

The Minnesota Atheist

Minnesota Atheists

Established 1991

Positive Atheism in ActionSM

Volume 19 Number 4

April 2009

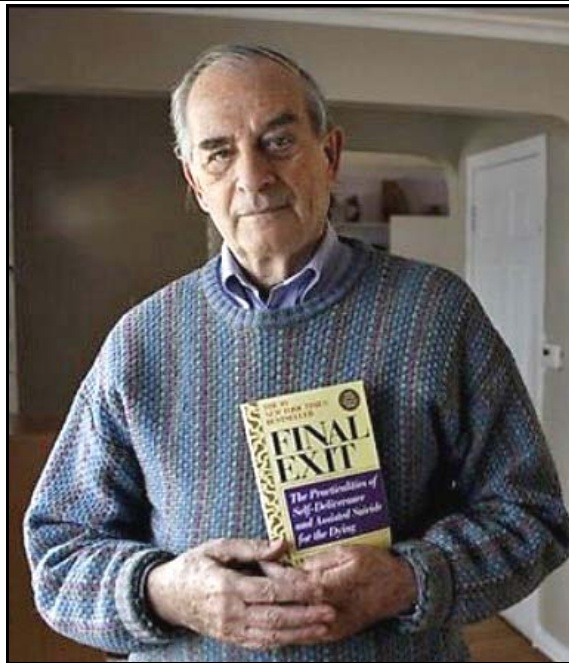
April Meeting

Jerry Dincin, PhD, President of Final Exit Network

By George Kane

The Final Exit Network provides counseling and instruction to those who wish to end their lives. According to their web site, <http://www.finalexitnetwork.org/whatsets.htm>, "Final Exit Network is the only organization in the United States that will help individuals who are not 'terminally ill' - 6 months or less to live - to hasten their deaths." Our speaker for the April 19 public meeting, Jerry Dincin, became the president of FEN one month ago, when the previous president, Ted Goodwin, was arrested by the state of Georgia for alleged direct participation in the suicide of a long-time member. The arrest of several FEN officers and the seizure of all of their bank accounts culminated in a multi-state sting operation.

Opposition to assisted suicide is

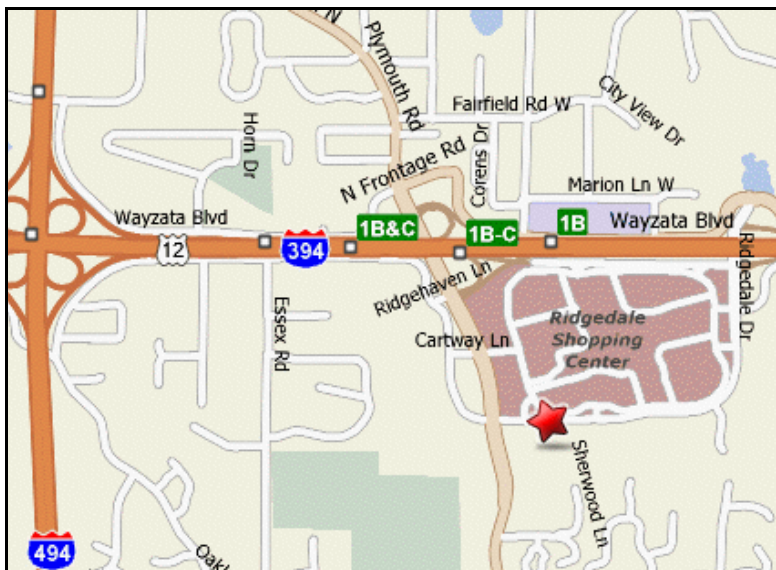


Jerry Dincin, PhD

based on religious conviction of the "sanctity of life," to the exclusion of consideration for the quality of life and for personal dignity. When, after several trials, Dr.

Jack Kevorkian was convicted in Michigan and sent to prison, Minnesota Atheists recognized him in absentia with an award for his courageous defiance of religion-based law in service to his clients. The Final Exit Network follows the path Dr. Kevorkian blazed in support of the self-determination of life outcomes.

Jerry Dincin will speak not only of the mission of the Final Exit Network, but we hope also of the criminal case against them in Georgia. Due to his flight schedule, **his presentation will begin at 1:00**, and will conclude by 2:30. For this meeting we will return to the Ridgedale Library, 12601 Ridgedale Drive, Minnetonka. The Business Meeting will follow afterward, and at 4:00 there will be a dinner buffet at Wanderer's Garden, 13059 Ridgedale Drive, Minnetonka.



MNA Meeting on Sunday April 19, Southdale Library 12601 Ridgedale Drive Minnetonka

- 1:00-2:30 p.m. — Program
- 2:30-2:45 p.m. — Break
- 2:45-3:15 p.m. — Business Meeting.
- 3:15-4:00 p.m. — Social Time.
- 4:00-6:00 p.m. -- Dinner buffet at Wanderer's Garden, 13059 Ridgedale Drive

In this issue...

