

# The Minnesota Atheist

Minnesota Atheists

Established 1991

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

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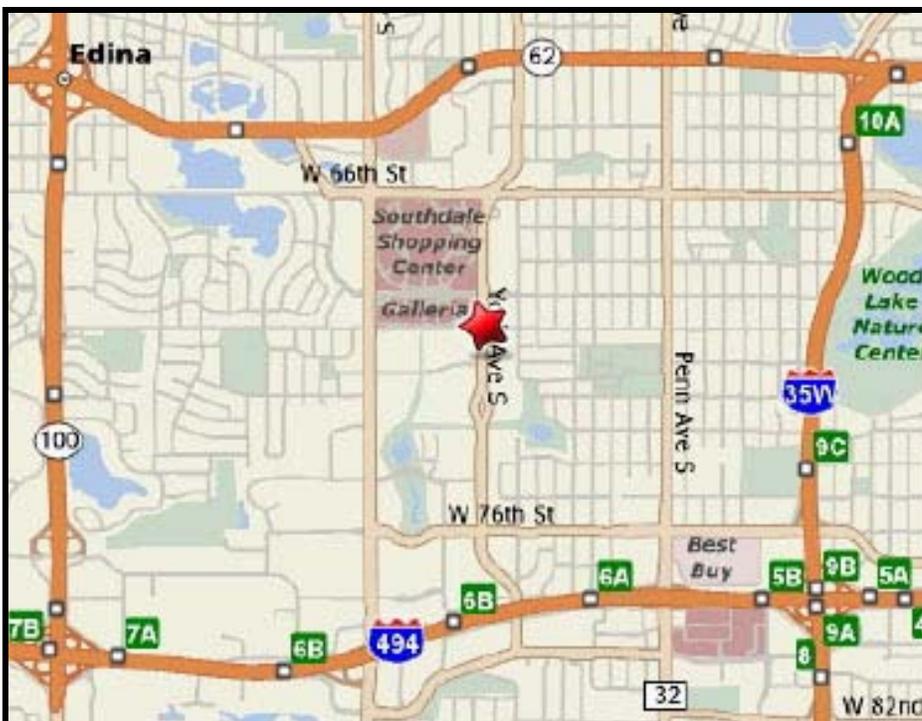
Sunday, March 15, MNA Public Meeting: Scott Lohman on

## The Humanism of Star Trek



Scott Lohman

Scott Lohman, President of the Humanists of Minnesota, has found an appreciation for a certain low budget science fiction television show from the 1960s. Lohman learned out about the Humanists of Minnesota through a table the group had at a Star Trek convention. Since then, he has been able to live long and prosper by learning more about Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry and the Humanist principles present in the show. *Star Trek*, like many science fiction shows, has more freedom to express ideas that are outside of popular culture and can be used to raise awareness in ways other genres cannot. Lohman will be explaining the Humanism of Star Trek through his research, as well as viewing clips to express this unique method of presenting the Humanist message. We invite all fans of humanism, atheism, free-thought and science fiction to boldly go.



**MNA Meeting on  
Sunday March 15,  
Southdale Library  
7001 York Ave. South  
Edina, MN 55435**

- 1:00-1:15 p.m. – Social time.
- 1:15-1:45 p.m. – Business Meeting.
- 1:45-2:00 p.m. – Break.
- 2:00-3:00 p.m. – Program
- 3:00-3:30 p.m. – Social Time.
- 4:00 p.m. -- Dinner at a nearby restaurant

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\$113,907**

### Honorary Members

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Annie Laurie Gaylor  
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Robert M. Price, PhD**

**MNA Meetup members: 403  
Life memberships: 31**

### Minnesota Atheists Mission Statement

Minnesota Atheists is dedicated to building a positive atheist community that actively promotes secular values through educational programs, social activities, and participation in public affairs.

## The Minnesota Atheist

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**Minnesota Atheists practices positive, inclusive, active, friendly neighborhood atheism in order to:**

- Provide a community for atheists;
- Educate the public about atheism; and
- Promote separation of state and church.

## President's Column by Bjorn Watland



Minnesota Atheists is the state's largest and most active atheist organization. How did we get to be that way? Through the efforts of founding members, such as Shirley Moll, Steve Petersen and August Berkshire, our organization is continually fulfilling its mission to provide a welcoming community for atheists, educate the public about atheism, and support the separation of state and church. We are strong promoters of 'Positive Atheism,' which means different things to different people. To me, I see Positive Atheism as advocating several things.

The first is honesty and openness. Since we do not believe in any gods, we must rely on ourselves to resolve issues great and small. We cannot appeal to the heavens to feed the hungry, or to ease the mind of someone we have wronged. We must do so ourselves. With Minnesota Atheists, I have found members having a good sense of integ-

ity. With people like that, it is easy to disagree respectfully and know where someone stands.

The second is that atheism, as a unique worldview, should be respected. While atheists differ on social issues, a person's lack of belief in a god or gods should not affect how others consider his or her opinions. Lately, there has been more effort to include atheists in interfaith dialog panel discussions and atheists' opinions are being heard regarding social and ethical issues. Minnesota Atheists has been proud to participate in these efforts.

The third is to stand our ground and let people know we are atheists. This does not mean being indiscriminately anti-religious, but rather, voicing our opinions on specific issues. Through respectful dialog, we can challenge any organization which seeks to limit the separation of state and church or seeks to harm

## Atheist Advocacy

others simply because they are atheists. We focus on protecting our rights and building a community, rather than seeking fights about the existence of God, because we have found we can make a larger difference this way. If an organization seeks a friendly theological debate, we won't object; we think that our arguments based on truth and evidence stand strong, but our energy is better spent in other ways.

