



# THE MINNESOTA ATHEIST

## Coping with Christmas - November Public Meeting

It's inevitable, before the leaves have fallen, Christmas items are on store shelves, and it starts: the unavoidable fervor of Christmas. If that isn't bad enough, it's the season of major family gatherings celebrating the holidays. Some have this part easier than others, with family who welcome your atheism, or don't have the traditional family gathering. Some have this part harder, and the holidays bring the stress of dealing with family who do not share your values.

We all have our own unique story of how we "Cope with Christmas," so let's share them. We can get our frustrations off our chest, hear what others have to deal with, learn what has worked for others, and discuss ways to cope. We will do some large group sharing of stories and break out into small groups for more in depth discussion. We will have questions to guide discussion and have it in round table format so everyone gets equal time to speak.

Come prepared to share, or just come to listen and absorb; we won't make you share anything. This should be a valuable event for all atheists whether you just get annoyed that you can't escape Christmas music, or are truly stressing about visiting family. So join us on Sunday, November 20<sup>th</sup> and we can Cope with Christmas together.

Brookdale Library  
6125 Shingle Creek Pkwy.  
Brooklyn Center, MN 55430

Sunday, November 20, 2016

1:00-1:15 pm – Social Time  
1:15-1:45 pm – Business Meeting  
1:45-2:00 pm – Break  
2:00-3:30 pm – Coping With Christmas Program  
4:00 pm – Dinner at Panera Bread  
6064 Shingle Creek Pkwy.

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# President's Column

By Alyssa Ehni

At least once per holiday season I am asked why I, an atheist, celebrate Christmas. There are many reasons for an atheist to celebrate the non-religious aspects of religious holidays and there are plenty of reasons for an atheist to choose not to celebrate.

Personally, I now enjoy celebrating Christmas with my family. I did not always. I grew up in a Christian household and we celebrated Christmas. Jesus was definitely the reason for the season. Like many families, we'd split out time between my mother's parents' house and my father's parents' house. When I was ten my paternal grandparents passed away on either side of the holiday; my grandfather on December 7th and my grandmother shortly thereafter on January 11th. For years after, the holiday was colored with a melancholy feeling. Not only were they missing from the celebrations but their absence was strongly felt for the weeks leading up to Christmas and the weeks that followed.

As I got older, my nuclear family began celebrating Christmas on our own. We'd attend the candlelight service on Christmas Eve, return home for hors d'oeuvres and open gifts in front of the Christmas tree. My mother has always had and still has a beautifully decorated tree.

The reasons I choose to celebrate Christmas now have nothing to do with the birth of the wee baby Jesus. I choose to designate this time of year to spend time with people that I love. It's about connection and deep loving relationships. There is nothing supernatural about it. My family and I make a delicious holiday meal (the mashed potatoes are my favorite!) and my family may or may not attend church. I still participate in gift giving; my brother and father are good stoic German descendants and I've made it my goal to find something each year that will put a big stupid smile on both of their faces. Now that I have a niece and nephew it's fun to find something they

get so excited about that they cannot even continue standing up. The gifts I give are more than just gifts; they are ways in which I let the people that matter to me know that I see them, I know them, and that they matter.

Beyond the gift giving, and more importantly, I like to sit in front of my mother's Christmas tree, basking in the soft glow given off by the strings of light. She still decorates it with ornaments that my brother and I made as children as well as the ornaments that we've received from family and friends over the years. Surprisingly, there are several ornaments that include pink flamingoes, thanks to my "fairy" godmother. The ornaments bring back memories of events that took place with people whom I love. None of this has anything to do with any gods.

One aspect of celebrating Christmas that I recently had the opportunity to experience is setting an example for my niece and nephew. My mother has begun asking for my niece, a toddler, to say the prayer before we eat our Christmas dinner. As my niece recites the words she has memorized, I do not bow my head or close my eyes like the rest of my family. Instead, I remain respectfully quiet and put forth an example of how it is okay to think for yourself about anything and come to conclusions different than those of others. She has not yet asked me about why my actions differ from the rest of my family's and should she choose to ask those questions I will be happy to explain it and encourage her to think for herself. Her conclusions should be her own.

