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March Public Meeting –The Origin of Morality

March 15, 2015

Some people see values and moral values in particular, as “unnatural,” and incompatible with a naturalistic, scientific worldview. But this is not so. Morals are created by our animal brains using its capacities for representation and recursion. Come hear one philosopher’s view on the origin and justification of moral values, and de-mystify your view of moral reality.

Scott Forschler is an independent scholar with a PhD in philosophy from the University of Minnesota, and a specialization in the foundations of morality. He is the author of several published articles in philosophy, including "From Supervenience to 'Universal Law': How Kantian Ethics Become Heteronomous," in *Kant and Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (de Gruyter, 2012). His most recent work is *The Logic of Morality* (Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming), in which he shows how objective moral facts are derived from the nature of practical reason.

Scott Forschler is a former member of Minnesota Atheists and CASH (Campus Atheists, Sceptics, and Humanists at the University of Minnesota). He now lives in the St Cloud area and is working on a textbook on ethical theories and principles titled *From Values to Morals*. He is on the speaker's bureau at both the Secular Student Alliance and the Center for Inquiry.



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March 15, 2015

Ramsey County Library, Roseville
2180 Hamline Ave N, Roseville MN

1:00-1:15 p.m. – Social Time
1:15-1:45 p.m. – Business Meeting
1:45-2:00 p.m. – Break
2:00-3:30 p.m. – Program
4:00-whenever – Dinner at Panda Garden Buffet (1706 Lexington Ave N, Roseville)

President's Column – Responding to Chapel Hill

By Eric Jayne

Craig Stephen Hicks, a white middle aged atheist, gunned down three young Muslim college students—all of whom were of Palestinian descent on February 10, 2015. Deah Shaddy Barakat, the oldest victim at the age of 23, was pursuing a doctorate in dentistry and planning a trip to Turkey to assist children in a Syrian refugee camp with emergency dental work. Also killed was Barakat's wife, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha and her sister Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha. Yusor was planning to study dentistry in the fall at North Carolina State University and Razan was a sophomore there.

The Chapel Hill police indicated that a longtime dispute over a parking spot was Hicks' motive but many have speculated that Hicks was instead motivated by a hatred for the Muslim faith. The FBI opened an investigation to determine if this was a hate-motivated attack but some have already jumped to that conclusion pointing to Hicks' antitheism and his outspoken sharp criticism of religion on Facebook.

This has left many Muslims feeling distrustful of atheists and it's prompted many atheists to carefully look within ourselves and respond with sincerity. As we grieve with the victims' families and the larger Muslim community over the loss of these three remarkable young people, we are also compelled to correct damaging misrepresentations about atheism cycling through the news. The atheist response has been mostly empathetic, clear, and honest, and it must remain that way if we are to repair trust between atheists and Muslims.

Perhaps the finest response came from Foundation Beyond Belief. They raised over \$20,000 in honor of the victims. The money will go to the Syrian American Medical Society Foundation; the organization Deah was going to travel with this summer to help Syrian refugee children. Along with the donation came this critical acknowledgement from FBB's executive director, Dale McGowan, "We wanted to say this guy may have been an atheist but the atheist community absolutely disowns this action, and we wanted to make it clear we recognize the victims as victims and make a gesture of healing."

I think most atheists know that an atheist, like anyone else, is capable of committing horrific acts of violence but I think it's important for prominent secular voices like McGowan to publicly acknowledge this. It should also be mentioned, however, that there's nothing in the atheist worldview making allowances for harming others.

Nevertheless, many blogs and news stories admonished anti-theism (atheism's saucier counterpart which is also sometimes branded "militant" or "new"

atheism), led by the likes of Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, for creating hate-inducing extremism among atheists. Even though I think I fit the description of an antitheist—somebody who sees atheism as more than just a personal identity but as a necessary social and political movement to confront the deleterious impact religion has on individuals and society—I choose to identify simply as an atheist. I prefer its simplicity and I think "atheist" is plenty bold within my social and professional network. But I know others prefer to identify as antitheist and that is a perfectly respectable, non-hateful, thing to be.

Antitheism was readily faulted by an editorial in The Guardian for influencing Hicks to murder since "[Hicks claimed] their faith was an affront to his atheistic principals." And in a recent NPR story Reza Aslan summarized antitheism as a "virulent opposition to the very concept of belief." He identified antitheists as "extremists" and draws a direct comparison to extremists within Islam. With little surprise, Sam Harris offers a notably cogent reaction to this misleading and destructive narrative.

"The analogy between militant atheism and militant Islam is a terrible one," according to Harris. "It is false in every respect. Atheists are simply not out there harming people on the basis of their atheism. Now, there may be atheists who do terrible things, but there is no atheist doctrine or scripture; and insofar as any of us have written books or created arguments that have persuaded people, these books and arguments only relate to the bad evidence put forward in defense of a belief in God. There's no argument in atheism to suggest that you should hate or victimize or stigmatize whole groups of people, as there often is in revealed religion." This is an important point, and it's one that is difficult for many to accept. Religions, especially the big three (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism), were built on a framework of ethnocentric, authoritarian reign. The texts for which these religious faiths are supported require severe punishment for nonbelievers and for those who criticize the religious faith. There simply is no such instruction or authoritarian reign within atheism. Likewise, ideas of hellfire and eternal damnation have no place in atheism. Fortunately, humanity has advanced morality far beyond the male-dominated teachings from ancient Mediterranean tribes. But even though many contemporary mainstream mosques/synagogues/churches overlook the maniacal

(continued on page 7)

News and Notes

By George Kane

The marriage equality movement has had a string of successes in referendum elections and the courts. Today same-sex marriages are recognized by the federal government and are legal in 37 states and the District of Columbia. The bans on same-sex marriage are being challenged in court cases in the remaining 13 states. When the U.S. Supreme Court struck down key provisions of the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in the 2013 *United States v. Windsor* case because provisions of the law denied same-sex couples of equal protection of the law, Justice Antonin Scalia scolded his colleagues that the logic of the decision would be used to overturn all state prohibitions of same-sex marriage. Now is not a time for complacency, however. Be certain that the opposition, almost exclusively from churches and religiously affiliated organizations, has not given up. Until same-sex marriage is recognized and permitted everywhere in the nation, the danger persists that all of these gains could be rolled back.

In Alabama, State Supreme Court Justice Roy Moore has written to Governor Robert Bentley urging him to defy an order by District Court Judge Callie Granade to begin issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Moore's arguments were based upon the nullification doctrines of John Caldwell Calhoun that inspired the Confederacy to secession and cast the nation into its Civil War.

Moore is the notorious "Ten Commandments Judge" who was removed from office in 2003 after his refusal to remove a religious monument from his courthouse, although he was recently elected back to the Chief Justice seat. His rebellion against the decision mandating same-sex marriage has no legal authority. Justices Clarence Thomas and Antonin Scalia were the only dissenters when the Supreme Court voted not to stay the order requiring Alabama to begin issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples. It is certainly encouraging that Thomas interpreted that ruling as signaling the intent by the other justices to overturn state bans on same-sex marriage.

Nevertheless, the prospect that this conservative court could change direction from the *Windsor* decision should still be viewed with concern. In its grant of *certiorari*, SCOTUS has consolidated four cases in which the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the right of states to ban same-sex marriage: *Bourke v. Beshear* from Kentucky, *DeBoer v. Snyder* from Michigan, *Obergefell v. Hodges* from Ohio and *Tanco v. Haslam* from Tennessee. The Court stated that it would rule only on the power of the states to ban same-sex marriages and to refuse to recognize such marriages performed in another state, and have asked litigants to limit their written and oral arguments to these two questions.