We should not be ashamed or be afraid to admit we are atheists. As president of Minnesota Atheists, I will continue to work to make our organization unnecessary in society. That may never happen, but it is my goal. When atheists don't feel like a minority, when their opinions are respected, and when religious intrusions into our government and society are no longer problems, Minnesota Atheists will have no purpose. Until that day, I will stand with you.

## The Secular Bible Study

The co-sponsored Secular Bible Study met for the first time February 24. Forty-five people attended and appeared to be engaged in the discussions. Chester O'Gorman is a co-leader and sponsored through the outreach program offered by Trinity Methodist Church. Grant Steves is a co-leader and sponsored by the MNA. The Secular Bible Study group has men and women of all ages and a diversity of beliefs. Chester started the meeting with introductions of the participants, and Grant announced the rules of dialog. The large group was divided into five smaller groups to begin reacting to the first chapter of

the book of *Genesis*. After discussing *meetup.com* and search for the Secular Bible Study group or contact the large group to share reactions. MNA Board Chair Grant Steves.

Their reflections on the first chapter of *Genesis* and *Enuma Elish* of Babylonian origins helped to set the stage for how the study will be conducted: the reading of the text for understanding, but not for spiritual edification necessarily.

The next meeting of the group will be March 10 in northeast Minneapolis (the exact location is uncertain).

If you are interested in this group, you may contact them through [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com)



## Shunning is Alive and Well in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Minnesota

by James Zimmerman

One of the most effective tools a religion has at its disposal is shunning. Fear of being shunned is what keeps many members loyal to a religion they no longer fully believe. And for those few who are vocal about the hypocrisy they've discovered in their former religion, shunning is a form of damage control, a preemptive maneuver that prevents the faithful – the 'sheep' – from associating with those who may cause their faith to waver.

In religions, and other groups propped up by unverifiable claims, the need for shunning is apparent. Should a member come across damning information about the group, it is imperative to excommunicate that individual hastily, lest they divulge their findings to others. Of course, merely erasing a former member from a religion's roster does not shut them up, but it does squelch the curiosity of members in good standing. Simply inform the faithful members of a cult, sect, or religion, that their best friend, brother, sister, father or mother has been disfellowshipped and – *violá!* – suddenly, and without dissent, all in the congregation are now under theological mandate to ignore, demonize and otherwise demean their former companion.

The word "shun" brings with it images of a by-gone era; of women in bonnets in the back woods physically turning their back on former members; of zealots crying out that their family member is "dead to them". But far from being relegated to by-gone books and plays, shunning is vibrant and thriving in twenty-first cen-



James Zimmerman

ture America.

Case in point: my wife and I have the pleasure of being shunned by dozens of friends and relatives. We left the religion of our upbringing with no grudges, and without having committed any of their so-called "sins" (these include the usual, such as extra-marital relations and interfaith activities, but also mundane activities such as voting and smoking). Still, Witnesses are

***"We are not living today among theocratic nations where such members of our fleshly family relationship could be exterminated for apostasy ... Being limited by the laws of the worldly nations in which we live and also by the laws of God through Jesus Christ, we can take action against apostates only to a certain extent, that is, consistent with both sets of laws. The law of the land and God's law through Christ forbid us to kill apostates."***  
(*The Watchtower*, 15 Nov 1952)

trained to believe that any dissent is worthy of complete shunning and, as the months went on, we regularly received letters, phone calls and emails from family members curtly explaining they would no longer have any contact with us.

For example, my wife's sister felt compelled to say in a recent email: "...you and James are no longer Jehovah's Witnesses. Based on this, combined with the abusive talk about my beliefs and religion to others, I am making the decision to cease all association with you and James." (The hypocrisy of a Witness condemning another for sharing their beliefs with others is nearly humorous.) And from her brother: "Due to the fact that you and James are no longer witnesses [sic] along with your outspo-

ken veiw [sic] about our beliefs, we had to make the decision [sic] to cease all association with you."

Thankfully, this is a watered down interpretation of the stance the religion's members wish they could take. Jehovah's Witnesses, in particular, have a palpable nostalgia for the days when conscientious objectors, instead of being shunned, were simply killed: "We are not living today among theocratic nations where such members of our fleshly family relationship could be exterminated for apostasy ... Being

limited by the laws of the worldly nations in which we live and also by the laws of God through Jesus Christ, we can take action against apostates only to a certain extent, that is, consistent with both sets of laws. The law of the land and God's law through Christ forbid us to kill apostates." (*The Watchtower*, 15 Nov 1952)

This relational aggression is immediate and total. Even my wife's response, wherein she explained that our three year-old son has gifts he wishes to give to his cousin, met with silence. Witnesses believe that toddlers - and even infants - are equally culpable with their parents, a teaching they base on that ever-loving book, the bible, and hence they see no reason to associate with the condemned children of apostatized parents.

The next time a clean-shaven, smiling face shows up at your doorstep to push their religion, ask them whom they are shunning: their childhood friend? Their cousin? Their mom? Their grandson? Then ask them if they believe theirs is a religion of love. Then ask them to reconcile this dichotomy. They may squirm, they may run. Either way, they'll think. It's never too late to start.