A happy Christmahaunakwanzivus season to you and yours.

Sincerely,

A Godless Heathen

## Cryptogram By George Francis Kane

Uwbnlywt bae oaw'n ewompvnuwo, Kp. Puwjyw,  
bae unnpyenm na Tao. Tao gap bae yv hlmpm bae  
vhmmf uhub uzz nlm kbvnmpymv ag nlm hapzo,  
uzz nlm qluzzmwtmv na aep ywnmzzytmwqm. Bae  
vykfzb nepw baep kywo agg uwo vub Tao oyo yn

Op. Uppahub yw Qupz Vutuw'v Qawnuqn



# News and Notes

By George Francis Kane



In last month's column we saw that the Republican platform is consistently hostile to the separation of church and state, and stands on every count in opposition to Minnesota Atheists' public policy positions. The Democratic Party platform also does not oppose the entanglement of government and religion, and even supports it:

*Democrats know that our nation, our communities, and our lives are made vastly stronger and richer by faith in many forms and the countless acts of justice, mercy, and tolerance it inspires. We believe in lifting up and valuing the good work of people of faith and religious organizations and finding ways to support that work where possible.*

At least the Democrats do not base their public policy positions on religious dogma, however. As they instead rely on the consequences of actions in people's lives, they are more often in line with the positions taken by Minnesota Atheists.

On reproductive rights, Minnesota Atheists finds that opposition arguments are dominated by religious dogma. The Democratic Party platform aligns with our organization's analysis.

*Democrats are committed to protecting and advancing reproductive health, rights, and justice. We believe unequivocally, like the majority of Americans, that every woman should have access to quality reproductive health care services, including safe and legal abortion—regardless of where she lives, how much money she makes, or how she is insured. We believe that reproductive health is core to women's, men's, and young people's health and wellbeing. We will continue to stand up to Republican efforts to defund Planned Parenthood health centers, which provide critical health services to millions of people. We will continue to oppose—and seek to overturn—federal and state laws and policies that impede a woman's access to abortion, including by repealing the Hyde Amendment. We condemn and will combat any acts of violence, harassment, and intimidation of reproductive health providers, patients, and staff. We will defend the ACA, which extends affordable preventive health care to women, including no-cost contraception, and prohibits discrimination in health care based on gender.*

*We will address the discrimination and barriers that inhibit meaningful access to reproductive health care services, including those based on gender, sexuality, race, income, disability, and other factors. We recognize that quality, affordable comprehensive health care, evidence-based sex education and a full range of family planning services help reduce the number of unintended pregnancies and thereby also reduce the need for abortions.*

Opposition to the civil rights of the LGBTQA community is usually based solely in bigotry, but it is typically argued on the basis of religious dogma. The party platform aligns with our public policy position; in fact, Democrats extend recognition of these rights further than we do, into foreign policy.

*Democrats believe that LGBT rights are human rights and that American foreign policy should advance the ability of all persons to live with dignity, security, and respect, regardless of who they are or who they love. We applaud President Obama's historic Presidential Memorandum on International Initiatives to Advance the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons, which combats criminalization, protects refugees, and provides foreign assistance. We will continue to stand with LGBT people around the world, including fighting efforts by any nation to infringe on LGBT rights or ignore abuse.*

Finally, on dealing with Islam, we find that the constitutional principle of separation of church and state requires government neutrality between religions. We conclude that the battle against terrorism by paramilitary groups must not become a religious war. Yet again we find that the Democratic Party platform aligns with our policy position.

*As we prosecute the fight against terrorism, Democrats will repudiate vile tactics that would do us harm. We reject Donald Trump's vilification of Muslims. It violates the religious freedom that is the bedrock of our country and feeds into ISIS' nefarious narrative. It also alienates people and countries who are crucial to defeating terrorism; the vast majority of Muslims believe in a future of peace and tolerance.*

# Featured Blogpost

## Niki Massey's Last Blog Post

*Editor's note: Niki Massey, a Minnesotan who wrote a secular blog for The Orbit, died in bed on October 1 at the age of 35. This was her last blog post.*

Two years ago, I addressed cultural appropriation in Halloween costumes.