Lawyers for the four states are expected to argue, as they have at the Appellate Court, that the Supreme Court has already ruled on the right of states to ban gay marriage in the 1970 case *Baker v. Nelson*. That case was brought by two gay students at the University of Minnesota when they were denied a marriage license in Minneapolis. When they lost in Hennepin County District Court and the Minnesota Supreme Court, they appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which let the trial court decision stand with a single laconic sentence: "The appeal is dismissed for want of a substantial federal question."

Since *Windsor*, four U.S. Courts of Appeal have held that *Baker* was no longer a controlling precedent. The Sixth Circuit finding to the contrary is the contested issue in the case. Judge Jeffrey Sutton ruled that *Windsor* and *Baker* were not in conflict, but rather perfectly harmonized: "Windsor invalidated a federal law that refused to respect state laws permitting gay marriage, while Baker upheld the right of the people of a State to define marriage as they see it."

If the Supreme Court agrees with Judge Sutton, in all of the states where same-sex marriage was created by federal courts, the battle will have to be fought all over again, this time in the political sphere.

George Kane Cryptogram

Rfkg rznkg gfb enits ht qgr Mnbzrab pgfq hq bnimgq qn ehts qgrlr,
fts gfb ndrlannxrs pgfq hq phbgrs qn ndrlannx.

Aisphm dnt Yhbrb

Minnesota Atheists February Meeting Review – Black Atheism

By Sonita Sarker

On February 15, the Minnesota Atheists' public meeting featured Mahad Muhammad's talk, "Black Atheist History." It was an informative, thought-provoking, and often humorous presentation on African-American cultural identity (blackness) from the 20th century to the present. The issue of atheism was woven into the narrative about many figures who questioned dominant prejudices about blackness as bad or lesser or enslaved. The speaker started by invoking names that are well known: Frederick Douglas, W.E.B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston, and Neil deGrasse Tyson. The accomplishments that are lesser-known were illuminating: Carter Godwin Woodson, who wrote *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933) and started Negro History Week (now known as Black History Month); Butterfly McQueen, best known for her role as Prissy in *Gone With the Wind* and honored with the Freethought Heroine Award by the Freedom from Religion Foundation. The talk also presented examples from more recent popular culture in which there were discussions of black culture questioning the relationship between race and religion: Muhammad Ali in a 1971 interview; the 2012 track titled "Summer's Ending" by Greydon Square, an Iraq-war veteran and atheist; and an episode from *Belle* (a 2013 one-season television show) on atheism, family, and religion. The presentation ended by invoking examples of black youth—Andy Lopez, Tamir Rice, and Michael Brown—the connection of their lives and deaths to atheism was not made directly; the speaker did, however, ask us to contemplate what the goals and objectives of our atheist community were in relation to black experiences of suffering and marginalization today.

The journey through the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries of black experience that the talk presented contained reminders of how much more we have yet to know about the relationship between black cultural identity and atheism. It also emphasized how often histories have to be re-told so that under-represented stories are made known and ever-newer generations grow up hearing differently-told stories.

The richness and depth of Black history in relation to atheism are already indications as to why the talk was necessary, relevant, and valuable. Mahad Muhammad's own relationship to black identity and atheism was not included in the talk but is addressed in his recent conversation on "Black Freethinkers of Minnesota" (#297 podcast of January 11, 2015). A "Day of Solidarity for Black Non Believers" was held on February 22nd. These events create considerable anticipation as to how "black" in the title of the newly-launched freethinkers group will be defined or what it will include.



Atheist Night at the New St. Paul Saints Ballpark

By Eric Jayne

For the last three years the Minnesota Atheists took over the St. Paul Saints minor league baseball team for a night of *unbelievable* fun. This year the Saints will be playing in their brand new, state of the art ballpark (CHS Field in downtown St. Paul) and we would love to see the team wearing our re-branded—secular-friendly—Mister Paul Aints jerseys there.

Because the Saints are moving to a new, bigger and fancier ballpark the sponsorship fees have increased. Minnesota Atheists has a co-sponsor but we're falling a little short of our funding goals. We need an additional \$1,500 to help us offset some of the sponsorship fee so we are reaching out to our members and supporters to help us fund this event. Donations of any amount can be made electronically at: MinnesotaAtheists.org/BaseballGame or mailed to P.O. Box 120304, New Brighton, MN 55112 (ATTN: Atheist Baseball Game Fund).

With the new ballpark comes a new theme which we are very excited to announce in the coming weeks. We'll continue our tradition of pre-game tailgating and between inning atheist-themed antics. We'll also be able to hang our banners throughout the new stadium and greet fans at a resource table as they walk through the gate. And of course the "S" will be covered on the signs displaying the Saints team logo.

This is a unique effort for positive outreach of Minnesota Atheists and atheism in general. For more information, or if **you're interested in joining the Atheist Baseball Committee** to discuss ideas and planning, please contact pres@mnatheists.org



Atheist & Family Night

Help us sponsor "Atheist Night" at the brand new CHS Field in St. Paul. The St. Paul Saints team to be secularized to the MR. PAUL AINTS in 2015!

To Donate: MinnesotaAtheists.org/BaseballGame

Minneapolis Homeless Shelters and Churches

By August Berkshire

A front page article in the February 16, 2015 *Star Tribune* was entitled “Rethinking Spaces for the Homeless.” Among other things, it described the Minneapolis law that states that, outside of the downtown area, homeless shelters can only be in religious buildings.

This issue had been brought to the attention of Minnesota Atheists over a month earlier by one of our members. In response, I sent the following email to the six city council members who serve on the Minneapolis Zoning & Planning Committee: Lisa Bender (Chair), Lisa Goodman, Andrew Johnson, Barbara Johnson, Kevin Reich, and Abdi Warsame.

I am writing regarding a meeting you are having on January 8, 9:30 am, at City Hall. Specifically, I am concerned about the item “Homeless Shelters Ordinances.” I have been informed that you will be directing city staff to begin looking at updating city ordinances that address the definition and regulation of “overnight shelters.”

I have been told that the code currently reads (in part): “537.110. Overnight shelter. Overnight shelters shall be allowed accessory to a religious institution place of assembly. In addition to obtaining a conditional use permit, as specified in Chapter 525, Administration and Enforcement, such overnight shelter shall be subject to the following standards...”

I have also been told that there is a “Downtown Shelter Overlay District” that was “established to provide areas that offer overnight shelter facilities that may not meet the accessory use requirements for an overnight shelter contained in the regulations of the primary zoning district,” but the boundaries of that district are very limited: The DS Overlay District shall be limited to locations within the downtown area bounded by East Lyndale Avenue North, Glenwood Avenue, 10th Street North, Hawthorne Avenue, and Linden Avenue. Outside of this area, all shelters must be attached to a religious institution.

My question is, outside of the Downtown Shelter Overlay District, is it only religious organizations that are allowed to run homeless shelters? If so, this would violate separation of church and state.

Sincerely, August Berkshire, [contact information]. Constituent of Abdi Warsame.