### by Jeannette Watland

As an atheist, I am often secluded and out of place in society. I can only imagine how different a child feels when they realize they are the only non-believer in their classroom. When I found out about Camp Quest a year ago I was filled with hope and excitement. Here is a place where adults and children alike can be themselves in a comfortable and welcoming environment. I had to check it out and doing so was one of the best choices I have ever made. The adult volunteers are wonderful people and I really feel like I can relate to them. The children and young adults I have encountered are absolutely amazing. All the kids I have had the pleasure to mentor at Camp Quest are funny, smart, and intuitive. I couldn't think of a better place for growing freethinkers.

So what do we do at Camp Quest? We do all the fun camp stuff one would see at a conventional camp: swimming, canoeing, archery, and field games. We have arts and crafts activities, such as long time favorite candle making. Every year there is a field trip and a service project. We teach ethics, critical thinking, and religious and cultural tolerance. However, sometimes I think the kids would be perfectly content if they could just spend a

week with friends who understand them.

Camp Quest is growing in popularity. It started in 2004 with just 11 kids. This year we are hoping to accommodate at least 35 kids, and 15 volunteers. We hope to see returning campers, as well as new faces. I feel privileged to be a part of Camp Quest as it continues to grow. If you wish to support this great camp you can do so in three ways.

The first is to send your children. We accommodate all children from ages 8 - 15, however, children from humanist, freethinking, atheist, agnostic, or Unitarian homes would be most comfortable at camp. There is a Counselor-in-Training program for young adults between the ages of 16 and 17.

The second way to help is by volunteering. This year we will need more volunteers than ever, to keep up with our growing roster. As a volunteer I really feel like I have made life long friends. I look forward to coming back every year. In fact, I got more excited about camp than my own honeymoon. We encourage volunteers to stay the whole week at camp. Previous camping experience is helpful, but not required. Anyone with experience with kids can be put to good use.

Lastly, you can help through donations. It is always hard to ask for money, especially in times of economic hardship. However, if you are in a place to help Camp Quest financially, just know that every dollar we receive is well spent. We use money from donations on things such as supplies, scholarships, field trips, renting the facility, and keeping the cost of camp down for everyone. Anything we receive will be greatly appreciated.

Camp Quest is held near Mound, Minnesota and will run this year from July 26 to Aug 1. Because of generous donations, the cost per camper is only \$395. To find out more about Camp Quest visit our website at [www.Camp-Quest.org](http://www.Camp-Quest.org), or call Rick Rohrer at 952-903-0520.

(Continued from page 6)

will work with me on ensuring a smooth transition towards this program. We will endeavor to continue the format as it has developed, breaking the interviews into segments. Rather than playing commercials during the breaks, we will provide the various subcommittees opportunity to submit brief reports.

Brent Michael Davids, a gifted composer, is developing an original musical theme. He also will be creating variations on that theme so we will be proud of the music we use for lead-ins and fade-outs.

The podcasts will be hosted on a *ing of the Guard*; Greg Laden interviewing biologist and philosopher Massimo Pigliucci and *Celebrating Darwin at the Bell*, overseen by Lynn Fellman.

They recognized me as the host of the morning show, saying that they like the show. I don't want to lose a "broadcast" appeal. However, with a podcast format we will be able to record events outside of the studio and present edited versions on the show.

Our recent shows have featured author Eric Maisel; August Berkshire, Steve Petersen, Crystal Dervetski, and Jeannette Watland in *The Chang-*

Upcoming shows will feature an examination of the humanism of the Star Trek Universe; Peter A. Lipson the guardian against medical woo;; Biologist Sean Carroll of the University of Wisconsin and David Eller.

For more details on each show, visit the Radio Page at [mnatheists.org](http://mnatheists.org).

## Radio Report

by **Mike Haubrich**  
**Director, Atheist Talk Radio Show**

Atheists Talk continues to be a solid outreach program for the Minnesota Atheists, and I am pleased to report that plans are in the works to branch into two separate projects related to the show.

August Berkshire is going to pilot a hybrid version of the show on KTNF radio, using his skills at outreach and dialog with the religious. There is the possibility that the new show, a shared program with a theistic co-host, may be picked up by KTNF as one of their own shows! Please show support for this project by listening and encouraging your friends to listen.

On the next track, the current show will be moving to an internet-based podcast show. Stephanie Zvan, our current host,

*(Continued on page 5)*



The Atheists Talk program on the “Changing of the Guard” included (standing from left) outgoing founding members August Berkshire and Steve Petersen. Mike Haubrich did the interview and Stephanie Zvan was the host. The incoming leaders (seated from left) are Jeannette Watland and Crystal Dervetski.

## Meet your new Board of Directors



The new Minnesota Atheists Board of Directors: Standing from left: Grant Steves, Jeannette Watland, Bjorn Watland, George Kane, Crystal Dervetski, Mike Haubrich and Cathy Prody. Inserts: left: Andy Flamm, right: Jack Caravela.

# First Amendment Watchdog Committee

by **Bob Schmitz, Chair**

Minnesota Atheists and the Humanists of Minnesota have established the First Amendment Watchdog committee, which has been meeting monthly since 27 May 2008. The committee's purpose is to focus on church-state separation violations in the State of Minnesota. Early in its existence our committee addressed the matter of a large Christian banner hanging from the ceiling in the high school cafeteria at Kimball, Minnesota. It was observed by one of our members while attending a basketball game there one evening. The committee referred this matter to ACLU-MN. Chuck Samuelson, Executive Director of ACLU-MN, immediately sent a letter to the Superintendent of that school district, pointing out the potential violation of the law and recommended remedial action. This incident is an example of the role our committee can play in addressing such violations.