President's Report	3
Fertility Rites	3
Dawkins lecture	4
<i>Watchmen</i>	5
Radio Report	6
P.Z. Meyers	6
Star Trek meeting	7
Lunatic Fringe	8
Jesus Interrupted	9
News & Notes	10
Pascal's Wager	11
Cryptogram	11
Easter 411	12
Cable Report	13
Financial Report	13
The Sunny Skeptic	14
Things To Do	15

Minnesota Atheists Board of Directors

board@mnaatheists.org

President: Bjorn Watland
pres@mnaatheists.org, 612-708-5029

Associate President:
Jeannette Watland apres@mnaatheists.org, 612-709-6719

Chair of Board: Grant Steves
chair@mnaatheists.org, 651-774-1992

Associate Chair: Jack Caravela
achair@mnaatheists.org, 612-788-9665

Treasurer: Andy Flamm
treas@mnaatheists.org, 612-251-3904

Secretary: George Kane
sec@mnaatheists.org, 651-488-8225

Director-at-Large: Cathy Prody
dir1@mnaatheists.org,

Director-at-Large: Crystal Dervetski
dir2@mnaatheists.org

Director-at-Large: Mike Haubrich
dir3@mnaatheists.org,

Building Fund:
\$114,486

Honorary Members

Dan Barker
Gerald Erickson, PhD
Annie Laurie Gaylor
Dick Hewetson
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

Published by Minnesota Atheists,
P.O. Box 6261, Minneapolis, MN 55406
612-588-7031, info@mnaatheists.org
www.MinnesotaAtheists.org

Editorial Board: editor@mnaatheists.org

James Zimmerman, Editor, 763-258-6000,
Zgoatee@Gmail.com

Tom Riddering, Design & Layout,
volksfolks@comcast.net, 651-714-2617

Chief Photographer: Richard Trombley

Membership/change of address:
Shirley Moll, address@mnaatheists.org,
651-484-9277

Public Relations: George Kane
pr@mnaatheists.org, 651-488-8225

Atheists Weekly E-mail (AWE):
George Kane, awe@mnaatheists.org

Cable: Steve Petersen
cable@mnaatheists.org, 651-484-9277

Webmaster: Bjorn Watland
web@mnaatheists.org, 612-708-5029

Podcasts: Grant Hermanson
podcast@mnaatheists.org,

Copyright 2009 Minnesota Atheists.
Minnesota Atheists is an affiliate of Atheist Alliance International, American Atheists, American Humanist Association, Council for Secular Humanism, and International Humanist and Ethical Union.

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

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

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

President's Column by Bjorn Watland



What makes Minnesota Atheists different? In the Twin Cities alone, there are many groups which could fall under the "Freethought" banner. There is a student group – the Campus Atheists, Skeptics and Humanists of the University of Minnesota – and non-student groups like the Humanists of Minnesota, Atheists for Human Rights, and Minneapolis Skeptics. As I wrote last month, Minnesota Atheists' slogan is, "Positive Atheism in Action." What does that say about these other groups? Are they negative? Hardly. We are a diverse group, with many different political opinions and different thoughts about how to dialog with religious people, but the organization as a whole acts in a certain way, which I believe attracts curious atheists.

First, we strongly support equal rights. Regardless of religion, sex,

Our Atheist Community

race, ability, economic status, or sexual orientation, you deserve to be treated equally under the law. From this gen-

eral position, we march in gay pride parades and speak out at the capitol about the importance of keeping church and state separate.

Second, we acknowledge that religious people are not stupid for having supernatural beliefs. From this, we make presentations to schools and in the public about atheists, stating our views and fostering understanding by engaging in respectful dialog. This is one of the most difficult things to do, because it is easy for those who grew up believing in a god to forget what that was like, and how strongly some of us believed, only to have had someone ask probing questions, in person, through a book, or the Internet, which began a

process of reasoning which led to atheism. Starting with respect does not mean pandering, but allowing a conversation to be built on what is presented, rather than on assumptions about each other.

Lastly, we join together as a community to bring dignity to the label we assign to ourselves as atheists. Some criticize atheist organizations for acting too much like a church by having regular meetings, pot lucks, picnics, signing songs, and having fun together. But our community is important to all of the people who are a part of it, and to all of those who don't yet know that they are not alone.

I, for one, am proud to be a part of such a diverse community, and to feel free to mingle with fellow atheists, no matter where I am. We may not have much in common, but we have at least one thing.



Wishing you a Joyous Estrus!

By Tom Riddering

Quick! What do eggs, flowers, the East, maidens dancing around phallic symbols, the vernal equinox, fecund rabbits, chicks, flowers, Mardi Gras, estrus cycles, and Christianity all have in common? SEX!

Well, Christians actually call it Easter, named after Eastre, the Germanic fertility goddess, which comes from the same origin as the word "east." Why east? That's where the sun rises! The same spring sun that shines on those brightly colored chicken ova and brings new life to the earth -- flowers, chicks, bunnies, and the occasional god. Jesus wasn't the only god alleg-



edly reborn around the vernal equinox. There was also Adonis, Osiris, Perseus, and Orpheus.

Spring is when we have the licentious festivals of Mardi Gras, Carnival, and the ancient Roman fertility festival of Lupercalia. It's when the

(Continued on page 7)

Professor Dawkins Visits the Twin Cities



by Ryan Sutter

On Wednesday, March 4th, Richard Dawkins delivered a lecture at the Northrup Auditorium in Minneapolis. The title of his lecture was *The Purpose of Purpose*. The main questions he addressed were:

- Why Darwinian natural selection would create a mind that sees purpose and goals everywhere, and
- What it is about our minds that cause us to subvert our basic biological gene-survival purpose?

The concepts are actually pretty deep if you think about it. If we exist because evolution has shaped us to be this way, and evolution only truly rewards the survival of genes, what possible explanation could there be for using birth control, for example.



Ryan Sutter

The answer was interesting. His illustration was a goal-seeking missile. A self-guided missile flexibly adapts its behavior in pursuit of the goal of striking a moving target. This ability to flexibly adapt to goals is a strength that allows it to do its job. However, flexibility and adaptation is a double-edged sword. If the missile falls into the wrong hands, it can be given a new goal and, its strengths intact, be used to attack the one who made it in the first place.