In response, I got a very nice letter from Minneapolis City Council Member Lisa Bender, chair of the committee:

Thank you for your email. I am the author of this ordinance change, along with CM Cam Gordon. It is true that outside of the downtown overlay that homeless shelters are only allowed as accessory (meaning physically within) churches or other religious institutions. We are looking at changing this to regulate them in a different way. Looking at peer cities, staff has begun to find that this is extremely unique. I am actually not sure about the legal question you raise – staff at the time that this change was made in the late 90s must have thought it was legally sound.

If you have any specific further thoughts or feedback about this topic, please let any of us know.

One issue that we will likely encounter is concern about impacts of shelters on neighboring properties as well as concerns over having a concentration of shelters in one geographic area. Potential policy solutions to this include requiring special permission (called a Conditional Use Permit), limiting the zoning classifications where shelters are allowed, or including spacing requirements for shelters. We are also starting to find that at least some other colder weather cities have special regulations to make it easier to provide winter emergency shelter.

We are at a very, very early stage of this work just getting added to CPED’s work program, which is the action we took on Monday.

I’m also happy to answer any further questions you might have.

All my best, Lisa

Lisa Bender 10th Ward City Council Member

So it may well be that our contacting the city council put the state/church issue on their radar. Minnesota Atheists will stay on top of this issue. In the meantime, if you know of any other state/church violations in our state, please contact Minnesota Atheists to let us know about them.

August Berkshire is the chair of Minnesota Atheists’ Legislative Committee

Rational and Reasonable or Empirical – February 2015

By Grant Steves

Rational, reasonable, thoughtful – a Roget list of words having something in common – usage. How we use and abuse language demonstrates our limitations and our adamant sensitivities. The ordinary application of the words only implies that one is more ‘reason’ oriented than ‘emotion’. That you think through the issue or problem before you, and it does not mean without evidence – although some present arguments in this manner. A more technical use is that reason is the only source/authority of knowledge. Philosophy defines Rationalism as, “a doctrine that knowledge comes from the intellect in itself without aid from the senses; intellectualism.” - Webster’s New World College Dictionary.

In the article, ‘Why I Am Not a Rationalist’, the author seemed to use the term in the philosophical sense. Some did not see the distinction being made. The artful dodger of debate, William Lane Craig, is an example of this penchant for use or abuse of reason without evidence to spin rational webs about the existence of god. He creates logical traps that are divined from presuppositions. This is a case of *a priori* case construction. Therein is his fault – webs spun of logic without evidence – sensory data. It is perhaps the *sine qua non* of theological thought and the ravings of blog denizens.

In contrast, the author’s position was an endorsement of the empirical method – that which is based on experiment, observation, sensory data, and she would associate this with science.

Empiricism as a term has not been bandied about like rational or reasonable. The case she makes for empiricism is to be admired. We sometimes need clarification of terms and clarification of application of terms being used. One could compare the two to theological thinking and scientific thinking. Webster’s New World College Dictionary defined empiricism as “an experimental method; search for knowledge by observation and experiment... relying solely on experience. The theory that sense experience is the only source of knowledge.” This approach to knowledge acquisition seems to resonate with naturalism and humanism. It does not resonate with the late night dorm bull sessions of my college years – nor from reading some blogs. Too often there is speculation without evidence – a failure to rely on experts (not for opinion but for verified experiments or evidence.) We increasingly need to check our facts, require people to use facts, and expose opinion and web spinning logic traps.

What amused me about the article, ‘Why I Am Not a Rationalist’, was it reflected the blog approach to writing. It mixed invective with reason but did not have

empirical evidence to support the attack. Perhaps in the context of an ongoing blog response that would have been clearer. The statement that rationalism as an “ideology and movement appeal largely to young, to men, to white people, to libertarians. It focuses primarily on individual actions,” is a blistering attack on the group who appear attracted to rationalism but without empirical evidence to support this generalized attack. This attack says more about the writer’s bias than about rationalism. The use of *ad hominem* attacks failed to achieve a persuasive end. This blog essay becomes strident with invective. Perhaps in the context of the over-heated blogosphere it works, but it is preaching to the convinced and alienating to those it applies to and those who are neutral. Perhaps that is the end game of this style of writing.

I agree with the substance of the argument, but I found the method of delivery to be too negative and that could result in polarization and not unification. It was not a collaborative effort but one spun by an individual in a rational, invective style.

President’s Column (continued from page 2)

parts written in their sacred texts there are several people from these faiths who do not—as a matter of fact, several actually embrace these pernicious holy decrees. Not only are the arguments trying to connect militant atheism to militant Islam bad, but they are also distracting us from dealing with the very real and very genuine harm facing the world today. Harris continues, “All the people who are comparing these murders to Charlie Hebdo – or to ISIS, as insane as that sounds – are really trivializing a kind of violence that threatens to destabilize much of the world. And ironically it is violence whose principal victims are Muslim.”

We grieve and empathize with the Muslim community over the deaths of these three young people. But at the same time we need to feel permitted to criticize bad ideas and address misrepresentations of atheism (and antitheism). Through this kind of empathy and honesty our young species will hopefully mature into something more tolerant and practical and less likely to harm ourselves over a disagreement about whose god-belief is more accurate.

Letter to the Editor

By Tommie O'Brien

This is in response to the current newsletter article on Rationalism. My name is Tom O'Brien and I was raised a Roman Catholic. After 9/11 I began asking myself why one person would murder another human over belief in an imaginary friend. My research led me to self-publish a book on the concept, text and history of religion; Bizarre Beyond Belief. Despite being a member of your organization, I consider myself a Rationalist. And, despite Ms. Zvan's comment that Rationalists are primarily young people, I am older (76) and hopefully wiser. In December before the Paris incident took place, I wrote a manifesto, hoping to get it published. This is that manifesto.

Or, professing to not believe in anything that can't be substantiated or proven with evidence, freeing the human mind and body from fear and loathing to be totally living in the present.

A total rejection of all beliefs perpetuated by the tribal moires and mythologies of primitive societies from eons ago. These relics of bygone eras are perpetuated primarily by paternalistic religious organizations that maintain power and profit substantially from their continuance. Within these organizations women are generally treated as chattel and are nonexistent in any role of authority.

Over millenniums, these beliefs, both forced and voluntary, of more than one-hundred and sixty some gods and goddesses have sanctioned torture and mutilation, slavery and serfdom, human sacrifice, stoning, racism, homophobia, murder, mass murder and endless wars. Many of those heinous beliefs which date as far back as three millenniums ago continue unabated today. Rivalries both within religions and rivalries between religions are the major cause of hostility, war and suffering which rage unabated in our world today.

Besides their belief in imaginary friends or gods, religions have fostered belief over time in an a wide array of other imagined and strange oddities: devils and angels, fairies and leprechauns, saints and sinners, werewolves and vampires, heaven and hell and Valhalla, virgin births and voodoo, witches and witchcraft, exorcism, and male and female genital mutilation.

Not to be overlooked is the mental harm to believers who are told from birth that they are defective merchandise that can only be rescued from this abominable state by their belief in the irrational and totalitarian dictates of organized religion. Dictates that prescribe what you can or cannot believe; who you are permitted to marry; what you can do in your own

bedroom and with whom; when you are required to fast and what foods are forbidden and when you are permitted to have a feast; and what clothing requirements are permitted. And while not all clergy are guilty, many will voluntarily ascribe to an unnatural lifestyle that fosters sexual anomalies. These are anomalies that mainly target vulnerable children who may then be scarred for life. Believers are also asked, or in some religions required, to generously support the priestly lifestyle.

With so many of today's youth joining religious wars of late, it's time for all concerned individuals to research and expose the fallacies of these relics of times past. Religions are reluctant to police their own.