Other issues addressed by the committee include: 1) Questionable practices of Charter Schools in relation to church-state separation; 2) tax supported programs like Positive Alternatives (anti-choice counseling services for pregnant women); 3) tax credits and deductions for Christian home schools; 4) tuition write-offs for parochial school tuition; 5) Property tax exemptions for church property; and, 6) Creationism in public high

**The committee has decided to develop a network of watchdogs throughout the state. Any member of a Freethought group can volunteer. They would report violations observed in their area to the committee, which would offer consultation on how the issue might be addressed.**

school science classes (an estimated 25% of our students are being taught creation science in public school biology classes as an alternative to evolution). Due to our actions FFRF might be interested in Positive Alternatives.

The committee has decided to develop a network of watchdogs throughout the state. Any member of a Freethought group can volunteer. They would report viola-

tions observed in their area to the committee, which would offer consultation on how the issue might be addressed. Other resources such as ACLU-MN, FFRF, and American's United would be utilized. If legislative issues arise that the committee believes should be addressed, the watchdog advocates may be asked to contact their respective legislators. Our goal is to es-

tablish a watchdog advocate in each of the 67 Senate Districts. If there are two or more in a district we connect them with each other. We have come to the realization that the Freethought community needs to organize to make their voice heard.

If you are interested in becoming a watchdog contact us at [info@mnatheists.org](mailto:info@mnatheists.org) (MN Atheists) or [allibobi@comcast.net](mailto:allibobi@comcast.net) (H of M). We will need your name, email address, phone number, Senate district number, State Senator or State Representative if known. If you do not know who represents you or what district you are in we can supply that information based on your address.



## Financial Report

### Building Fund: \$1055

Thomas Dooley	\$35
Guy Harper	\$50
Vanita Mishra	\$100
Christopher Matthews	\$50
Randy Quast	\$500
Art Searcy	\$50
Bob Schmitz	\$25
James Whitney	\$25
Vern Young	\$200
Anonymous	\$20

### Radio Fund: \$255

Matthew Dittloff	\$25
Thomas Dooley	\$30
Simon Gibson	\$25
James Koran	\$25
Art Searcy	\$50
David Thomas	\$100

### Visibility (General) Fund: \$560

Louis Odette	\$25
Randy Quast	\$500
Melorie Raymond-Gabrysiak	\$20
Michael Toft	\$15

**Building Fund balance as of January 31, 2009: \$113,907**

**Book Review*****The Atheist's Way: Living Well Without Gods*****By Eric Maisel****New World Library, 208 pages****by Greg Peterson**

Ever since Sam Harris first got our attention with *The End of Faith*, a parade of atheist-themed books has come out. Thanks to people like Richard Dawkins, Victor Stenger, Taner Edis and others the scientific case for the implausibility of religious dogmas has been largely made. Christopher Hitchens has made the politico-sociological case against the desirability of religion, and Daniel Dennett has gotten us to question religion and religious psychology. But until recently, a few topics have been missing from our canon. Enter Eric Maisel and his *Atheist's Way*.

*Way* presupposes atheism. Maisel spends no time making a case for godlessness, a position he sees as too evident (perhaps because the case has been made elsewhere) to address in this slim volume. He has other, bigger fish to fry, anyway, rather than rehashing the same old arguments against cogent evidence for theism.

Maisel sets out to answer the question, "How then should we live?" and he largely succeeds in providing challenging answers that provide philosophical courage and direction without succumbing to unrealistic, wishy-washy, banal "inspiration."

This is the path of existentialism that looks reality in the eye unflinchingly and determines to create in our meaningless universe a source of boundless meaning from within. We nominate ourselves, we invest meaning, and we take off on a hero's quest. Some statements within the book reminded me of my favorite

line from the TV series, *Angel*, in which the title character says, "In the greater scheme or the big picture, nothing we do matters. There's no grand plan, no big win....If there is no great glorious end to all this, if nothing we do matters, then all that matters is what we do. 'cause that's all there is....All I wanna do is help. I wanna help because I don't think people should suffer as they do. Because, if there is no bigger meaning, then the smallest act of kindness is the greatest thing in the world."

**Too few atheist writers, even the best ones, seem to know how to address the problem of meaning - not for themselves, but for others.**

Maisel might take exception to some parts of what Angel said. It is perhaps a little facile. But as a statement of principle for the character, it rather nicely reflects the attitude of *Atheist's Way*. In one sitting, I read it cover to cover. It took a couple of chapters to get into the book, but once I was hooked, I was hooked like a hungry trout.

Too few atheist writers, even the best ones, seem to know how to address the problem of meaning - not for themselves, but for others. It is fine for the relatively well-off and well-known to make brash proclamations about a godless universe without ultimate purpose, but where does that leave the overweight stock boy in Kansas who wants to be part of an epic struggle between opposing forces to give his life some meaning? I found *Way* has the answer: Anyone can be involved in an epic, *heroic* struggle against the forces,

external and internal, that would seek to drain life of meaning. It truly is a heroic undertaking, and has the added virtue of being true in a way that demons, angels, and apocalypses never can be.