Now, our minds are not created artifacts in quite the same way that the missile is, but they have been shaped by million of years of evolution to be flexible in the pursuit of goals, altering course intelligently, creating sub-goals, etc. Those are the very strengths that allowed us to survive and pass on our genes. How-

ever, the invention of advanced language and civilization changes our environment allowing other people (and sometimes ourselves) to subvert those evolved goals for other reasons that are actually contrary to our evolved goals.

Sex gets subverted, filial devotion gets subverted, tribal and family allegiances get subverted. We take a perfectly valid genetic goal and redirect it into religions, raising pets, all sorts of things that make no sense in light of the evolutionary imperative to propagate our own genes. Our very power and flexibility make us susceptible to goal subversion quite unlike that which happens in nature.

Dawkins concluded with a Q&A period during which he handily responded to inquiries both interesting and bizarre.

Movie review

Watchmen

by James Zimmerman



James Zimmerman

Don't arrive late for Watchmen. The first ten minutes, featuring a gasp-inducing fight sequence that doesn't flinch which segues into a back-story montage set perfectly to Dylan's *Times They are A-Changing*, are the best ten minutes of the film. But Zack Snyder's long-awaited screen adaptation of the classic graphic novel Watchmen certainly gives the viewers plenty else to take in during the remaining 152 minutes. Dark, dreary shots of a city in perpetual nighttime, choreographed violence that blurs the line between fighting and dancing, non-linear story-telling, cultural commentaries, a superb soundtrack, and buff characters – some in barely-there superhero costumes (and sometimes not even that) – running around saving the world, saving themselves, and saving the world from themselves, all adds up to a don't-blink-or-you'll-miss-it adventure.

Snyder's movie is ambitious, and that's appropriate, considering the source material. Based on arguably the most popular graphic novel of all time, it's tough to judge the picture without comparing it to its predecessor. In some ways, it succeeds: it handily depicts half a dozen main characters and provides enough backdrops for us to care about them in the present. The non-linear story-telling is in keeping with the novel, though in film format small snippets of the story, so valuable in the novel and to the tale itself, are lost in the quick flash of the screen. Viewers who come into the theater with no working knowledge of Watchmen might find themselves confused:

Where did Rorschach get that disguise, and how does it work? Why does Dr. Manhattan walk around naked for most of his screen time? What's with Bubastis, the lynx/slug hybrid always skulking around Ozymandias? If you've read the comics, these tidbits not only make

sense, but actually enhance the characters. If you haven't read them, no amount of repeated viewing of the film will bring any clarity.

You've probably deduced by now that this is an extremely detailed story, hinging on equally detailed back story. There's so much comic book mythology kicking and jumping around in Watchmen that, for many years, it was considered un-filmable. Snyder gets kudos for, at the very least, transferring the epic into a viewable, comprehensible spectacle. He makes some compromises (the loss of Black Freighter, the story-within-a-story, is a travesty made only marginally better by its promise to appear as an extra on the DVD), but he also manages to improve on the original in a few limited areas (the antagonist's blame-placing is more logical here than in the novel).

Atheists will be pleased to discover that, during its entire run time, there are no appeals to the supernatural. None of the heroes (or villains) labors under the delusion that a god is going to step in and fix their problems. As the masked crusader Rorschach (played faultlessly by Jackie Earle Haley) noted: "God doesn't make the world this way. We do." And, in answering questions about his omnipotence, Dr. Manhattan, the anti-Superman responded: "I don't think there is a god, and if there is

I'm nothing like him." His observation is spot on, as we never see him inflicting punishment upon grandchildren for the errors of their grandparents (see Numbers 14:18), causing famine (see Genesis 41:31, 32), displaying a fetish for foreskins (see Exodus 4:23-25), or forcing parents to eat the corpses of their children (see Jeremiah 19:9).

Depiction, where explicit or implicit, of deities: 5/5

Depiction, whether explicit or implicit, of religion: 4/5

View of valuing this life as opposed to an afterlife: 4/5

Positive view of self-reliance: 3/5

Championship of reason: 4/5

Bottom line: 4/5

Electronic MNA Newsletters

Increase the effectiveness of your Minnesota Atheists membership dues—switch from a paper to an electronic newsletter.

It costs us about \$22.00 per year per person to print and mail a paper version of the newsletter. It costs us *nothing* to e-mail an electronic PDF version. Also, you'll receive the electronic version sooner and it will be in full color.

If you're interested in making the switch from the paper to the electronic version of our newsletter, please contact editor@mnatheists.org.

April Radio Report

by Mike Haubrich

Atheists Talk continues to be an important outreach, but the expense of paying for the show is rather high. We have tried an experiment at the request of KTNF, to see if a dialog between an atheist and a theist would generate a larger audience. The first show in that format didn't work out as we hoped, and so we are going to try another approach. We don't have anything definite to report on that, yet.

However, we do have some very exciting news. Brent Michael David tipped us off that there will be an opening at KFAI, Community Radio! I sent in the application, and if that works out we would save considerable money, plus the time slot is more conducive to gathering a larger audience. If we are able to land the show with KFAI we will not need to run a separate podcast and we will not renew our contract with KTNF.

In March our guests included Massimo Pigliucci, Greg Laden, Sean Carroll, Scott Lohman, Robert Price Peter Lipson, and Robert Dull. The show with Peter Lipson struck some deep chords with listeners, and I appreciate that Stephanie Zvan was able to arrange that interview.