Tommie O'Brien

Tom O'Brien <tomob@usfamily.net>



If you would like to respond to something you saw in The Minnesota Atheist, please send it to:

editor@mnatheists.org

We value your thoughts. Thank you.

The Serengeti Strategy

By Greg Laden, reprinted from scienceblogs.com/gregladen with permission

“The Serengeti Strategy” is a term coined by climate scientist Michael Mann in which “special interests faced with adverse scientific evidence ... target individual scientists rather than take on an entire scientific field at once.” His invention of the analogy must have been an interesting moment, given the context. In his book, *The Hockey Stick and the Climate Wars: Dispatches from the Front Line*, Mann talks about a trip to scientific meetings in Arusha as an IPCC co-author, during which he took the usual side trip to the Serengeti:

After the meeting, I joined a daylong expedition to see one of the world’s greatest displays of nature: Serengeti National Park. Here, zebras, giraffes, elephants, water buffalo, hippos, wildebeests, baboons, warthogs, gazelles, and ostriches wander among some of the world’s most dangerous predators: lions, leopards, and cheetahs. Among the most striking and curious scenes I saw that day were groups of zebras standing back to back, forming a continuous wall of vertical stripes. “Why do they do this?” an IPCC colleague asked the tour guide. “To confuse the lions,” he explained. Predators, in what I call the “Serengeti strategy,” look for the most vulnerable animals at the edge of a herd. But they have difficulty picking out an individual zebra to attack when it is seamlessly incorporated into the larger group, lost in this case in a continuous wall of stripes. Only later would I understand the profound lesson this scene from nature had to offer me and my fellow climate scientists in the years to come.

Later in the same book, Mann, writing about attacks on his “Hockey Stick” research, notes:

Climate change deniers went on to wage a public—and very personal—assault against my coauthors and me in the hope that somehow they might discredit all of climate science, the fruit of the labors of thousands of scientists from around the world, by discrediting us and our work. The Serengeti strategy writ large.

Mann provides other examples of the Serengeti Strategy in use. Most of these examples will be familiar to you. The Competitive Enterprise Institute, a libertarian “think” tank, produced a website called “RachelWasWrong” for the purpose of discrediting the environment friendly writings of Rachel Carson. The site attacks Carson, ineffectively if you know the facts, in an effort to discredit environmentalism in general.

Mann also mentions Darwin. To my knowledge, there wasn’t much of a Serengeti Strategy launched against Darwin in his day. People didn’t operate that way back then, perhaps. The attempts at refuting Darwin’s theories of evolution were more regularly launched at the theories themselves, and of course, Darwin had his bulldog, Thomas Huxley, which helped keep him out of the fight. But in more recent times, we see creationist organizations attacking Darwin by trying to link him with Hitler, the Nazis, the Holocaust, etc., in order to make his ideas seem unpalatable. That is of course a good example of an ad hominem attack.

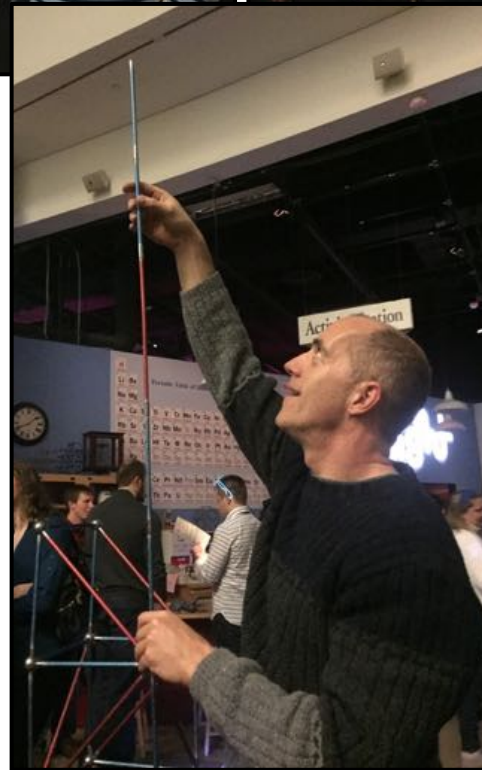
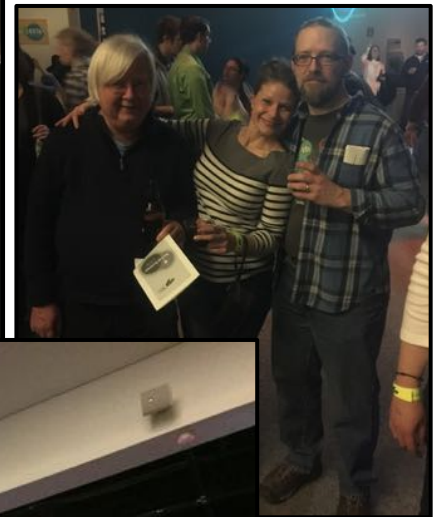
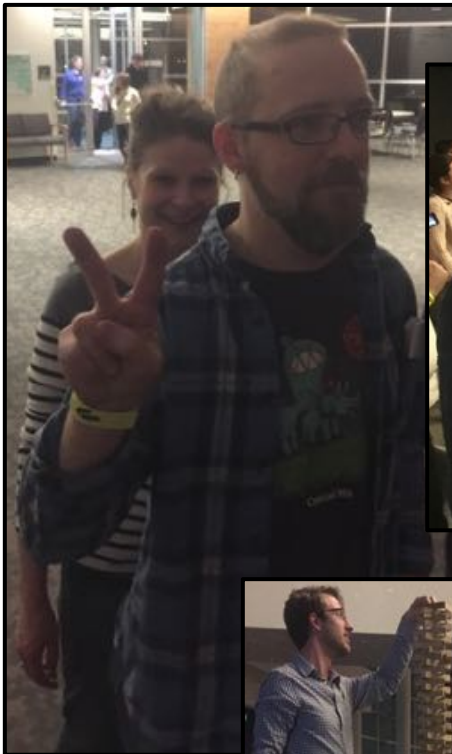
Individual modern day evolutionary biologists are also attacked this way. One of the best examples is probably the regular attacks by Bill Donohue, President of the Catholic League, or operatives of the Intelligent Design purveying Discovery Institute, on biologist and blogger PZ Myers.

I’ve been the subject of this strategy as well, most annoyingly by members of the Men’s Rights Movement, who wish to discredit the commonly held and relatively sensible version of human behavioral biology (related to human behavior, sex differences, etc.) to which I subscribe. This came to a head a while back when I wrote a novel (which you must have read by now, right?) live on the internet as a fundraiser for the Secular Student Alliance, an organization that I strongly supported. The very secular Men’s Rights Movement set aside the fact that this effort was to raise money for a cause they actually supported in order to attempt to destroy sales of the revised version of the novel with numerous bogus awful reviews (here is where you can find the details of that dust up, and a link to get your own copy of the novel!). Michael Mann has been attacked, by the way, in a similar manner, on his Amazon page.

The point of all this is that *ad hominem*, or other, attacks on individuals who publicly represent a point of view, as a means of taking down the larger concept (the reality of global warming, evolutionary biology, etc.) is a technique.

Social Science Event

Minnesota Atheists has been participating in the regularly scheduled "Social Science" events at the Science Museum of Minnesota. It is an adult night at the museum welcoming those 21 and over to grab a drink, enjoy the museum and experience innovative programming. They all have a theme. February 5th was "In the Dark", where participants could explore the darkened museum and all that glows, flickers, and shines. Complete with LED jewelry, lazier mazes, luminescence, and phosphorescence.