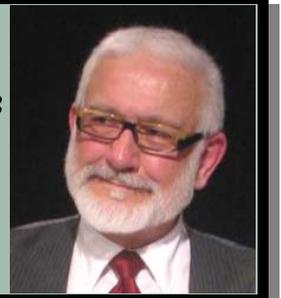
This is a book to challenge and improve an atheist's life, and to show the religious skeptic afraid of embracing atheism a clear-eyed view of what a life free of superstition can be. It is simply written, direct, accessible, and potentially life-changing. There's no excuse not to read this book, and I urge all atheists to do so. Frankly, we need a better class of non-believer, and adherence to the "Way" laid out in this book can help produce that.

The most loathsome movie character I know is Cypher from "The Matrix." Knowing what was real, he chose to re-enter the imaginary world of the matrix to experience fantasy comforts and pleasures rather than bravely facing a gray, bleak reality in which painful struggle could make him an actual hero. This choice is somewhat analogous to what Maisel lays out for the reader. As a life coach, he provides the insight, the motivation, and the methodology to make selecting the hero's journey seem not only achievable, but noble in a way that will satisfy the self.

**Want to read another take on *The Atheist's Way*?  
See the next page... The Eds.**

*Comments from the whip*  
**Grant Steves**

***The Atheist's Way: Living Well Without Gods***  
**by Eric Maisel**  
**New World Library, 208 pages**



Embracing atheism means leaving religion behind. You give up the crutch of prayer, and the unknown of spirituality. In the last few years, you may have noticed books that address spirituality and the atheist. None of these books gave an answer. They all seemed to miss the mark of recommendation; e.g., *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality* by Andre Comte-Sponville, and *Spirituality for the Skeptic* by Robert C. Solomon.

Eric Maisel has written a book that presents *The Atheist Way*. In one hundred seventy-five pages, he molds an atheist way of living well without gods. What people need, according to Maisel, is to make meaning. It is our human quest to make meaning that result in an integrated person. It is this quest to make meaning that appears to distinguish humanity from other living creatures. Maisel offers a brief look at faith-based spirituality, but dismisses it: “The mind is a terrible thing to waste on superstitions, and I am thrilled to have my mind return from its indulgent philosophical wanderings.” At the same time he recognizes “the lack of community and not having a ‘church home,’ which may not be comprehensible to an atheist who didn’t grow up in one,” is something that creates meaning for some people. However, atheists are still better off despite “lacking the certainty and security of knowing I have the answer and that God is going to take care of me.... In our freedom, we are offered signature truths about reality:

“1) That human meaning is sub-

jective and malleable; 2) that self-interest can be discussed internally, leading to thoughtful decisions about what we intend our life to signify; and 3) that because this process is available to us, we can create ourselves in our own best image, marrying ‘high values’ and ordinary pleasures in such a way that we feel proud about ourselves, while getting a full measure of happiness out of life.”

How do we create meaning? What are the answers? Is there a formula that Maisel has to offer? Meaning is private, personal, individual, and subjective discovery. Putting the responsibility on the person, we may: 1) ignore the problem, 2) hunt for meaning as something lost, 3) submit to authority, 4) say that all is subjective, and 5) stare too long at reality but fail to discover the reality. “In the end, we may elect to pursue ‘passionate meaning-making.’”

Maisel strongly endorses the idea that we create ourselves and not submit to how others would define us. He would have us invest in meaning. It is where we invest that reveals who we are and the meaning we make.

Eric Maisel’s experience as a psychotherapist, philosopher, and cultural observer has guided many creative people to make their meaning. He recognizes the roots of belief that attach to those who become atheists. In that transition from spiritually driven to atheist, some become lost in a search for meaning. We must realize that ‘self-awareness will not simply happen of its own accord.’

Start making meaning by writing ‘your life purpose statement, whether it is a word, a sentence, or a page. This step helps you to continue making meaning in your life.

In your search to discover the terms that you fill with understanding, try ‘making meaning, investing meaning, reinvesting meaning, divesting meaning, meaning adventure, meaning container, meaning crisis, meaning conflict, meaning disturbance...etc.’. Eric Maisel does not give the formula, but he tells us that meaning is a wellspring. “You make it; it comes out of you; it is new each day; it is infinitely variable.” Making meaning is a process. It changes and evolves as we do...You announce that you are the sole arbiter of meaning in your life, you nominate yourself as the hero of your own story, and you give up all religions and supernatural enthusiasms.”

Dr. Maisel has written a book that encourages us to make our self and the meaning within that human being. In reading this book, you may be encouraged to read anyone of his many books. It may be that you are coping with depression – read *The Van Gogh Blues*. Perhaps you want to write – try *The Art of the Book Proposal* and *A Writer’s Space*. If you need inspiration – explore *Coaching the Artist Within or Creativity for Life*. When you need a step-by-step guide to completing your art – examine *Fearless Creating*. None of them will disappoint and all will stimulate you to make meaning.

# Religion Required

by Vic Tanner

In his excellent book, *Breaking the Spell*, philosopher Daniel C. Dennett made the modest proposal that classes on world religion should be a requirement in all public and private schools as well as home schooling. One community is doing just that. The Modesto, California school district has made a world religion course a requirement for high school graduation in the hopes that it might be a model of how to teach about religion in schools for the rest of the country.

The course's goal is to teach the customs and practices of the world, including the major world religions, namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism,

Sikhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in an objective and unbiased manner. The instructors of the class went to extraordinary lengths to ensure no particular religion was favored, going as far as to count the number of pages dedicated to each religion. Are they forging a brave new curriculum for public schools? Or is the introduction of religious instruction in public schools a potential for disaster?