From left: Mike Haubrich, Stephanie Zvan and Greg Laden

I would like to emphasize that any member is welcome to make suggestions for guests, and if you are able to arrange a guest you are welcome to do the interview (no radio experience required.) I appreciate the support of the Minnesota Atheists in producing this show. Thank you!

U of M Morris Professor: You Got Creationism in my Zoology

by Emily Kaiser, *City Pages*, December 24, 2008
http://blogs.citypages.com/blotter/2008/12/u_of_m_morris_p.php

When University of Minnesota-Morris biology professor PZ Myers heard that the Cincinnati Zoo and the infamous Creation Museum were offering a joint ticket deal to lure in customers, he took his outrage to the blogosphere.

The pairing was a curious one to begin with. The Creation Museum, located in Kentucky and started by the apologetics ministry Answers in Genesis, claims the earth and all its life forms were created 6,000 years ago. (Our favorite exhibit is the stegosaurus and triceratops living large on Noah's Ark.)

"The Cincinnati Zoo is promoting an anti-science, anti-education con job run by ignorant

creationists," Myers wrote on his blog, Pharyngula. "I believe the Cincinnati Zoo has betrayed its mission and its trust in a disgraceful way, by aligning themselves with a creationist institution that is a laughing stock to the rest of the world, and a mark of shame to the United States."

The news quickly spread and two days later, the deal was off. The flood of emails and phone calls were enough to scare the friendship to a halt.

Take that, Jesus!

Right: PZ Meyers expels creationism from the Cincinnati Zoo.



"The Humanism of Star Trek" at the March Meeting

By James Zimmerman

At the March 15th meetings, attendees were treated to Scott Lohman's presentation of "The Humanism of Star Trek". As both the President of the Humanists of Minnesota and a life-long *Star Trek* fan, Scott was certainly qualified to deliver such a presentation. And he didn't just talk Trek: he delivered his presentation while in Starfleet uniform and came equipped with Trek gadgetry.

Scott's talk began in the nineteenth century, wherein Scott detailed the origins of science fiction. He noted that creators of science fiction soon discovered that they could tell stories that pushed the edge of cultural norms and comment on social issue in a safe setting – where such heavy topics were disguised in science fiction.

Scott gave a mostly chronological overview of the *Star Trek* universe. He related the beginnings of *Star Trek*: how atheist Gene Roddenberry created and then pushed for the show to be produced. He then discussed the original series, the animated series, the motion pictures, the *Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, *Voyager*, and *Enterprise*. In each case, Scott drew attention to episodes that took on matters of faith and the supernatural, such as "Who Mourns for Adonis", from the original series, in which the characters refuse to worship a god they've discovered, and "Death Wish" from *Voyager*, in which an omnipotent being fights for his right to die (as eternity is a long, long time). Scott also cited episodes which dismissed gods as merely more advanced (but non-supernatural) beings, such as the original series' "The Return of the Archons", in which the 'god', Landru, turns out to be a computer, and the *Next Generation*'s "Devil's Due" in which the being portraying herself as the devil is simply a powerful charlatan.

Scott reminded everyone that, should they want more *Star Trek*, they need only wait until May 8th. The eleventh *Star Trek* motion picture is scheduled for release on

that day.

Scott quickly noted the top-rated episodes of each series. For those who missed it, here they is the top rated episode from each series:

Star Trek: The Original Series - "The City on the Edge of Forever"

Star Trek: The Next Generation - "Yesterday's Enterprise"

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine - "Duet"

Star Trek: Voyager - "Scorpion"

Star Trek: Enterprise - "In a Mirror Darkly"



Above: Scott Lohman boldly goes where no Trekie has gone before — to our March meeting.

(Continued from page 3)

Kanamara Matsuri (Festival of the Steel Phallus) is celebrated in Japan. Nothing subtle about those Buddhists and Shinto! It's when pre-Christian pagans all over the earth celebrated the return of life after the dark death of winter and propitiated their gods for a successful growing season by celebrating their fertility. The early Christian church couldn't eradicate this popular festival, so they hijacked it and assigned new theological meaning to it. But under all that sanctimonious piety, Easter is nothing but the spring fertility rites. Now that's some-

thing even atheists can celebrate!



Lunatic Fringe (God as fashion designer)

by Vic Tanner



Vic Tanner

There are many good, rational reasons for not believing in gods. Logically, the existence of one is very low, and scientifically there just isn't any real evidence. But, for some reason, I always gravitate toward the really stupid reasons. Like religious clothing.

According to the Judeo-Christian myths, God created mankind naked. It was Adam and Eve's idea to invent clothes, not God's. God didn't even seem to be real keen on the idea of them: ... blue, purple and scarlet yarn started rolling, God caught on pretty quickly.

It all started as God was strolling through the Garden of Eden one day, in the very merry month of May, and He noticed that Mr. and Mrs. Adam had figured out some sort of MacGyver-ish way to construct rudimentary loin cloths out of fig leaves, not realizing that this is exactly the sort of thing that God doesn't like.

"Who told you that you were naked," God scolded. (Genesis 3:11)

God did come to terms with their new found need for clothing, and he quickly whipped up a couple of matching outfits for the couple.

"The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them." (Genesis 3:21)

It doesn't really say what kind of skin the outfits were made from. I would assume it was some sort of animal skin, but the Bible doesn't outright say. He may have he killed a couple of goats to make clothes for his disobedient kids, or I suppose the garments could have been made of dried skin flakes stitched together. After all, with God, anything is possible.