Photos courtesy of Art Kallenbach

Is Atheism Responsible for Anti-Muslim Violence?

By George Francis Kane

Three days before this writing, Craig Stephen Hicks turned himself in to police in Chapel Hill, North Carolina for the murder of three residents in the apartment complex where he lived. Dental student Deah Barakat, his new wife Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, and Abu-Salha's sister Razan were easily recognizable as Muslim by the religious attire worn by the women.

The presumption that Hicks killed them because they were Muslim was immediate and widespread. That was the belief of over a thousand community members who gathered at the University of North Carolina campus the next evening to pay tribute to the victims. Police investigators reported that the flare-up that led to the shootings was a long-running dispute over a parking place. The victims' families and the Council on American-Islamic Relations demanded an investigation into the event as a hate crime, and the FBI announced they would undertake it. President Obama weighed in that "No one in the United States of America should ever be targeted because of who they are, what they look like, or how they worship."

The presumption of a hate crime was redoubled when an examination of Hicks' forays into social media showed that he was an avowed atheist who stridently denounced religion. PZ Myers reported in his blog *Pharyngula* that his mail box was flooded by opponents who blamed the murders on atheism. Of course Myers and other bloggers like Greta Christina denounced the murders without hesitation.

The Minnesota Atheists Newsletter is a monthly publication, so it is extremely risky to venture prognostications about a fast-developing news story. On the basis of what has been reported so far, however, I think that the likelihood of a hate crime charge against Hicks is low. It is difficult to win hate crime cases because prosecutors must prove that hatred of a particular race or religion was the motivation for the specific crime. Juries have even acquitted in cases in which the perpetrator at the time of the crime used specific racial or religious epithets. On his *Facebook* page, Hicks showed that he despised superstitious religious thinking in general, but did not display any specific animosity towards Muslims. He had a reputation among his neighbors of being confrontational and repeatedly reporting them for perceived parking violations.

A decision not to file a hate crime charge will not erase the perception outside our community that the organized atheist movement bears some responsibility for the murders. Muslim groups claim that there is a high level of anti-Muslim rhetoric in the United States to which atheists are contributing. There is a widespread portrayal in Christian media of atheists as "haters."

I admit that I have engaged in group responsibility reasoning myself, when I used to spend a lot of time on online discussion groups with Christians. For example, I would get into a firefight with a couple of fundamentalists over evolution, and I would ridicule the use of the Bible to resolve questions of science. I would then get attacked by liberal Christians, who would say that I was wrong to denounce Creationism as the conclusion of religion, that they were not fundamentalists and fully accepted evolution. My response was "Why have you not jumped in to tear apart the Creationists' arguments? You have a responsibility to reign in the people on your (Christian) side who are in error. If you don't refute the arguments of your co-religionists, don't complain when you are associated with them."

That is the position that I think the atheist community is now in. If there are atheists who are advocating violence against Muslims, it is our responsibility to engage them and refute their arguments. I did this myself a few years ago in another discussion group, arguing against an impassioned Australian who maintained that we were in an existential military battle to eliminate Islam.

Certainly there exist atheists who want to cast all Muslims as our enemies, but I really think that is not true of atheist organizations in the United States. If you examine the public policy positions of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, or Americans United for Separation of Church and State, or American Atheists, or the Secular Coalition for America, or the Atheist Alliance of America, you will find that they all support the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment. I invite readers to examine Section VIII of Minnesota Atheists Public Policies (<http://mnatheists.org/information/public-policy-positions>) to see that our support for freedom of religion is not abated by the existence of terrorist paramilitary groups in the Middle East. We specifically defend Muslims against persecution by Christian groups.

Cable Report

For our first program, author, professor, and activist Kim Socha discussed her latest book, *Animal Liberation and Atheism: Dismantling the Procrustean Bed*. Socha noted the need for a book such as hers, and then discussed the link between atheism and veganism. Socha noted that Christianity and Judaism treat animals as the property of humans, to be used as humans see fit. While animals fare better in other religions, such as Buddhism, the treatment of animals in those religions is only good so far as it benefits humans – they are not given respect and consideration in their own right. She next talked about the major, lamentable flaws in the way notable atheists – such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins – have approached animal rights. The discussion concluded with an examination of the continuum of practices in treating animals with respect and an explanation of the term “suicide food.” Socha noted that her book is available at several local book stores and online at Freethought House’s site. James Zimmerman hosted.

In our second episode, James Zimmerman interviewed Erin Manthey. Manthey is an organizer and coordinator for the Twin Cities’ Sunday Assemblies. After first discussing her youth growing up in a fundamentalist home and her subsequent rejection of religion, Manthey explained the origins and rapid growth of the Sunday Assemblies. She identified their appeal and contrasted them with both traditional religious services and with local UU churches. Manthey explained what a typical Sunday Assembly is like and offered information on how and where to get involved, or just attend, the local Sunday Assembly in Minneapolis.

Cable Crew: George Kane, Brett Stembridge, Shirley Moll, Steve Petersen, Les Stordalen, Grant Hermanson and Art Anderson .

Podcasts: MinnesotaAtheists.org. Available via iTunes and YouTube podcasts are made possible by Grant Hermanson. To date, our channel has had over 134,000 downloads.

Cryptogram Answer

Each epoch has found in the Gospels what it sought to find there, and has overlooked what it wished to overlook.

Ludwig von Mises



Erin Manthey



Kim Socha and James Zimmerman

Cable Schedule

Burnsville/Eagan Community Television: Ch. 14. Check their website www.bect.tv for day and times. Sponsor: Kevin Hardisty

Bloomington: Ch. 16. Sunday 11:00 p.m. Sponsors: David and Joanne Beardsley

Minneapolis: Ch. 75. Monday 7:00 p.m. Sponsor: Steve Petersen

Northwest Community Television (NWCT) Brooklyn Center, Brooklyn Park, Crystal, Golden Valley, Maple Grove, New Hope, Osseo, Plymouth and Robbinsdale, Ch. 20. Check web page for date and times: nwct.org/programming.aspx Sponsor: Grant Hermanson

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

Roseville, Shoreview, Arden Hills, North Oaks, Little Canada, Falcon Heights, Lauderdale, Moundsview/New Brighton: Ch. 14. Wednesday 10:30 p.m. Sponsor: Shirley Moll

St. Cloud: Ch. 12. Thursday 8:30 to 9:00 p.m. Sponsor: Tom Stavros

St. Paul: Ch. 15. Wednesdays 5:00 p.m. Sponsor: Jim Wright

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

White Bear Lake, Hugo, Lake Elmo, Mahtomedi, Maplewood, North St. Paul, Oakdale, Vadnais Heights: Ch. 15. Saturday 8:00 p.m. Sponsor: Michael Seliga

Secretary's Report – February

By Jill Carlson

- The Treasurer introduced financial documents to continue to establish MNA as a 501c3 non-profit. Board approved signing and submitting the Annual Review Form.
- Summer planning for the Aints game and the Secular Women Work conference were briefly discussed and status updates were accepted on the Kickstarter campaign to fund these events.
- Georgia Tsoi provided an update on the MNA leading library and needs for the short-term future.
- August Berkshire shared the status of his legislative energy related to the acceptance of humanist and atheist marriage celebrants. Overall the momentum and news was positive.
- Georgia Tsoi and Alyssa Ehni agreed to serve on an external committee for the establishment of a "Humanist Center" programming collaboration in the Twin Cities.