And one year ago, I addressed the bullsh\*t Caitlyn Jenner costume for men.

"Gee, Niki", you may wonder, "What are you gonna do for this year?"

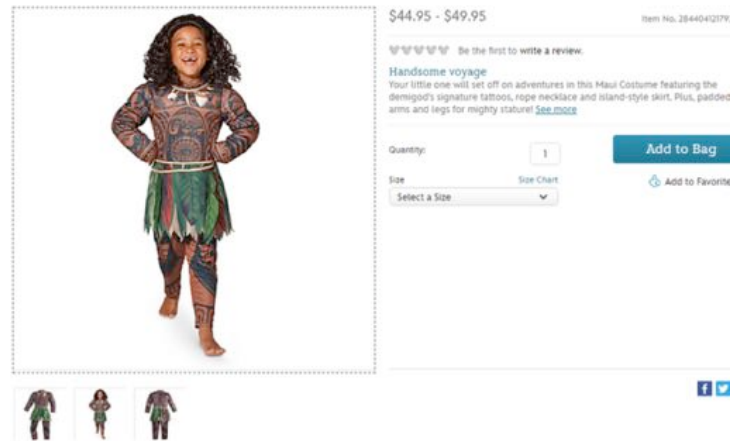
I'm coming for your kids, folks. Hide 'em, lock 'em up. ...or just don't do this to them:



Like, come on, parent, really? You're full of sh\*t from the word "retard" and then just kept tumbling into a mass of bigotry, bringing your kid right along with you.

Can't wait to make a spectacle of your spawning? Disney's got you covered just in time for Moana to come out!

### Maui Costume for Kids - Disney Moana



Really?  
Really??  
REALLY???

Disney, you were doing so well with this damn film and then... and then THIS? The first time I saw this thing, my jaw actually dropped. My jaw is threatening to drop from saving the image and putting it here.

WHY? Why are you selling the SKIN of one of your characters? Why are you selling the skin of any culture? To kids?

Every year around this time I wonder if I will have something to gripe about around Halloween and the costuming therein. And every year, I don't have to worry – it's always something.

I love Halloween. I love the entire month of October. My birthday's in October. Halloween is in October. There's Autumn in October, hot apple cider, caramel, turned fall leaves, and SKULLS EVERYWHERE. What I don't like about Halloween are the humorless Jokers who KEEP f\*cking up. Same sh\*t every year. First we have Kid Blackface, sooner or later some jacka\*\* is going to smear the feces that is shoe polish or brown makeup all over their face and poof! become *\*insert black stereotype or dead black person\** here. Cisguys suddenly get the urge to don dresses and sh\*tty makeup for this night only, night of jacka\*\*ery, night of "Oh god, f\*ck you." And with the rise of the a\*\*hole-proudly anti-PC-alt-right, goodness knows how many of these f\*cksticks will use the Spookiest Night of the Year as license to be...well... f\*cksticks.

Hey, who knows, maybe someone will get creative and combine the two and go out as a named dead black transwoman! Wouldn't that be oh so clever and anti-PC!

...Thankfully I enjoy my Rumchata in October, too. And stouts. Lots and lots of stouts.



# Cable Report

By Steve Petersen and James Zimmerman



Shawn Otto and James Zimmerman

In October, sciencedebate.org co-founder, Shawn Otto, talked about his latest book, *The War on Science*. In the first half hour show, Shawn explained what is happening in our government and our culture that has resulted in, essentially, a war on science. He talked about why this is especially a problem in recent years and why it's an especially grievous situation amongst politicians and political candidates. Shawn delineated three main components of science denial amongst political conservatives - denying the science of reproductive medicine, evolution, and climate change - but was quick to point out that science denial is also an issue among political progressives (especially in the areas of vaccines and GMOs). In the second show, Shawn noted that the war on science is fought on three fronts: the identity politics, the ideological, and the industrial, and he defined what he meant by each term. In evaluating ways in which we can help combat science denial, Shawn talked about his push for science debates among political candidates. He also argued that teachers in both colleges and secondary schools should teach science

civics and hold student science debates. He concluded by listing off places where his book is available and by directing viewers to his sites, [science.debate.org](http://science.debate.org) and [shawnotto.com](http://shawnotto.com). James Zimmerman hosted both episodes.