The great Yahweh didn't stop there, though. Once clothing was created, the creative juices started flowing and fashion wasn't far behind. I'm not really sure what God had in mind in the next passage, but it sounds like He had something pretty planned:

"The LORD said to Moses, Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from each man whose heart prompts him to give. These are the offerings you are to receive from the people: ... blue, purple and scarlet yarn; goat hair; ram skins dyed red and hides of sea cows." (Exodus 25:1-5)

It's never been a secret that God likes fringe, He was a real child of the 60s. He's also fond of headbands, bell bottom jeans, and lava lamps.

Yes, that does sound like it would make a killer outfit, but God doesn't stop with the pretty yarn and "sea cow" hides. Once He gets on a roll, He gets down right fabulous:

"Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them, that they shall make themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and they shall put on the corner fringe a blue thread." (Numbers 15:38)

It's never been a secret that God likes fringe, He was a real child of the 60s. He's also fond of headbands, bell bottom jeans, and lava lamps. If you look real closely, God can be seen in the background during the Acid Rain Dance sequence of *Woodstock*.

Once the Israelites had been out in the desert for awhile and were getting settled in, it was time to make some

fun yet functional clothing for Aaron and the priests. God told Moses:

"Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron, to give him dignity and honor. ... Have them use gold, and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and fine linen." (Ex 28:2-5)

"For the breast piece make braided chains of pure gold, like a rope... Make two more gold rings and attach them to the bottom of the shoulder pieces on the front of the ephod, close to the seam just above the waistband of the ephod. The rings of the breast piece are to be tied to the rings of the ephod with blue cord, connecting it to the waistband, so that the breast piece will not swing out from the ephod." (Exodus 28:22-28)

There is, of course, nothing worse than having your breast piece swing out from your ephod. It can be very embarrassing. Though it's not as bad as letting your hair go – that sort of thing really gets God's goat. He'll take that out on the whole town:

"Then Moses said to Aaron and his sons ..., 'Do not let your hair become unkempt, and do not tear your clothes, or you will die and the LORD will be angry with the whole community.'" (Leviticus 10:6)

Once Moses came down from Mount Sinai carrying two huge stone tablets with something or other written on them, the Israelites built a tabernacle (a sort of a special tent in which to house the Ark of the Smashed Stone Tablets) and, whenever God was visiting, he would use the tent as a place to crash:

"Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you." (Ex 25 8-9)

"Make the tabernacle with ten cur-

(Continued on page 12)

Book Review**Comments from the whip****Grant Steves****Jesus Interrupted****Bart D. Ehrman****Harper Row, 2009 292 pgs**

Bart Ehrman, as the Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, has specialized and taught about the New Testament. In his latest book, *Jesus, Interrupted*, he reveals hidden contradictions in the bible, and why we don't know about them.

In a mixture of autobiography and biblical scholarship, Bart Ehrman tells his story of going from evangelical behavior to agnostic. It is his scholarship that uncovers the problems of the bible, but that is not the reason why he lost his faith. Its core is scholarship on the bible, but it reads at times like a mystery thriller.

His first revelation is that what he is about to reveal has been known and accepted by biblical scholars for a hundred or more years. Pastors going through seminaries learn this material, but they fail their congregation by not speaking these facts.

Religious scholars know that the gospels create problems. We know that they build on one another, and they fail the author test. Read Mark and get a basic story of Jesus, but without the birth and genealogy. Ask why? Read Luke and find all of the birth narrative and a genealogy of his father Joseph – why if he is the Son of God? Mark does not make him the Son of God from birth, but Luke does. Why? When you get to the gospel of John, you have Jesus not only the Son of God, but also a pre-existing being. We went from human being to divine being. In a theology fabricated well after the death of this Jesus, we have a myth of divinity created. However, the minis-

ters and pastors of the churches know this – so why do they not teach this?

We know that the writers of the bible are not who we are led to believe. Mark was not a disciple. Luke was a companion of Paul and did not know personally the Jesus about whom he was writing. Therefore, who told them the story? The gospel writers Matthew and John were assumed to be disciples. They knew each other, but their stories do not resemble each other and have contradictions. Matthew writes of a human Jesus being born. John writes about the incarnate 'Word of God' who was with god from the beginning of the universe and helped to create all things. Matthew never says a word about Jesus as a god, but for John that is what Jesus is. Matthew's focus is on Jesus as preaching the kingdom of god and nothing is said about him being god. In John, Jesus teaches about himself as a divine being. Matthew records Jesus performing miracles, but not to prove his identity, but in John, his miracles are to prove his identity. The facts are there and they contradict.

Why does Matthew not write about himself in the story? The book of John does not speak of himself – why? At the end of John (21:24), he writes, "This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true." Note how the author differentiates between his source of information, "the disciple who testifies," and himself: "we know that his testimony is true." He/we: this author is not the disciple. He claims to have gotten some of his informa-

tion from the disciple. We must conclude that none of the authors were disciples and only reported what they heard.

In the fifth chapter, Ehrman asks the question: is Jesus, "Liar, Lunatic, or Lord?" The gospels should reveal this. Why do three of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, never mention that Jesus is god? Perhaps the gospel of John is the theology of John and not the teachings of Jesus. Perhaps the fourth choice is that he is a 'legend'. However, a legend goes beyond the written biography done by a friend. Why do the contemporaneous historians, leaders, and commentators say little or nothing about Jesus? In fact, the Works of Josephus were used to prove that a secular source mentioned Jesus, but we now know this statement was fabricated.