Call for April 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 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. Article length should ideally be 500-1000 words and no more than 2000 words.

Please send submissions to the editor, Jenny Nolan at editor@mnatheists.org by 11:59pm on March 22. All submissions may be edited for style and length.

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

Treasury Report

January

Radio Fund

Nancy Ruhland	\$50
Leo Buzalsky	\$25
Total Radio Fund	\$75

General/Visibility Fund

Geraldine L Jensen	\$30
Sung Hwang	\$20
Eleanor E Rittenour	\$15
Cynthia Grosse	\$15
Susan Gibson	\$10
Total General/Visibility Fund	\$90

Total Income: **\$165**

Current Building Fund Total **\$133,647**

Top Expenses

Radio Show	\$820
Newsletter Printing	\$495

Science Fiction Animation Feature

Jack Foster (jack@jackfoster.com) wrote to us that he is working on a science fiction animation feature that indirectly touches on atheism in a positive way. The story, is about a young girl who lives on a planet that she believes is Earth. She and her fellow inhabitants are instructed and guided by a teacher who calls himself god. A warning that god gives her sets her off on a quest that ultimately reveals that the god is lying, that he is only a man, that the planet she and her friends live on is not Earth, and that they have never been told the real reason they are there. The film's central message is about questioning authority and not believing everything one is told.

Here is a link that he sent us to a youtube clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnZVrCH_vj4. He is running an Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign until March 16 at <http://igg.me/p/scifi-grok/x/244>.

Radio Report

By Mike Haubrich

"Atheist Debates," Matt Dillahunty on Show #298, January 18, 2015

Matt Dillahunty is one of the premier atheist debaters in the United States and is working on a project to teach more atheists how to win at debate. Many believers, particularly in the areas of the country in which religion is more concentrated, only hear about atheists in the context of the news and pop online to debate us. We should be effective at it, and Matt has created a series of videos to teach proper debating methods.

"GMOs and Social Media," Anastasia Bodnar on Show #299, January 25, 2015

Genetic Modification is the scientific process through which targeted genes are spliced into the seeds of organisms. The processes, especially those regarding foods that are transgenic, is the subject of a great amount of debate and rancor because many people believe that GMOs are not safe, or at least not properly tested. Anastasia Bodnar is a researcher in GMOs and also maintains a very active social media presence to teach people about GMOs. She discussed the social media aspects of this modern technology.

"The 300th Show Show," #300, February 1, 2015

This was a fun show, but of course we ran out of time before all of our thoughts were put on the air. We had the hosts and some interviewers all gather around the microphone at one time to talk about the history, the present and the future of Atheists Talk.

"Secular Women Work," Chelsea Dufresne and Monette Richards on Show # 301, February 8, 2015

In 2015 the Minnesota Atheists are making the annual convention even more exciting by hosting the Secular Women Work convention. This a great opportunity to network and workshop and to listen to speakers discuss the challenges and means to deal with the issues of secular women in the workplace. The Kickstarter Campaign was a success and thank you to all of you who donated to make this event possible!

"Religion's Dirty Dozen," Valerie Tarico on Show #302, February 15, 2015

Valerie Tarico is a psychologist and former evangelical. She compiled a list of the 12 bad ideas that can be attributed to religion ideas that make life and society worse than it would otherwise be. There are more than twelve, but these are the most egregious.

"Jen Hancock's Handy Humanism Handbook," on Show #303, February 22, 2015

Jen Hancock returned to talk about her handbook. Humanism is often discussed and criticized but rarely understood by those who don't live it. Jen's handbook is an introduction, and as she says most people are humanists, they just don't know it.

Minnesota Atheists is the producer of the radio program, and the director is Mike Haubrich with hosts Mike Haubrich, Brianne Bilyeu, Scott Lohman, David Pacheco, Mahad Muhamad and Stephanie Zvan. Both Stephanie and Brianne upload podcasts to our web site. The radio program is broadcast live every Sunday from 9:00 to 10:00 a.m. from AM950 KTNF studios in Eden Prairie, MN. Live streaming is available on our web page. www.mnatheists.org. Original music was composed, played and recorded by Brent Michael Davids. The cost to us is \$5,320.00 every six months. Your donations will be appreciated. They can be sent to our post office box or posted online at <http://minnesotatheists.org/join-and-donate/radio-fund>. Thanks to Brianne Bilyeu the program has a presence on social media: an Atheists Talk Facebook page and an account at [Twitter.com/atheists_talk](https://twitter.com/atheists_talk). All past programs can be accessed via MNA web page <http://mnatheists.org/news-and-media/podcast> or on iTunes. If you are interested in helping on the radio program, please send a message to radio@mnatheists.org



Secular Civil Marriage Celebrant Bill Makes Progress in the Minnesota Legislature

By August Berkshire, Chair, Minnesota Atheists Legislative Committee

Last year Minnesota Atheists, in consultation with our colleagues at the Humanists of Minnesota, was able to get a bill introduced in the Minnesota House and Senate that would add atheists and (secular) humanists to the list of people who could solemnize (officially conduct) civil weddings. Unfortunately, it took us about half of the short session legislative to figure out the best wording and there was too little time for the bill to get a hearing in committee. Thus the bill never came up for a vote.

This year we began working even before the legislative session began. We are happy to report that the bill has been introduced again. The wording is the same as last year, though the subdivision numbering is different. (See Sidebar A)

The board of directors of Minnesota Atheists has now credentialed its first secular wedding celebrant, Stephanie Zvan, though she cannot perform a wedding that is recognized by the state until we get the law changed. You will notice that the wording on the certificate parallels the wording of our bill. (See Sidebar B) We are not interested in a lawsuit at this point because the short-term potential pitfalls are as great as the advantages. We are working quietly – with the legislature, not as adversaries – to try to get the law changed.

The Minnesota Senate

Our bill, Senate File 795 (SF 795), was introduced on February 12, 2015 (Darwin Day!). Like last year, the chief author was Senator John Marty. Unlike last year, we have co-authors: Senator Sandy Pappas and Senator Kari Dziedzic. We hope to get other co-authors.

The bill went to the Senate Judiciary Committee, where it awaits a hearing. In the meantime, we are meeting with members of the committee, especially the Republicans, to ask them to support the bill. We have already met with committee members Kari Dziedzic and Scott Newman, and have an appointment to meet with Warren Limmer.

The Minnesota House

Our bill, House File 1015 (HF 1015), was introduced on February 18, 2015. Like last year, the chief author was Representative Phyllis Kahn. Unlike last year, we have a co-author: Representative Mike Freiberg. We hope to get other co-authors.

The bill went to the House Civil Law and Data Practices Committee, where it awaits a hearing. In the meantime, we are meeting with members of the committee, especially the Republicans, to ask them to support the bill. We have already met with committee chair Peggy Scott.

How you can help (See Sidebar C)

- 1) Call to thank the three Senate and two House co-authors of our bill.
- 2) If you are represented by any of the legislators on either committee, call to ask them to support the bill. (At this point there is no need to contact a legislator who is not a co-author or committee member.)
- 3) If you want to get married by or become a secular celebrant, or if you are a constituent of a committee member, please contact me (especially if you are a Republican). You might be able to help us lobby a committee member or testify before the committee. I can be reached at augustberkshire@gmail.com or (612) 868-2267 (cell and text).