We are actively looking for people to host and produce programming. If you have ideas on programming most or interest in programming please get involved. welcome, contact Steve Petersen at [address@mnatheists.org](mailto:address@mnatheists.org).

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

**Podcasts:** [MinnesotaAtheists.org](http://MinnesotaAtheists.org). Available via iTunes and YouTube which are made possible by Grant Hermanson. To date, our channel has had over 261,000 downloads.

## Cable Schedule

**Bloomington:** Ch. 16. Sunday 11:00 p.m. Sponsors: David 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: <http://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.

# October Meeting Review

By George Francis Kane



Dr. Hector Avalos

At our October Public Meeting, Dr. Hector Avalos, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Iowa, spoke about how near-death experiences strengthened his atheist convictions in a presentation titled "Life and Death as an Atheist." Dr. Avalos is a frequent presenter at these meetings; this is the seventh year that he has presented to our October meeting. He says that Minnesota Atheists is one of the best groups to which he makes presentations.

Most of Dr. Avalos' presentation was devoted to his life story. He was born in 1958 in Nogales, Mexico, where he lived in a mud brick house with no running water. His family led a 19<sup>th</sup> Century lifestyle with a burro instead of an auto, and kept chickens at their home. His family was intensely religious and Pentecostal. They believed that all entertainment was sinful, and led a lifestyle with bible-reading at its core.

Hector lived in Nogales until 1964, when his grandmother brought him to Scottsdale, Arizona, where she was working as a live-in maid. In his youth he was precocious and enthusiastic. He became a child evangelist and faith healer, and delivered a sermon to a major convention at the age of 9. In 1969 he moved with his grandmother, who became a maid in a new home. There he dabbled in chemistry; he combined five popular over-the-counter arthritis medicines, and marketed it as a "miracle" arthritis cure. The Arizona Health Department ordered him to cease and desist.

His next passion was to become a missionary and biblical scholar. He already could quote extensively from the Bible, but in an encounter with Jehovah's Witnesses learned that what he knew from the Bible could be questioned by going to the original Greek sources. He decided to teach himself Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic and other topics, mowing lawns to buy books.

He reached an unexpected conclusion, however. His Bible study eventually led to his rejection of religion and acceptance of the atheist conclusion. At first he rejected Pentecostalism for Calvinism, but eventually he realized that there is no evidence supporting Christianity or any other religion. By his first year of college he was a convinced

atheist.

When he entered the University of Arizona in 1979 he suffered health setbacks. It began with a cold that did not go away. He had repeated nosebleeds that required emergency room visits. He then developed head-to-toe arthritis, and by late 1979 he looked like a concentration camp survivor. He was near death in 1980 when doctors discovered a hole in his lung. He was diagnosed with Wegener's Granulomatosis, now called Granulomatosis with Polyangiitis. He was told that the typical patient with this disease lived for only 5 months.

He had to drop out of the university after he lost his job and apartment. He and his wife went back to living in Hector's grandmother's living room. Despite struggling with his disease, he studied voraciously on his own. When he returned to school he caught up by taking the final exams of some courses, and getting credit by examination for others. He quickly made up for lost time.

When he graduated from the University of Arizona, academic advisors urged him to apply to Harvard for advanced studies. After he entered Harvard in 1983 he had a tumor removed from his throat, but when it returned he continued his class work, despite receiving chemotherapy every 6 hours.

In 1991 he became the first Mexican-American to receive a Ph.D. in the Hebrew Bible, and he became a Postdoctoral Fellow at Chapel Hill from 1991 to 1993. In 1993 he was hired by Iowa State, which was willing to meet the work demands imposed by his illnesses.

Dr. Avalos was near death in 1995, after experiencing frequent choking requiring ambulance trips to the hospital every few days. It was found that he had a tracheal tumor that reduced his airway to a pinhole. His doctors believed that it would be too dangerous to give him a general anesthetic, so he had to have his throat cut open while he was fully awake, with only an ineffective local anesthetic. The pain was excruciating.