Can an unbiased and detached method of teaching, such as is being modeled in Modesto, be expected to continue once a class like this is released to the wild? Even with the best of intentions, a class like this is prime for abuse. Other attempts to institute religion courses in public schools have often met with much public criticism, largely because of a major misunderstanding by the school administration as to what 'religion' actually is. They were not so much attempts to teach "religion", as they were attempts to teach a specific religion – Christianity - usually in the form of a Bible study.

Even if the pilot study in Modesto is done correctly, this does not mean that similar programs will be carried out responsibly in other school districts. At some point, some teacher will be tempted to teach some doctrine as truth. Or others as false. Could a fundamentalist Christian teacher be expected to teach about Islam in an unbiased manner or mention admirable traits of Atheism? Would Atheism even be mentioned in such a class?

Even with all the potential abuses, a class such as this could still be greatly

**Could a fundamentalist Christian teacher be expected to teach about Islam in an unbiased manner or mention admirable traits of Atheism?**

beneficial. The United States is one of the most religious countries on earth. It is also one of the most ignorant about religion, even its own. When I discover on a day to day basis how many people don't understand the basic tenets of their own religion, or fail to grasp the benefits of church/state separation, I tend to believe that a class like this may not only be a good idea, but may, in fact, be a necessity for our country to continue. No one, after all, can make an informed choice, without information, and many children, especially home schooled children, *never* come in contact with differing viewpoints on religion. Perhaps, even if taught improperly, the class could do some good. Who knows? It could have the unintended consequence of educating the educators.

The direst potential consequence that I see of a class like this being added to public schools would be the slippery slope that may result. It may be used by a more unscrupulous and proselytizing mindset to try to open the door for other types of religious

instruction in public schools - a sort of wedge effort. Once a course on religion is being taught, it may be harder to argue why other classes on religion do not meet the criteria of a public school room. We must remember: other parts of the country are not as progressive in their agenda as southern California. Can we allow religious instruction in public school, but put the proper limits on what is taught and how? If they can have a class in world religion, why can't we have a class on Christianity?

This would, of course, be a plain violation of the separation of church and state. A class such as this cannot promote one religion over another or religion over secularism. But this is not commonly understood, even with solid judicial judgments. The 1963 US Supreme Court case of *Abington School Dist.*

*v. Schempp* barred Bible recitations in the class room but said "the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities" if these qualities are "presented objectively as part of a secular program of education." This seems pretty plain to us, but there are groups out there that are just waiting to push the subject. A group known as the Bible Literacy Project spent many years and millions of dollars writing a proposed text book, *The Bible and Its Influence*. They are attempting to get the book endorsed and used in schools to teach the Christian Bible, as if adding the phrase "and its influence" suddenly transforms it into a sociology textbook. This book has already been used in two schools in the US. If abuses of the curriculum do occur once the gate is open, could we close it again? It is a good thing to know about religion. After all, you can't defend yourself against things you know nothing about. There is an old saying: if you want to know about religion, ask an atheist.

## Darwin Day Panel Discussion

by James Zimmerman

On February 15<sup>th</sup> (Darwin Day in both Minneapolis and St. Paul), Minnesota Atheists sponsored a panel of scientists and science instructors to discuss their thoughts on evolution, creationism and Darwin. The discussion focused mostly on the teaching of evolution in schools, and the efforts fundamentalists put forth in their contin-

ued insistence to raise Creationism to the level of valid science.

Lynn Fellman moderated the discussion, which included panelists P.Z. Myers, Randy Moore, Greg Laden, Sehoia Cotner, and Jane Phillips.

Following the discussion, panelists took questions from the audience. During the question-and-answer session, panelists gave their thoughts on having bible-literalists

in class, whether they felt it was important for students to agree with or simply understand evolution, and what is being done to ensure that college students come equipped with a basic understanding of biology from their high schools.

**Below from left: Lynn Fellman and panelists P.Z. Meyers, Greg Laden, Jane Phillips, Sehoia Cotner and Randy Moore.**



### Freethought Cryptogram

Zq fdfxk uevqhvk bqa fdfxk bmf, hlf cxzfi hbi offq leihzgf he gzofxhk.

-- Hlepbi Wftfxieq

Answer on page 14.

## News & Notes

by George Kane

### The first vote of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress

with significance to the separation of church and state was a success, but not everyone on the religious right realized that they had suffered a defeat. One of the provisions of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 was originally to be \$10 billion for repairs and facility construction at eligible colleges. Funds were not to be available for theological seminaries, or at secular colleges for buildings used for religious instruction. Republican Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina offered an amendment “to allow the free exercise of religion at institutions of higher education that receive (repair and reconstruction) funding.” In other words, the amendment would have opened up the government funding to religious education.

The DeMint amendment was defeated on party lines, 54 – 43. Senator Snowe of Maine was the only Republican to vote nay. The Secular Coalition for America thanked the Senate for upholding the separation of church and state, but the executive director of the American Center of Law and Jus-

tice, the leading litigation group of the religious right, called it a wash. To placate Republicans, who wanted to reduce the recovery bill’s expenditures by \$100 Billion, the Senate dropped all funding for college reconstruction. On his weekday radio program, Jay Sekulow reported that this made the “discrimination against Christianity”

**It is conspicuous that Obama calls for improving interfaith relations, but not relations with those of no faith.**

moot. He reported that the reconciliation of the House and Senate versions could not add the funds back in, because the reconciliation only resolved differences in funding, and could not add items that were absent in either version.