(Sidebars continued on page 16)

Sidebar A SF 795 & HF 1015 Changes in Context (Additions are underlined.)

517.04 PERSONS AUTHORIZED TO PERFORM MARRIAGES.

Marriages may be solemnized throughout the state by an individual who has attained the age of 21 years and is a judge of a court of record, a retired judge of a court of record, a court administrator, a retired court administrator with the approval of the chief judge of the judicial district, a former court commissioner who is employed by the court system or is acting pursuant to an order of the chief judge of the commissioner's judicial district, the residential school administrators of the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf and the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind, a licensed or ordained minister of any religious denomination, or by any mode recognized in section 517.18. For purposes of this section, a court of record includes the Office of Administrative Hearings under section 14.48.

517.05 CREDENTIALS OF MINISTER OR CELEBRANT.

Ministers of any religious denomination, or any other celebrant identified in section 517.18, before they are authorized to solemnize a marriage, shall file a copy of their credentials of license or ordination or, if their organization or religious denomination does not issue credentials, authority from their governing board or the minister's spiritual assembly, with the local registrar of a county in this state, who shall record the same and give a certificate of filing thereof. The place where the credentials are recorded shall be endorsed upon and recorded with each certificate of marriage granted by a minister or celebrant.

517.18 MARRIAGE SOLEMNIZATION.

Subdivision 1. **Friends or Quakers.** All marriages solemnized among the people called Friends or Quakers, in the form heretofore practiced and in use in their meetings, shall be valid and not affected by any of the foregoing provisions. The clerk of the meeting in which such marriage is solemnized, within one month after any such marriage, shall deliver a certificate of the same to the local registrar of the county where the marriage took place, under penalty of not more than \$100. Such certificate shall be filed and recorded by the court administrator under a like penalty. If such marriage does not take place in such meeting, such certificate shall be signed by the parties and at least six witnesses present, and shall be filed and recorded as above provided under a like penalty.

Secular Civil Marriage Celebrant Bill Makes Progress in the Minnesota Legislature

By August Berkshire, Chair, Minnesota Atheists Legislative Committee

Sidebar A continued

Subd. 2. **Baha'i.** Marriages may be solemnized among members of the Baha'i faith by the chair of an incorporated local Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is, according to the form and usage of such society.

Subd. 3. **Hindus; Muslims.** Marriages may be solemnized among Hindus or Muslims by the person chosen by a local Hindu or Muslim association, according to the form and usage of their respective religions.

Subd. 4. **American Indians.** Marriages may be solemnized among American Indians according to the form and usage of their religion by an Indian Mide' or holy person chosen by the parties to the marriage.

Subd. 5. **Construction of section.** Nothing in subdivisions 2 to 4, or 6 shall be construed to alter the requirements of section 517.01, 517.09 or 517.10.

Subd. 6. **Atheists and humanists.** Civil marriages may be solemnized by atheist or humanist celebrants who have been appointed by the boards of directors of self-identified atheist or humanist organizations that sponsor training for such individuals. An atheist or humanist organization appointing such celebrant must be registered as a nonprofit with the Minnesota Office of the Secretary of State and must have tax-exempt status as an educational organization under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

Sidebar B



Sidebar C

Senate File 795 (SF 795): Atheist and humanist marriage solemnization authorization

Main Author: Senator John Marty 651-296-5645
 Co-author: Senator Sandy Pappas 651-296-1802
 Co-author: Senator Kari Dzedzic 651-296-7809

Senate Judiciary Committee

	<u>State Senator (Party)</u>	<u>District</u>	<u>Phone</u>
Chair:	Ron Latz (DFL)	(46)	651-297-8065
Vice Chair:	Barb Goodwin (DFL)	(41)	651-296-4334
Ranking Minority Member:	Warren Limmer (R)	(34)	651-296-2159
Member:	Bobby Joe Champion (DFL)	(59)	651-296-9246
	Kari Dzedzic (DFL)	(60)	651-296-7809
	Dan D. Hall (R)	(56)	651-296-5975
	Scott J. Newman (R)	(18)	651-296-4131
	Kathy Sheran (DFL)	(19)	651-296-6153

House File 1015 (HF 1015): Atheist and humanist marriage solemnization authorization

Main Author: Representative Phyllis Kahn 651-296-5645
 Co-author: Representative Mike Freiberg 651-296-4176

House Civil Law and Data Practices Committee

	<u>State Representative (Party)</u>	<u>District</u>	<u>Phone</u>	<u>State Representative (Party)</u>	<u>District</u>	<u>Phone</u>
Chair:	Peggy Scott (R)	(35B)	651-296-4231	Kathy Lohmer (R)	(39B)	651-296-4244
Vice Chair:	Dennis Smith (R)	(34B)	651-296-5502	Dave Pinto (DFL)	(64B)	651-296-4199
DFL Lead:	John Lesch (DFL)	(66B)	651-296-4224	Dan Schoen (DFL)	(54A)	651-296-4342
Member:	Jon Applebaum (DFL)	(44B)	651-296-9934	Bob Vogel (R)	(20A)	651-296-7065
	Glenn Gruenhagen (R)	(18B)	651-296-4229	Nick Zerwas (R)	(30A)	651-296-4237
	Debra Hilstrom (DFL)	(40B)	651-296-3709			
	Joe Hoppe (R)	(47B)	651-296-5066			
	Brian Johnson (R)	(32A)	651-296-4346			

Minnesota Atheists Respond to David Brooks

David Brooks recently wrote an opinion piece for the New York Times about what he views as the perils of secularism. Several media outlets, including the Minneapolis Star Tribune, picked up his article. The president of Minnesota Atheists had a rebuttal published in the Sunday, February 8 edition of the Star Tribune. Two other rebuttals were also written by Minnesota Atheists board officers: Stephanie Zvan (associate president) and August Berkshire (director-at-large). All three rebuttals are printed below.

by Eric Jayne:

In his Feb. 4 column, David Brooks suggests that religions provide moral philosophies that, when combined with a love for God, motivate people to be good and experience greater fulfillment. Secularism, according to Brooks, provides no moral guidance, no sense of community, and no motivation to “compel sacrifice and service.” As a former evangelical Christian, practicing social worker, and current president of Minnesota Atheists, I have a different view.

Secularism fosters a culture of free thought and careful consideration of moral philosophies, including those from the three Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam). Religious instruction, on the other hand, commands unwavering devotion to ideas that are commonly embedded into the minds of young and highly impressionable children.

Without a secular worldview, it would be a crime to be gay (Leviticus 18:22). We would be forbidden to wear blended fabrics (Deuteronomy 22:11), and we would physically beat disobedient children to death (Exodus 21:17). Long before the Apostle Paul preached about the immoral hazards of women teaching men (1 Timothy 2:11-12), humans have been fine-tuning all kinds of moral codes of conduct. Nevertheless, Brooks complains that secular-based enlightenment is a perilous path to take in pursuit of moral action. But I think Mark Twain’s secularist perspective is more truthful: “If man continues in the direction of enlightenment, his religious practice may, in the end, attain some semblance of human decency.”

Brooks ended by suggesting that only “enchanted secularism” will motivate people to action. Organized atheist groups like Minnesota Atheists and Humanists of Minnesota have a different view. Primates, including humans, evolved traits for cooperation and compassion from a long process of Darwinian natural selection. Helping others is a natural human urge, and groups like ours provide an outlet to connect secularists with other secularists and to serve our community with a variety of volunteer service projects. You can call it enchanted secularism, but I like to call it positive atheism in action.

by Stephanie Zvan:

In his February 4 New York Times column, David Brooks displays a touching concern for the moral development of secularists. As one of that substantial and growing minority of people raised without religion, let me put his fears to rest. As it turns out, the landscape outside America’s churches is not a wilderness stocked only with wolves for caretakers.