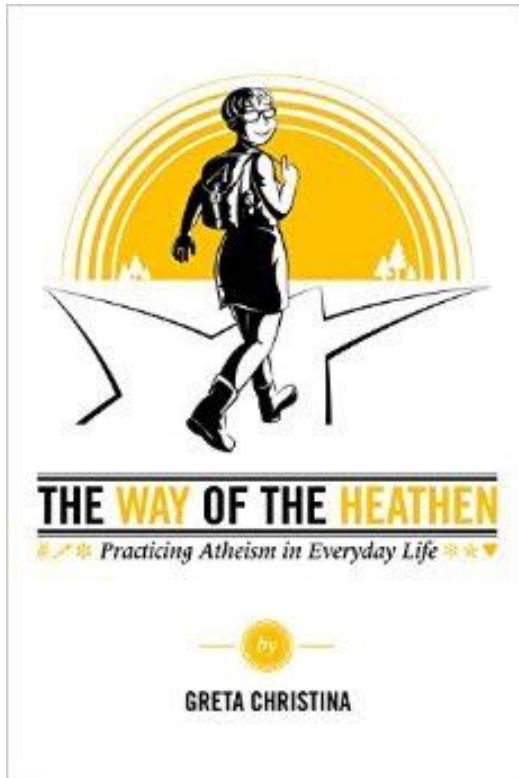
Academic honors continued despite his medical crises. In the spring of 1996 he was selected Professor of the Year for all of Iowa State University, beginning with a petition initiated by Christian students.

In 2012 he was diagnosed with bladder cancer. Again he could tolerate little to no anesthesia, and had only Tylenol to mitigate his pain. This near death experience confirmed to him that mythological beings cannot help anyone; only people help people.

Dr. Avalos concluded that not only did his near-death experiences strengthen his atheism, but that his atheism made him a better person. He did not try to prepare for an afterlife, but devoted himself to improving the world; to using his remaining time wisely; and to enjoying every minute left to him. He has written ten books, taught thousands of students, and left a mark educating the public about religion.

(continued on page 8)

# Winter Solstice Banquet 2016



We have an exciting night lined up for one of the longest nights of the year! The Winter Solstice Banquet on Sunday, December 18, 2016 will feature renowned secular humanist/atheist blogger, speaker, and author Greta Christina! Greta will speak on her newest content which we can all relate to, “Practicing atheism in everyday life.” This is also the topic of her newest book, *The Way of the Heathen: Practicing Atheism in Everyday Life*, which we will have copies of to purchase and get signed.

“Practicing atheism in everyday life” explores life beyond being an atheist, taking us right into humanism: So you don’t believe in God. Now what? The way we deal with life can change dramatically when we stop believing in gods, souls, and afterlives. When we leave religion — or if we never had it in the first place — where do we go? How do we deal with love and sex, pleasure and death, reality and making stuff up? How do we decide on our values, and how do we live them?

The venue will be Embassy Suites by Hilton Minneapolis North, 6300 Earle Brown Drive, Brooklyn Center, MN 55430. Embassy Suites is located on the southwest quadrant of the intersection of I-94/I-694 and Hwy 100, off Shingle Creek Pkwy which is exit 34 off I-94/I-694. This is not far at all from the Brookdale Library where we featured our last two monthly public meetings. If you decide you would like to spend the night, we have a block of rooms reserved; just tell them you are with the Minnesota Atheists group.

The Winter Solstice Banquet wouldn’t be complete without a gratifying meal. We have three meal options to choose from complete with the standard non-alcoholic beverages (coffee, tea, water). There will also be a cash bar for more beverage options. See the insert for pricing, meal options, and a form to mail in your reservation. Alternatively, register online at: <http://mnatheists.org/events/winter-solstice-banquet>

This event has filled up in years past, so be sure not to wait, get your reservation in now! We hope to see you there, and may you have a Happy Solstice and a Happy New Year!



Greta Christina



# October Meeting Review (continued from page 6)

In 1999 he founded the Iowa State University Atheist and Agnostic Society.