But don’t count your chickens, Jay! The funds were slipped in through the back door. The reconciled bill provided \$39.5 billion to states to “backfill” cuts that have been made to their 2008 or 2009 education budgets. In restoring funds cut from public college budgets, the allocation that states were supposed to use for financial aid

and operating costs was expanded and repurposed, so that colleges can also use the funds for facilities — but only at public institutions.

**President Obama** used the occasion of the National Prayer Breakfast to announce his appointees to remake Bush’s Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiative. The new Executive Director is Joshua DuBois, a former Pentecostal pastor who headed religious outreach for Obama’s Senate office and presidential campaign. He will be advised by the 15-member Council of Faith-Based and Neighbor-

hood Partnerships (see insert). As an atheist, I find in this lineup little reason to celebrate. It is not exclusively focused on conservative Protestants, the way Bush’s Faith-Based Initiative was, and the bottom four appointees come from secular charities. Fred Davie is even gay, but he has a divinity degree. But the appointments are clearly intended to create a partnership between religion and government, as Obama promised during the campaign, to strengthen religion and to give it a role in setting the national agenda.

There are four priorities that Obama set for the Council in his address to the Prayer Breakfast:

1. Enlisting faith and community groups in economic recovery efforts
2. Reducing abortions
3. Encouraging responsible fatherhood
4. Improving interfaith relations, including in the Muslim world

“Encouraging responsible fatherhood” is a nice idea, but otherwise I again find nothing in these goals for an atheist to celebrate.

*(Continued on page 13)*

### Council of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships

The Rev. Jim Wallis, executive director of Sojourners  
 Frank Page, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention  
 Joel C. Hunter, Pastor of the Megachurch of Lakeland, Fla.  
 The Rev. Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA  
 Bishop Vashti McKenzie of the African Methodist Episcopal Church  
 Richard Stearns, president of World Vision, a Christian humanitarian organization  
 Rabbi David N. Saperstein, director of Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism,  
 The Rev. Otis Moss Jr., pastor emeritus, Olivet Institutional Baptist Church  
 Eboo Patel, executive director of Interfaith Youth Corps  
 William J. Shaw, president of the National Baptist Convention  
 Melissa Rogers, director of Wake Forest School of Divinity Center for Religion and Public Affairs  
 Arturo Chavez, president and CEO of the Mexican American Cultural Center  
 Diane Baillargeon, president and CEO, Seedco, a secular job-training program  
 Judith N. Vredenburg, president and CEO of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America  
 Fred Davie, president, Public/Private Ventures, a secular nonprofit charity

## Cable Report

by Steve Petersen and James Zimmerman

In February James Zimmerman led a panel discussion with members Jack Caravela and Ryan Sutter on the Christianity of America. In Part One, they discussed America's formative years. The program began by discussing the freedom of religion many European settlers desired. Next, they discussed the beliefs and religious affiliations of the Founding Fathers. They also discussed arguments put forth by those who assert America is a Christian nation.

In Part Two, they compared the Christianity of contemporary America with several time periods in the past. They discussed the religion climate during the first decades after independence, as well as the temperance movements, abolitionists, and progressives that proliferated during the Gilded Age. They

lastly address the religiosity of America during the era between the two World Wars and during the post-war years. The show concluded with Jack suggesting books to read for more information.. If you would like to help on the cable program or sponsor the program on your cable access station or have ideas for future programs please contact me at chair@mnatheists.org

**Cable Crew:** Art Anderson, Brett Stembbridge, Shirley Moll, Steve Petersen, George Kane, Todd Erickson, and Grant Hermanson,.

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

### Cable schedule

**Burnsville/Eagan Community Television:** Channel 14. Check their web site [www.bectv.tv](http://www.bectv.tv) for day and times. Sponsor: Kevin Hardisty.

**Bloomington:** Channel 16. Monday 9:30 p.m., Tuesday 5:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Sponsors: David and

Joanne Beardsley.

**Minneapolis:** Channel 17. Saturday 8:30 p.m. Sponsor: Steve Petersen.

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

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

**St. Cloud:** Channel 12. Thursday 8:30 p.m. Sponsor: Jack Richter.

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

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

**White Bear Lake, Hugo, Lake Elmo, Mahtomedi, Maplewood, North St. Paul, Oakdale, Vadnais Heights:** Channel 15. Saturday 7:30 p.m. Sponsor: Michael Seliga.

Below from left: Jack Caravela, Ryan Sutter and James Zimmerman.



(Continued from page 12)

Goal #1 is just entangling government and religion. "Reducing abortions" has been a stated goal of every president, I think, since the *Roe* decision. But whether the number of abortions goes up or down, I don't think that one can draw any conclusions about whether the resulting change in the quality of life will be for better or worse. And it is conspicuous that Obama calls for improving interfaith

relations, but not relations with those of no faith.

During the campaign, Obama had at least given a nod to church/state separation by promising that faith-based organizations would not be eligible for government funding if they practiced religious discrimination in employment. That requirement has been dropped.

But on the plus side, Obama rescinded Bush's presidential decree

banning foreign aid funds to any program that even mentions abortion as an option. This so-called "Mexico City Decree" was first instituted by Ronald Reagan, then rescinded by Bill Clinton, and then reinstated by George W. Bush. I would like to see Congress decide this with a law, rather than leaving such an important clause of foreign policy to be decided solely by the party designation of the president.