Half of the books we have in the New Testament are not written by whom we thought.

The choice of these books for the New Testament was originally made because the churchmen of that day believed they were authentic. They made this decision over two hundred years after the books were written. They did not have the scholarly tools of analysis we have today. Scholars, ministers, and pastors know the facts surrounding the biblical story, but they fail to tell their congregation. For many people this book will reveal new information, but the fact remains it should not be new to any literate person.

News & Notes

by George Kane

Michael Newdow lost the first round of his suit to end the practice appending, in violation of the constitutionally prescribed script, the words 'so help me God' to the presidential oath of office. But he asserted that the loss is actually a good thing:

It may sound disingenuous, but I have always advocated for losing in the District Court if possible. Basically - except for findings of fact (which rarely exist in constitutional cases such as this) - it is advantageous to lose. As the loser, you are the Appellant in the next round. That allows you to frame the issues, since you go first during the briefing. The Appellant starts with a maximum 14,000 word Opening Brief. The 'winners' then have a 14,000 word limit to respond with their Respondent Briefs. Then the loser gets to speak last, with a 7,000 word Reply Brief.

During the oral argument, the advantage persists. The Appellant goes first, and then can reserve time for rebuttal, so that [the appellant] goes last as well.

So pop the Champagne, and get ready for the round that really counts. Of course, we may lose again there, in which case the litigation will essentially be over (since the Supreme Court will never accept the case for certiorari if we lose in the Court of Appeals). But we have a very strong case, with that little detail called the Constitution of the United States on our side. So, in my opinion, at least, we're in very good shape.

The new President and congress



George Kane

dominated church/state separation news at the beginning of the year, but now the focus has returned to the courts and state legislatures. I have a personal interest in one court case that the religious right is appealing, from my native California and my *alma mater* University of California. The conservative Christian plaintiffs claim that the University of California is discriminating against the students from religious high schools when they reject classes for meeting admissions requirements. UC requires incoming freshmen to have taken 15 specific classes in high school, in math, science, English, foreign language, and social studies. In the case *Association of Christian Schools International v. Stearns*, plaintiffs claim that 'UC has targeted courses that emphasize disfavored religious viewpoints, such as the idea that God has influenced human history and provides a universal, unchanging standard of truth and morality.' All incoming freshmen must have passed in high school a class in World History. Their complaint is that UC has refused to recognize for this requirement such courses as the Holocaust, Jewish Leadership, Jewish Philosophy, Women in Scripture, Moral Theology, History of Christianity, and Catholic Traditions. I'm sorry, but how broad is the knowledge of World History that a student receives in any of these classes? The only point of the suit seems to be to foster a sense of victimhood among conservative Christians.

In East Brunswick New Jersey, high school football coach Marcus Borden's fight for the right to lead his team in prayer before games has come to a legal dead end. When the school ordered him to desist, Borden

originally won in federal court. How in the world can that possibly happen? With *pro bono* assistance from Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the school district had that ruling reversed on appeal. The final word on the story is that SCOTUS has refused to hear the case, exhausting Coach Borden's appeals.

Late last year, Louisiana enacted a *Science Education Act* to promote 'open and objective discussion of scientific theories being studied including, but not limited to, evolution, the origins of life, global warming, and human cloning.' Drafted by the conservative Christian *Louisiana Family Forum* (LFF), the bill promises support for teachers who 'use supplemental textbooks and other instructional materials to help students understand, analyze, critique, and review scientific theories,' providing cover for teachers to promote Intelligent Design as science.

National science organizations are responding by boycotting Louisiana. The Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology, with more than 2300 members, has moved its 2011 convention from New Orleans to Salt Lake City. The boycott has been joined by the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (ASBMB). Losing these large conventions will add to Louisiana's financial crisis.

In Mississippi, Representatives Chism and Espy have introduced House Bill No. 25. Can you read it without breaking out in laughter?

The State Board of Education shall require every textbook that includes the teaching of evolution in its contents to include the following language on the inside front cover of the

(Continued on page 11)

(Continued from page 10)

textbook: "The word 'theory' has many meanings, including: systematically organized knowledge; abstract reasoning; a speculative idea or plan; or a systematic statement of principles. Scientific theories are based on both observations of the natural world and assumptions about the natural world. They are always subject to change in view of new and confirmed observations. This textbook discusses evolution, a controversial theory some scientists present as a scientific explanation for the origin of living things. No one was present when life first appeared on earth. Therefore, any statement about life's origins should be considered a theory.

Evolution refers to the unproven belief that random, undirected forces produced living things. There are many topics

with unanswered questions about the origin of life which are not mentioned in your textbook, including: the sudden appearance of 24 the major groups of animals in the fossil record (known as the Cambrian Explosion); the lack of new major groups of other living things appearing in the fossil record; the lack of transitional forms of major groups of plants and animals in the fossil record; and the complete and complex set of instructions for building a living body possessed by all living things. Study hard and keep an open mind."

Nearly identical language is written into a bill just introduced in the Texas House of Representatives. The bill would additionally restore language requiring the teaching of the 'strengths and weaknesses' of scientific theories. That language had been previously removed at the insistence of Texas' leading scientific societies

and over 1400 scientists in Texas, because its intent was to baldly introduce Intelligent Design into science classrooms as an alternative to evolution. The bill additionally stipulates that 'no student in any public school or institution shall be penalized in any way because he or she subscribes to a particular position on scientific theories or hypotheses.' In other words, any explanation is just as good as any other.