Dr. Avalos' experiences have made him a passionate supporter of Death with Dignity. They have made him more empathetic to people with pain; led him to a life centered on this world, and not the next; motivated him to formulate his morality based on empathy, not on future rewards; and inspired him to value his life not on his longevity, but on the accumulation of his experiences. He considers himself to be an atheist who has been in many foxholes—his many near-death experiences.

## Letter to the Editor

Letter to the Editor:

*The notice for the October public meeting stated that Dr. Hector Avalos would explain how his near-death experiences have made him a better atheist. That prompted a member to submit the following letter.*

How having cancer turned me to atheism:

In March of 2009 I turned 52 years old, and I was happy and content with life both spiritually and physically. I had just received a new position at the company I worked for, and my wife and I were even talking about early retirement. One morning I woke up with a sore throat, and while I was massaging it I found a lump. This was the beginning of many doctor visits, various scans and biopsies, and a resulting surgery. The post-surgery diagnosis was stage 4 thyroid cancer with the cancer having escaped its primary nodule and invading the surrounding lymph nodes.

It was prior to the surgery, and during the time of deciding on treatment options, when my first doubts about religion and god started to surface. One night I was doing some personal writing concerning how I felt about the cancer diagnosis, and I realized that my religion was perpetuating the feeling that it was my fault for having cancer. In a moment of clarity, I understood that when one is diagnosed with cancer, then religion teaches that it is because of ones' own bad karma, or our sins, or that faith is being tested, or there is a lesson that needs to be learned. With all that in mind I was left with this inescapable conclusion: in god's view, I was in some way deficient as a spiritual person, and therefore, it was my own fault that I have cancer. That conclusion helped also to explain the accompanying shame I felt about having cancer because, if I could realize having cancer was my own fault, then so could others.

It may be called pride or ego, but the thought that any spiritual deficiency I had should be the reason that I deserved

Dr. Avalos concluded his presentation answering questions from the audience.

The meeting was at the Brookdale Library. There were 50 people in attendance.

to have cancer made me angry. It occurred to me that having faith in god means that the victim gets the blame for their own suffering as a part of god's plan for them, and *I was the victim*. The blame I felt was no different from the blame religions place on a woman for being raped, or any other victimization that occurs. In the view of religion, the victim deserves what they get because that is what's in god's plan for the victim.

I remember thinking at the time: "What a screw job. God gets all the credit for the good in life while the victims get to take all the blame for the bad, and this is the loving god I should want to spend eternity with?" The blasphemous profanity which followed that thought would certainly qualify me for the seventh circle of hell in *Dante's Inferno*.

Accordingly, my choice was limited. If I chose to agree with the religious teaching that I had a spiritual deficiency, then the cancer cure would not only require atonement, but also my knowing what god wanted from me in the future. This was difficult because I felt that I had nothing to atone for. Additionally, if the life I had lived up to that point was not good enough for god, then I had no idea what was going to be good enough. It was also about this time I started reviewing research on the scientific causes of thyroid cancer, which led to critical thinking about the causes for cancer, and the treatments for cancer. I had found another choice.

That critical thinking would, over time, end up replacing my faith in god as the tool I use to discern reality. Years of critical thinking about my beliefs would need to go by before I would eventually identify myself openly as an atheist in April of 2015.

Update: On August 22, 2016, some seven years after the initial cancer finding, and after a few recurrences, I have received a cancer-free diagnosis. While it is only a snap shot in time representing my health status on that date, and is not necessarily a prediction of the future, I am still happy to be alive and celebrating the diagnosis.



## Cryptogram Answer

Anything you don't understand, Mr. Rankin, you attribute to God.

God for you is where you sweep away all the mysteries of the world, all the challenges to our intelligence. You simply turn your mind off and say God did it.

Dr. Arroway in Carl Sagan's *Contact*

## Secretary's Report - October

By **Tim Berry**

- It was moved, seconded and passed to pay \$500.00 as the refundable deposit to reserve a room at the Embassy Suites in Brooklyn Center for the Winter Solstice party.

Complete meeting minutes are available to dues paying members by contacting Tim at [sec@mna.theists.org](mailto:sec@mna.theists.org).