*The Sunny Skeptic***Crystal Dervetski****Atheist Dating and Relating:****A Reinvention Can Gain Attention**

So you're swimming along and trying to meet new people, but sometimes it still feels like you've hit a snag or that you're in a rut. This is the time of year when everyone's New Year's Resolutions start to tank. Perhaps it's time to think about trying a personal reinvention. I know it can be a frightening consideration, but reinventing yourself can be a great way to get a fresh perspective, and can help people see you in a different light as well. Here are some tips for reinventing yourself that will not only make you feel better about your personal style, but may also benefit others. Since we know atheists are often (wrongly) criticized as not being charitable people, these are a few simple options for helping yourself and others at the same time.

Maybe you've had long hair for 20 years, or always had the same hair style, and it's just part of who you are. Consider cutting your hair or changing the way you fix it. If your hair is long and in passable condition, think about donating it to a charity program that makes wigs for persons living with cancer. Locks of Love, Wigs for Kids, or the Pantene Beautiful Lengths program are just a few options. Go to a reputable hair salon and talk to them about what you think for a new hairstyle. Any good stylist will spend time with you and look at photos, talk about your face shape, lifestyle and how much time you will want to spend on styling your hair.

Do you still have a favorite shirt or pair of pants from your high

school days, even though you graduated 15 years ago? You need to change your style once in a while, and, quite honestly, although everyone is impressed that you still fit into your tapered, stonewashed jeans, they look awful and are like a neon sign that you're both old and weird. If your clothing is still in good condition, consider donating it to an organization or thrift shop. You can research organizations in your area fairly easily, just look them up and call ahead: ask where their shop proceeds go. (I personally donate items to a shop that employs adults with disabilities, and all of the proceeds go to their work program.)

Don't forget, if your item of clothing is in bad shape, you can recycle it. Don't just throw it in the garbage! A good example is Wiper's Recycling in Maplewood. Wiper's recycles old shoes into biodegradable oil spill clean up kits. They also recycle all forms of clothing. Visit them at [www.wipersrecycling.com](http://www.wipersrecycling.com). You can also find information online about your local waste management programs; chances are you can place unwanted clothing directly into your recycling bin for pick up, but find out for sure before trying this.

Are your eyeglasses tired and not too flattering? A person's face is obviously important in communication with others, and I'm sure you've all heard it said that the eyes are the window to the soul. While I'm sure none of us believe that, we have to believe that eyes are obvious focal points when talking to others. If your glasses are outdated or not in great shape, they may make you look older than you actually are. Consider investing in a new, more modern pair. Your old glasses should

definitely be donated if at all possible. Did you know that people in developing nations might have to pay the equivalent of 3 months salary for a pair of glasses? Many thrift stores and eyeglass chain stores have drop boxes to donate your used glasses, or go to New Eyes for the Needy, where there are addresses where your old glasses may be shipped: [www.neweyesfortheneedy.org](http://www.neweyesfortheneedy.org).

Have you cleaned out your home and done a total reinvention, but now have a lot to give away? Consider Freesharing.org or Freecycle.org, online communities that allow you to give away (and get) items and notification of items. I would recommend that you opt out of getting emails as they are posted, and just get a once a day or week report, as it can fill up your inbox quite quickly.

For other recycling tips in your area, visit [www.recyclemoreminnesota.org](http://www.recyclemoreminnesota.org).

A reinvention can be scary, we often hang onto something old out of fear of change. Really though, what do you have to lose? If you're smart about a reinvention, you only stand to gain and you may have the added bonus of being able to help others at the same time. A change can do you good.

Comments? Email Crystal D. at [astrocomfy@hotmail.com](mailto:astrocomfy@hotmail.com).

**Answer to Freethought Cryptogram**

In every country and every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty.  
--Thomas Jefferson

## Things to do, places to go: A calendar for atheists

Sundays, 6:00-7:00 p.m. **Atheist/Agnostic Alcoholics Anonymous**, 3249 Hennepin Ave. S., #55 (Men's Center, in the basement) Minneapolis, Open to men and women. FFI: tcAgnostic@gmail.com

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday, 1-3:30 p.m., **Minnesota Atheists monthly meeting**. Steve Petersen, 651-484-9277

Every Sunday, 10:30 - noon, **Brunch Social**. Q.Cumbers, 7465 France Avenue South, Edina. Bring your AWE for a \$2 discount.

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

1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Monday, 6 p.m., **Freethought Toastmasters Club**. Larpenteur Estates apartment complex, 1280 Larpenteur Ave. W., St. Paul. (Park directly in back and follow sidewalk to Party Room.) Roger Belfay, (651) 222-2782 or George Kane, nup@Minn.net.

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

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

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

4<sup>th</sup> Wednesday, **Meal and a Reel**, Uptown, Minneapolis (Hennepin Ave. and Lake St.) 6 p.m. meal, 7 p.m. movie. George Kane, nup@Minn.net. Details in Atheists Weekly E-mail.

Thursdays, 7 p.m., **Campus Atheists, Skeptics and Humanists (CASH)** See cashumn.org for program and location.

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

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

3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday, 6:30 p.m., **Minnesota Atheists board meeting**. Location varies. Grant Steves, 651-774-1992

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**To sign up for Atheists Weekly E-mail (AWE), send a request to awe@mnaatheists.org.**

**To sign up for Minnesota Atheists Meetups, go to <http://atheists.meetup.com/493>.**

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**Steve: Every tiny seed on earth was placed here by the alien King Rondalay to foster our titrates and fuel our positive transfers.**

**Tina: Oh, Steve, no one wants to hear about our religion that we made up.**

— Steve Martin and Tina Fey, introducing the screenplay awards at the 81st Academy Awards, February 22, 2009.

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