Another new bill in the Texas legislature would exempt private, nonprofit educational institutions that do not accept state funding and state-administered federal funding from approval by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to award academic degrees. This is because the Board unanimously refused to permit the Creation Research Institute to offer an online master's degree in science education. If the bill passes, Texas will surely become a magnet for fraudulent organizations offering advanced degrees for sale.

A New Spin on an Old Favorite
 by Jacob Hamm

Pascal's Wager of course "states that we have everything to gain [an eternity in heaven] and nothing to lose by believing in a god. On the other hand, disbelief can lead to a loss of heaven [i.e. hell]."

This is only true if you assume that god is evil and will damn those who get it wrong.

If you assume god is good and will not damn those who get it wrong, then the wager favors being honest and courageous in your beliefs since a good god would presumably favor honesty and courage over being duplicitous and cowardly to gain favor or avoid punishment.

Freethought Cryptogram

Pcfjco zkj qoryolon yc korr yn

pg kophg cjhpr pg prr.

Bpc Qphdoh, Sjbronn

Answer on page 14.

Easter 411

by Vic Tanner

Easter: A Christian holiday with a pagan name dated with a Jewish calendar? There aren't many holidays in which the date needs to be calculated. Moreover, minor variations in the criteria for these calculations has resulted in different Christian groups, specifically the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, celebrating Easter on different dates. In 1928, the British Parliament made a suggestion to the Holy See to alter the dating method of Easter, not because of any great insight into theological issues, but merely to simplify the date to make the scheduling of secular affairs around Easter easier. The Holy See accepted the proposal.

The name of the holiday, "Easter", is taken from the Anglo-Saxon goddess, Astre, and the spring celebration that was held in her honor in ancient Germania. The actual worship of Astre appears to have faded away by the time a Christian presence entered Germany around the seventh century, but the name survived and was eventually used to describe the Christian holiday.

The celebration of Easter, otherwise known as Pascha, is tied to the



Vic Tanner

Jewish festival of Passover, or Pesach, by both the date and the symbolism. It may have begun as a Christian variation of the celebration. Passover is traditionally attributed to the tenth plague in the Exodus story of the Bible, but modern archeology, with its use of infrared scanning techniques, has been unable to recover any signs that a mass exodus as described in the Bible occurred, leaving historians to ponder the origins of the Exodus legend (the modern picture we have of ancient Israel seems to indicate that

Many cultures around the world have a festival to celebrate the coming of the Vernal Equinox.

the story may be an abstract memory of the Egyptian control of Canaan in the 13th century BCE). This strips away much of the mythical baggage from Passover, leaving it as a spring festival.

The fact is, many cultures around the world have a festival to celebrate the coming of the Vernal Equinox. The ability to use the heavens to calculate the seasons was a significant piece of knowledge to many ancient cultures and the Israelites were no

different. From Stonehenge to the Alberta Sun Temple, ancient cultures have left behind clues as to their fascination with the night sky. In the Ach Valley in Germany a piece of stone with an ancient star map depicting the constellation of Orion has been carbon dated to 32,500 years old, indicating that ancient man did indeed pay close attention to the heavens and made acute significance of astronomical events. On the reverse of the stone, a depiction of a hunter, with one leg shorter than the other as in the constellation, showed that they related to these celestial images by personifying them as legendary hero figures. And recently, the work of archaeologist Curtis Marean has pushed the date that man has been tracking the stars back even further, perhaps to 160,000 BCE.

Easter is a true mixed bag of beliefs, some ancient, some relatively new, borrowing from many cultures. It is still evolving today, and it is celebrated in both religious and secular ways. In Finland, children plant grass seeds to mark the beginning of the growing season, and candy and egg hunts are popular all over the world. I plan on marking the day by blogging about the celestial nature of the holiday. But, that's a Freethinker for you.

(Continued from page 8)

tains of finely twisted linen and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, with cherubim worked into them by a skilled craftsman. All the curtains are to be the same size—twenty-eight cubits long and four cubits wide. Join five of the curtains together, and do the same with the other five. Make loops of blue material along the edge of the end curtain in one set, and do the same with the

end curtain in the other set. Make fifty loops on one curtain and fifty loops on the end curtain of the other set, with the loops opposite each other. Then make fifty gold clasps and use them to fasten the curtains together so that the tabernacle is a unit.” (Ex 26:1-6)

Surely, this is a tent that would not be out of place on *MTV Cribs*. Eventually, God tired of the fashion game and decided to become an in-

visible deity with a hands-off policy. The Churches, unable to find guidance in their clothing choices, eventually went with an all black wardrobe for simplicity's sake. God briefly reentered the clothing design field to design undergarments for the Church of Latter Day Saints, but other than that, He has mostly kept to Himself.

Cable Report



Above: From left, Grant Steves, Bjorn Watland and James Zimmerman discuss two atheist themed books.

by Steve Petersen

At the March cable show taping James Zimmerman produced and hosted two programs. The first was an interview with Bjorn Watland on Minnesota Atheists' Meet-ups. This was an overview of meet-up activities listed on our meet-up site and easy-to-follow instructions on how to sign on to our meet-up. For the second program, Grant Steves joined the panel, and they reviewed and discussed two atheist-themed books. The first was *50 Reasons People Give for Believing in a God*, by Guy Harrison, and the second book was *Godless*, by Dan Barker from the Freedom from Religion Foundation. If you would like to help on the cable program or sponsor the program on your cable access station or have ideas for a future program please contact me at: spetersen175@comcast.org.

Cable Crew: Art Anderson, Brett Stemberge, 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.bect.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 & 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.