## Member Well-being Committee Announcement

The Well-being Committee was formed to address the ongoing needs of members who are experiencing short-term life challenges. This committee is requesting volunteers who are looking for opportunities to provide some support to members of Minnesota Atheists in need. If you are interested in volunteering, please call 612-868-2267 or email [well-being@mna.org](mailto:well-being@mna.org). More information to follow.

## Call for January 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@mna.theists.org](mailto:editor@mna.theists.org) by 11:59 p.m. on December 22. All submissions may be edited for style and length.

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



# See you in 2017!

## Would the World be a Better Place Without Religion? By August Berkshire

(On April 8, 2016, the interfaith group Northern Intercultural Spiritual Experiences (NISE) held a panel discussion on the topic of this essay's title at Champlin United Methodist Church. The panel featured a Christian, a Muslim, a Baha'i, and August Berkshire representing atheism. These are his opening remarks on the topic.)

Atheism is simply the lack of belief in the existence of gods. There's nothing in that definition that instructs a person to be good or bad – any more than the lack of belief in unicorns says anything about whether you should be good or bad.

What atheism does lead to is the conclusion that if there is to be any good in this world we have to provide it ourselves because there is no god to do it for us. This humanitarian atheism is also known as secular humanism.

I think everyone acknowledges that religion has both positive and negative effects. Tonight I'm going to argue that we should abandon religion, thereby getting rid of its negative effects, while at the same time maintaining religion's positive effects by enacting secular humanism. In this way, the world would be a better place without religion; we would retain the baby of goodness, while throwing out the bath water of religion.

First let's summarize some of the negative effects of religion:

It is yet another form of tribalism, which serves to divide people. We see this most distinctly in the Middle East. Religion is not the only form of tribalism that exists – there are race and nationality, for example – but *any* form of tribalism that we can eliminate will leave us better off.

Christianity and Islam – which, between them, are believed by more than half the world's population – are evangelical religions that instruct followers to convert others. They are not live-and-let-live religions, even if many of their adherents behave that way.

Religions are based on faith, which relies on revelation, as opposed to science, which relies on evidence. Mainly because of religion, we have people who are anti-woman, anti-gay, and anti-science. Sometimes this opposition to women and gays is expressed in terms of a denial of human rights; other times it's expressed in violence. Of course, religion is not the only source of evil in the world, but *any* source of evil that we can eliminate will leave us better off.

If there was a way to eliminate only the bad religions, I would advocate that. Unfortunately, good religions *give cover* to bad religions because they say it's okay to accept things on faith, from an invisible being. Once that Pandora's Box is opened, there's no closing it. Our best option is to nail the box of faith shut.

Now let's look at some of the positive aspects of religion, and see how they can be replaced by secular humanism:

When people are distressed, they often turn to a god for hope. This god-belief *can* have a placebo effect, making people feel better, while in actuality not changing anything about those people's circumstances. This failure of religion is why it's being abandoned in states and countries that have

prosperity, education, health care, and good social safety nets, such as the New England states and European countries.

Most people, if given a chance, would rather have a good job rather than pray to a god for food or money that never arrives. Most people, if given a chance, would rather have access to a doctor and a hospital rather than have to rely on faith healing, which never works beyond the body's own, normal healing capacity.

What about the good charitable work that religious institutions do? Well, the reason they have to do "the Lord's work" is because "the Lord" isn't doing it himself, probably because he doesn't exist. And if we humans are doing the work, shouldn't we take the credit?

There are many secular charities in existence, such as the Red Cross and Doctors Without Borders. Government social safety nets also exist. By expanding these things we can replace the good works done by religious institutions.

The only thing that religion offers beyond what secular humanism can offer is an afterlife, which, however, cannot be verified, and which contradicts all our knowledge about the material nature of the human body, brain, and mind. Even so, we can lessen the desire for an afterlife by helping people to live long, healthy, fulfilling lives. In that way, we'll be "ready to go" with fewer regrets. Instead of bemoaning that we only get one life and "this is it", we can learn to enjoy the fact that we get a life *at all* and be grateful for what we have. Moreover, the idea that "things will be better in heaven" might serve to lessen our endeavors to make things better here on Earth.

