00 p.m. to about 9:00 p.m., Davanni's, 14639 County Road 11, Burnsville. Meet in the party room. The book for January is *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror* by Thomas Ligotti.

Cook for and Dine with Families at a Local Homeless Shelter. Saturday, January 18th, 3:00 p.m., Family Place, 499 North Wacouta Street, St. Paul. Space is limited, so sign up on meetup.com to reserve a place.

Crafty Freethinkers North. Sunday, January 26th, 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., Maple Grove Library, Training Room 133, 8001 Main Street North, Maple Grove. You may attend any part of the time.

Dinner & A Book. Wednesday, January 29th, 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., Davanni's, 5937 Summit Drive, Brooklyn Center. The book for January is *The Happy Atheist* by PZ Myers.

Food Packing at the Emergency Food Network Warehouse. Thursday, January 9th, 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., Emergency Food Shelf Network, 8501

54th Avenue North, New Hope.

Freethinking Females Evening at Chatterbox Pub. Fourth Monday, 7:30 p.m., Chatterbox Pub, 800 Cleveland Avenue South, St. Paul.

Freethought Dinner Social. Second and fourth Mondays, 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., Davanni's, 8605 Lyndale Avenue South, Bloomington. Contact Bob or Marilyn Neinker, 612-866-6200.

Freethought Lunch. First Tuesday, 11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., Old Country Buffet, County Road B2 between Fairview and Snelling. Contact Bob or Marilyn Nienkirk, 612-866-6200.

Freethought Toastmasters. First and third Mondays, 6:30 p.m., Larpenteur Estates Party Room, 1276 Larpenteur Avenue West, Saint Paul. Contact George Kane, dir2@mnatheists.org.

Godless Gamers—Board Game Night. Second and forth Thursdays, 6:00 p.m., Fantasy Flight Games Center, 1975 County Road B2, Roseville..

Lake Superior Freethinkers Monthly Membership Meeting. First Sundays, social time 9:00 a.m., breakfast 9:30 a.m. (\$13.00), program 10:00 a.m., Duluth Radisson, 505 West Superior Street, Duluth.

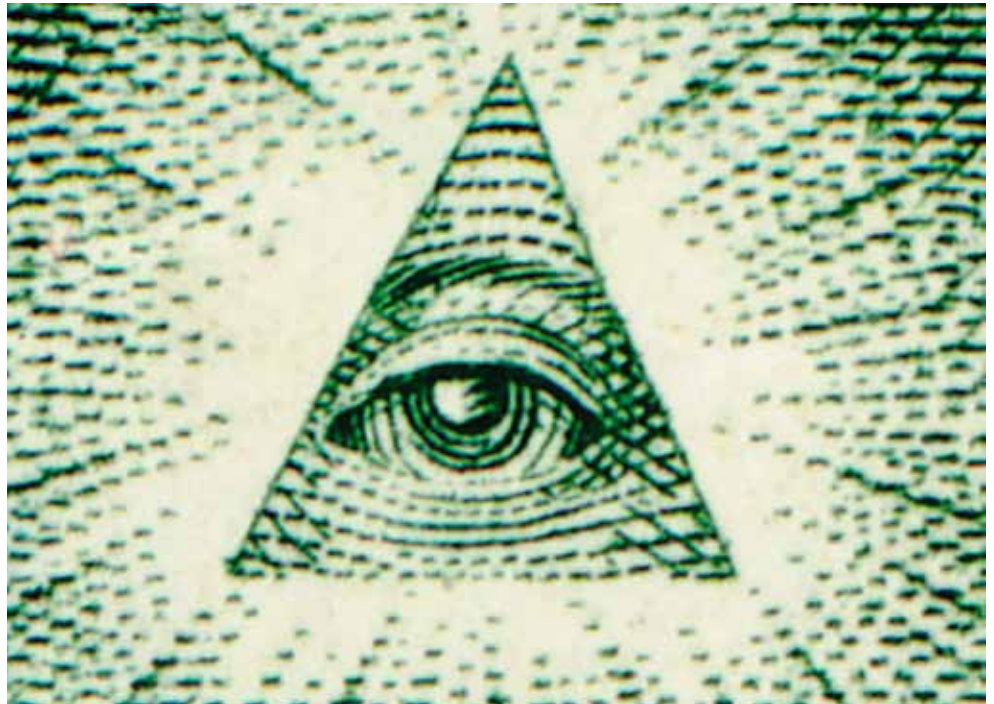
Little Canada Book Club. Second Sunday, 1:00 p.m., Caribou Coffee, 3354 Rice Street, Little Canada. The book for January is *The Botany of Desire* by Michael Pollan.

Lunch at the Dragon House Restaurant. Third Wednesday, 11:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., Dragon House Restaurant, 3970 Central Avenue, Columbia Heights. Contact Bill Volna, 612-781-1420.

Minnesota Atheists Board Meeting. Third Wednesday, 6:30 p.m., Larpenteur Estates Party Room, 1276 Larpenteur Avenue West, St. Paul. Open to all members. Contact George Kane, dir2@mnatheists.org.

For all the latest meeting news, subscribe to Atheists' Weekly Email (AWE) at mnatheists.org/atheists-weekly/subscribe-to-awe.html. Also visit our Meetup page at meetup.com/minnesota-atheists.

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Student memberships include a subscription to the PDF version of *The Minnesota Atheist* delivered by email. All other memberships include a subscription to the printed version delivered by postal mail. If you would prefer the PDF version delivered by email, please check the box and provide your email address.

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Minnesota Atheists

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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.

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MINNESOTA ATHEISTS GOALS

Minnesota Atheists
practices positive,
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neighborhood atheism in
order to provide a community
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public about atheism, and
promote separation of state
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