Financial Report

Building Fund: \$590

Robin Anderson	\$25
Kevin Hardisty	\$20
Guy Harper	\$50
Mike Haubrich	\$70
Vanita Mishra	\$100
Daniel Norte	\$36
Jeff Sella	\$25
Bjorn Watland	\$44
Anonymous	\$220

Radio Fund: \$165

Matthew Dittloff	\$25
J. S. Futcher	\$15
Anne Hanna	\$25
Steve Petersen	\$65
Jeff Sella	\$25
Anonymous	\$10

Visibility (General) Fund: \$55

Greg Anderson	\$40
Nicholas Brandt	\$15

The Sunny Skeptic**Crystal Dervetski**

Atheists Ask Atheists

In the course of writing publicly about atheism, I have

come across some questions, and many times opposition, regarding belonging to a formal organization for free-thinkers. As with most questions, they are repeated multiple times by a variety of people, and oddly enough, many times they come not from religious persons but from fellow atheists. I plan on sharing a few great statements and questions I have received over the last year, and my answers to them.

"Organizing is just like a religion, and I'm against that."

Organizing is not like a religion solely because religions are organized. Most religions are, of course, what we would call 'organized', as in they do have a formal structure to carry out a variety of activities and the members of the group are usually united by a commonality or shared goal. But the act of organizing does not make a group 'like a religion'. If this were true, then your grandma's knitting circle would be a religion, as would your friend's straight-edge punk band. We know that organizing is a basic human necessity, and that the simple act of organization isn't what is harmful to society.

The benefits that a formal organization provides are a sense of community, a sharing of information and knowledge, the ability to make a significant, positive impact on society through charitable works, and the political impact that an organized group wields to defend their own

rights and the rights of others. These benefits are all found within Minnesota Atheists, and are the best reasons to join and support this organization.

"I don't believe in publicly sharing my life-philosophy/beliefs/political stance/etc with others."

Joining a formal atheist or free-thinker organization doesn't necessarily mean that you will be 'wearing your beliefs on your sleeve'. People who decide to join also decide how "out" they want to be in the atheist community and whether they would like to participate or not. Members also decide how much or how little they would like to share about themselves. Although almost all of us at MNA are atheists, it seems at times that the similarities end there. That is part of what makes our group so interesting and unique: our wide variety of members and their range of experiences. Also, our Minnesota Atheists meet-up sites and the Atheist Weekly Email offer ways to keep up on activities while remaining anonymous.

"People shouldn't have to pay to join or keep a group going, that's like a church."

This is yet another fallacy based on the assumption that if a religion does it, it must be inherently bad or wrong, much like the first idea of organizing being something to avoid.

Minnesota Atheists is a dues-paying organization, which has a membership fee for those who wish to obtain membership privileges, such as voting rights or serving on the Board of Directors. The reason paying dues is not like a church or religion is because *any* organization

needs funds to continue to operate whether they are religious or secular. This is unavoidable, and we can't ignore the fact that just being a presence in the community will require at least some expenditure. Almost all of our meetings and social events are free and open to the public. You can come have fun with the group without ever spending a dime, just as you can read this newsletter for free if you choose to do so. There are no collection plates passed around at any of the meetings or events. That being said, it is important to remember that those who contribute financially help to spread the word and keep the group afloat. Dues-paying members and financial supporters are the foundation that keeps an organization strong and running smoothly.

If promoting positive atheism is an important cause to you, it makes sense to contribute to Minnesota Atheists in any way you can. Consider joining Minnesota Atheists to promote the work that we are continuing in the community.

If you are reading the paper copy of this newsletter, please see the back cover for more information about joining Minnesota Atheists. If you're on the web, see our web site at: www.mnatheists.org.

Comments? Questions? Email Crystal D. at astrocomfy@hotmail.com

Cryptogram answer

Anyone who believes in hell is at heart not moral at all.

Dan Barker, *Godless*

Minnesota Atheists

www.mnatheists.org

P.O. Box 6261, Minneapolis MN 55406

JOIN OR RENEW MEMBERSHIP

- \$35 – Individual Membership
- \$45 – Household Membership
- \$75 – Sustaining Fund Membership
- \$20 – Student (newsletter by email, send copy of fee statement or high school ID)
- \$600 – Life Membership
- \$25 -- Newsletter Only

DONATE TO SPECIAL FUNDS

- \$ _____ General Expense / Outreach Fund
- \$ _____ Building Fund
- \$ _____ Radio Fund
- \$ _____ Monthly Donation

All memberships include the newsletter.

To pay by credit card or PayPal, please go to our website.

Payment by: Check (enclosed) for \$ _____ payable to **Minnesota Atheists**.

Name: _____ Phone (____) _____

Address: _____

>>Minnesota Atheists has IRS 501(c)(3) status. All contributions are tax-deductible. <<

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

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

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

3rd 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.

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

1st and 3rd 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.

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

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

4th 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.

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

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

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

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

Minnesota Atheists
P.O. Box 6261
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55406-0261

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

DATED MATERIAL—DO NOT DELAY



NONPROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U.S. Postage
PAID
Minneapolis MN
Permit No. 1613

**If nothing we do matters,
then all that matters is what we do...
If there is no bigger meaning, then the smallest
act of kindness is the greatest thing in the world.**

— The vampire Angel in the TV series *Angel*

**“Atheists Talk” on Air America Minnesota radio!
Sundays, 9-10 a.m. AM 950 radio or stream live at
AirAmericaMinnesota.com/listen**