My parents did not stop being parents with their decision to raise their children without religion. They still shared their values and moral thinking with their children. In fact, interestingly enough, they chose not to raise us in their childhood churches because these churches promoted moral stances intolerably in conflict with the ethics they had somehow managed to develop on their own.

Nor did my parents have to break trail to share their ethics with us. From *Sesame Street* to *Free to Be You and Me* to the children’s section of the library, it turns out that much of the media created for children concerns itself with interpersonal ethics. It’s almost as though children learning to get along fairly with other human beings is a preoccupation of society as a whole.

In addition to my parents, plenty of other adults worked hard to provide the moral framework that Brooks is concerned I might lack. It started with my kindergarten teacher and continued with every adult I encountered who hoped to reduce the amount of time they spent mediating between squabbling children. It continues now with people, both within and without the secular movement, who are working to make the world more fair.

So relax, David Brooks. Those of us without religion are in good hands. Sure, we don’t always agree on our ethical principles, but neither do religious sects. We even have the opportunity to update those principles based on better information without fighting the history and authority of a church to do so.

Don’t worry about us. We’ll be just fine.

by August Berkshire:

The headline of David Brooks’s February 4, 2015 Opinion asks, “Can one be good (enough) without God?” A better question to ask would be, “Can we be good with God?”

While Brooks lauds religion’s prepackaged morality, he fails to point out that it is often very difficult to change a revered past. Hence we continue to have religiously motivated sexism, homophobia, religious intolerance, science denialism, suicide attacks, corporal punishment for children, child brides, and other sexual abuse.

(continued page 18)

Minnesota Atheists Respond to David Brooks (continued from page 17)

Yes, religious books also contain good morals, but since both the good and bad are believed to be handed down by a god, it must be something other than a god that decent people use to separate the good from the bad. What could that be? Why, our own evolution-supplied sense of empathy. Because what most humans share is not a “spiritual urge” but rather empathy. This is why the “Golden Rule” has arisen independently in dozens of cultures throughout history.

Imagine a mother with two children, a girl and a boy, and the girl starts hitting the boy. Does the mother say, “Stop hitting your brother because it says not to in our holy book.”? No, at that instant gods and religions are the furthest things from her mind.

Instead she might say, “Stop hitting your brother, you’re hurting him.” (Consequences.) Or, “Stop hitting your brother – how would you like it if someone hit you?” (Empathy.) These are the things that naturally occur to the mother to say. Consequences are how we should judge our actions and empathy is why we care in the first place.

Anything helpful does not need to be justified by a god-belief. Only harmful things need to be propped up by a belief in an invisible (and undetectable) being. The six most frightening words in the English language are, “God told me to do it.”

What we don’t need is for things to become “hotter” (and more irrational) spiritually. What we need is the calming, reasonable voice of atheism.

The following was published online on Dec. 11, 2014 in The Courier-Journal in Kentucky, in response to news that the [Noah’s] Ark Encounter [a.k.a. the Ark Park] in Williamstown, KY would be denied government tax subsidies. It may also have appeared in print.

Letter: Ark not seaworthy

Answers In Genesis should build its ark by the ocean, then put it to sea to show us that it could stay afloat without breaking in half. Of course, this ark is not seaworthy. Nor is it worthy of taxpayer dollars or more attention than fiction-based Disneyland entertainment. At least Disneyland is more honest about the likelihood of its fairy tales being true.

August Berkshire, Minneapolis, Minn. 55454



Upcoming Events

On-Site Training for Celebrants by the Humanist Institute

Saturday, March 14, 10:00am-4:00pm, Minnesota Humanities Event Center, 987 Ivy Ave E, Saint Paul MN. Register at <http://humanistinstitute.org/on-site-training-for-celebrants/>

Advance Care Planning Sunday, March 29 at 1:00pm, Maplewood Library, 3025 Southlawn Dr, Maplewood MN

Flying Spaghetti Monster Dinner Sunday, March 29 at 6:30pm, Old Spaghetti Factory, 233 Park Ave S, Minneapolis MN

Freethought Forum – Discussion Group Tuesday, March 31 at 7:00pm, Claddagh Irish Pub, 7890 Main St N, Maple Grove MN. Our first topic is religious violence in general and especially as it pertains to current events in the Middle East

Godless Gamers Every Sunday at 2:00pm and Thursday at 6:00pm, Fantasy Flight Games Center, 1975 County Road B2, Roseville MN

Freethought Toastmasters Meeting 1st and 3rd Monday of every month at 6:30pm, Larpenteur Estates Party Room, 1280 Larpenteur Ave W, Saint Paul MN. freethought.toastmastersclubs.org

Volunteer Food Packing 2nd Thursday of every month at 1:00pm, The Food Group, 8501 54th Ave N, New Hope MN

Blasphemer's Brunch 2nd Saturday of every month at 10:30am, Pizza Lucé, 800 W 66th St, Richfield MN

Minnesota Atheists Board Meeting 3rd Wednesday of every month at 6:30pm, Amherst H Wilder Foundation, 451 Lexington Pkwy N, St Paul MN. All Minnesota Atheists members are welcome.

Freethinking Females 4th Monday of every month at 7:30pm, Chatterbox Pub, 800 Cleveland Ave S, St. Paul MN. Shattering the myth that Atheist groups are male dominated with a female's only event.

Bowling for Deities Last Saturday of every month at Noon, Memory Lanes, 2520 26th Ave South, Minneapolis MN

2015 Aints Game Saturday, August 8, CHS Field, 360 N Broadway St, Saint Paul MN. Save the Date!

Secular Women Work Conference Friday-Sunday, August 21-23, Humphrey Conference Center, 301 19th Ave S, Minneapolis MN. Save the Date!



There's always time to make a difference.

Join Minnesota Atheists, renew your membership or make a donation today.

Minnesota Atheists Membership and Donations

- One-year student membership \$10
- One-year individual membership \$35
- Three-year individual membership \$90
- One-year household membership \$45
- Three-year household membership \$115
- One-year sustaining membership \$75
- Three-year sustaining membership \$200
- Life membership \$600
- General Fund \$_____
- Building Fund \$_____
- Radio Fund \$_____

Donations are tax deductible. Membership fees are deductible for the amount beyond their fair market value.

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.

Name: _____
 Street address: _____
 City, State, Zip: _____
 Phone: _____
 Email (required for student memberships and email subscriptions): _____

Minnesota Atheists, PO Box 120304, New Brighton, MN 55112. Please make checks payable to Minnesota Atheists. Students, please enclose a copy of your fee statement or school identification.

Minnesota Atheists

Positive atheism in actionsm since 1991

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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The Minnesota Atheist Newsletter

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Submissions may be edited.

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Minnesota Atheists Goals

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.

Minnesota Atheists Affiliations

Minnesota Atheists is affiliated with the Atheist Alliance of America, Atheist Alliance International, American Atheists, The American Humanist Association, the Council for Secular Humanism, The International Humanist and Ethical Union, and the Secular Coalition for America.

Minnesota Atheists Membership

Regular members: 204
Life members: 40
Meetup members: 1792

Minnesota Atheists Honorary Members

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



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