Morality based on religion is unusable, due to the many differences that exist, both among religions and within single religions themselves. Morality based on religion is also unstable, because if you lose your religion then you lose your basis for morality.

Morality based on secular humanism, which is based on things we can usually quantify – what is helpful vs. what is harmful – is the *only* kind of universal morality that's possible. You do not need religion to justify good behavior; you only need it to justify bad behavior.

Humans have already developed secular guidelines for ethical behavior, such as the United Nations' "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" and the American Humanist Associations' "Humanism and its Aspirations".

I hope we would all acknowledge that we can encourage and develop kindness, empathy, and compassion in ourselves and others without having to use religion. We can retain the baby – the good parts of religion – without the need for religion itself. And then we can throw out the dirty bath water of religion – the intolerance, violence, and superstition.

We will never unite under a single religion, but if everyone simply drops their religion, which we are well on our way to doing in the Western world, we can all be secular humanists, if only by default.

[Closing remark at the end of the event]: The late Christopher Hitchens, a famous atheist, made the following moral challenge: "name one ethical statement made, or one ethical action performed, by a believer that could not have been uttered or done by a nonbeliever."

## Upcoming Events

**Walk to End Hunger with Minnesota Atheists** Thursday, November 24<sup>th</sup> at 7:30a.m., Mall of America, 8100 24<sup>th</sup> Ave S, Bloomington. Join your freethinking friends and Minnesota Atheists on Thanksgiving morning to help build awareness and raise money for hunger relief programs in the Twin Cities. Register at: [www.walktoendhunger.org](http://www.walktoendhunger.org), click on The Food Group and join the Minnesota Atheists team.

**Winter Solstice Banquet** Sunday, December 18<sup>th</sup>, Embassy Suites by Hilton Minneapolis North, 6300 Earle Brown Drive, Brooklyn Center. See the insert for more information and to register.

**Atheists Talk Community Brunch** 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of every month at 10:30a.m., Q. Cumbers, 7465 France Ave S, Edina

**Godless Gamers** Every Sunday at 2:00 PM and Thursday at 6:00p.m., Fantasy Flight Games Center, 1975 County Rd B2, Roseville

**Atheist/Agnostic Alcoholics Anonymous** Every Sunday from 6:00-7:00 p.m. and Wednesday from 7:00-8:00p.m., Health Recovery Center building, lower floor, 3249 Hennepin Ave, Minneapolis. Based on A.A, minus beliefs in any form of a God.

**Freethought Toastmasters Meeting** 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Monday of every month from 6:30-8:00p.m., Larpenteur Estates Party Room, 1280 Larpenteur Ave W, St Paul. [freethought.toastmastersclubs.org](http://freethought.toastmastersclubs.org)

**Freethought Dinner Social** 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Monday of every month from 5:00-7:00p.m., Davanni's, 8605 Lyndale Ave S, Bloomington

**Freethinking Females** 2<sup>nd</sup> Monday of every month at 7:00p.m., Claddagh Irish Pub, 7890 Main St N, Maple Grove, and 4<sup>th</sup> Monday of every month at 7:30p.m., Sweeney's Saloon, 96 North Dale Street, St. Paul (Note, two different locations). Shattering the myth that Atheist groups are male dominated with a female's only event.

**Volunteer Food Packing** 2<sup>nd</sup> Thursday of every month at 1:00p.m., The Food Group, 8501 54th Ave N, New Hope

**Blasphemer's Brunch** 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday of every month at 10:30a.m., Pizza Lucé, 800 W 66th St, Richfield

**Minnesota Atheists Board Meeting** 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of every month at 6:30p.m., Amherst H Wilder Foundation, 451 Lexington Pkwy N, St Paul. All Minnesota Atheists members are welcome.

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

For more events, visit [www.meetup.com/minnesota-atheists](http://www.meetup.com/minnesota-atheists)



## 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.

**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.**

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# Minnesota Atheists

## Positive Atheism in action 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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**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: 218  
Life members: 43  
Meetup members: 2,400

### Minnesota Atheists Honorary Members

Hector Avalos, PhD  
Dan Barker  
Gerald Erickson, PhD  
Annie Laurie Gaylor  
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