

# The Minnesota Atheist

Minnesota Atheists    Established 1991    Positive Atheism in Action™

Volume 19 Number 8

September 2009

## A Busy Summer for Atheists...

Minnesota Atheists members Norman and Katherine Barrett Wiik welcomed their first child, Liam Oran, into the world in late July. The new family is doing well, and Liam is looking forward to meeting new friends at future Minnesota Atheist events.



On August 22, 2009, Minnesota Atheists members August Berkshire and Matthew Richardson joined (photo, from left) Amy Burns and Hank Zumach, and others, of the La Crosse Area Free-thought Society at a shared booth at the La Crosse Gay Pride Festival. Photo by Matthew Richardson.

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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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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



## Secular Student Alliance Conference

On Friday, August 7, 300 atheists descended onto the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky. The Creation Museum, an Answers in Genesis project, is designed as a more traditional science museum than some carnival ride (as other "creation museums" have been). It presents evidence to support their pre-drawn conclusion that all that has ever happened in the past is contained in the Christian Bible. Since the Christian Bible contains lineages and ages of people, they conclude that that scientists who have used material evidence to come to the conclusion that the Earth is about 4.5 billion years old must be mistaken about atheism.

Why were 300 atheists going to such a place? "To mock them," responds PZ Myers, evolutionary biology professor at the University of Minnesota, Morris. The goal was to fully understand what arguments were being made to support Creationism and fully expose such arguments as circular or based on poor reasoning. Dr. Myers made light of the event by riding a fiberglass dinosaur which featured a saddle. What started off as a fun event would shortly turn into a serious conference of about 100 attendees at Ohio State University in Columbus.

While the tone of the Creation Museum trip was full of mockery, the conference itself featured a

strong theme of cooperation. For example, Jesse Galef, Communications Associate for the Secular Coalition for America, gave an inspiring presentation about how to reach out to your elected officials. Should atheists look for non atheist allies when lobbying? "It can certainly help get attention - showing that it's not just atheists who support the side," Galef responds. Sean Faircloth, Executive Director of the SCA, later spoke about the importance of reaching out to



non-atheists and getting them behind our causes. "We need to get the soccer moms and Joe Six-Packs of the world to care about our issues, Faircloth said." One way to do that is to show clear harm. In many states and counties, religious organizations are exempt from health and safety regulations. This has resulted in the needless deaths of children

from dangerous day care facilities and staff. It is absurd to replace government audit and inspection with religious authority.

The next day, Ashley Paramore, the Events Coordinator for Students for Freethought at Ohio State and an SSA board member, spoke about the importance of service projects to an atheist student group. Inspired by Ashley Carter from University of Illinois Atheists, Agnostics and Freethinkers, she organized a service project trip to New Orleans to repair damage done after Hurricane Katrina. What is unique about Ms. Paramore's project is that at the start she coordinated with the Thomas Society, a campus Christian group. There were several benefits to working with another organization: First, the Thomas Society had organized service projects in the past, were familiar with transportation, group insurance, feeding people, etc. Second, she was able to spend more time getting volunteers since she wasn't planning everything. Lastly, one of the goals of a service project is to break down the stereotype that atheists don't volunteer. By working with a religious group, Paramore's group not only made that case, but they get a lot of time to dialog with people to break down stereotypes on both sides.

*(Continued on page 10)*

# MNA Board Adopts Code of Ethics

**by Grant Steves**

The MNA Board has adopted a Code of Ethics that defines fairness where conflicts arise – independence, conflicts of intent, and the need to separate personal needs from those of MNA as an organization.

This code describes principles and values to help Board members better understand and meet expectations and requirements of MNA.

This decision was made because of the growth of MNA, and a greater need to define professional responsibility as new Board members are elected. It will also assure the membership that we are following ethical standards in our judgment.

## **Minnesota Atheists Code of Ethics**

1. The Board members must adhere to the Constitution and their Constitutional responsibilities.
2. The Board members shall not engage in activities that harm MNA.
3. The Board members shall not engage in activities that conflict with their fiduciary, ethical, and legal obligations to MNA members.
4. The Board members shall effectively disclose all potential and actual conflicts of interest; such disclosure does not preclude or imply ethical impropriety.
5. The Board members shall take care to ensure that contributions are used in accordance

with donors' intentions.

6. The Board members shall take care to ensure proper stewardship of all revenue sources, including timely reports on the use and management of such funds.

7. Minnesota Atheists will not share, in the absence of a proper legal demand, information it collects about its members or any other interested persons, including but not limited to names, addresses, telephone numbers, e-mail addresses and financial data, with anyone without prior consent of the person or persons whose information would be disclosed. Access to personal information will be restricted to those who need it in order to maintain membership rolls and tax information and to distribute publications, announcements, and calls for donations produced by and directly related to Minnesota Atheists. No member of Minnesota Atheists is to use, to solicit goods, services or charitable donations from any member, whether personally or on behalf of any other organization, any information collected by Minnesota Atheists. Members may, however, engage in such transactions with other members with whom they have a personal relationship, but not with information given to that member by Minnesota Atheists.

“The Bible says, ‘Slaves, be obedient to your master,’ etc. Well, we don't hear black people saying, ‘Okay, we got to stick with that.’ Yet when it comes to the issue of homosexuality, then people are running to the Bible.”

*-Rev. Dennis Wiley, co-pastor of the 500-member, predominantly black Covenant Baptist Church, July 1, 2009, on National Public Radio*

# Disbelief 101

by James Zimmerman

You're not going to learn anything new reading this book. But that's not an indictment of the book, no, it's a comment on your age. *Disbelief* is intelligently designed to appeal to the tween/early-teen crowd, and it does a superb job. Indeed, it is the best book on the topic of disbelief available for young people.

The author begins right away (well, after an introduction by Tom Flynn) by assuring young people who may be nervous reading such a book that he understands their fears. S. C. Hitchcock (writing under a pseudonym for the safety of his family) tells such readers that, if they take nothing else from the book, and if they are unable or unwilling to read anything else, to remember that there is no God. "Religion," he says, surely striking a nerve with everyone in his intended audience, "survives and is a huge force in the world because it relies on the indoctrination of children." It was this observation, Hitchcock noted in an interview, that drove him to write the book.

The book is divided into several brief chapters that build on each other, explaining the absurdity of believing in god(s). The book endeavors to shine light on the flaws of all religions, dwelling primarily on the three 'great' monotheisms.

*Disbelief* beautifully addresses concerns and fears a young per-

son may have regarding casting aside faith. It even advises youths on how to deal with their rational thinking, should they happen to live in a household where dissenting opinions are forbidden. For example, Hitchcock spends three pages calming his readers & telling them it's okay to set such ideas aside until they are free of well-intentioned care-givers who would likely not understand.

Additionally, the book devotes a chapter to debunking a few of the tired objections to evolution, such as the arguments that things are too complex to have evolved, that life violates thermodynamics, and the particularly silly argument that it's "just a belief".

*Disbelief 101: A Young Person's Guide to Atheism*, S.C. Hitchcock, 130 pages, See Sharp Press, 2009

Sprinkled throughout are references to things young people will understand. *Disbelief* includes dialogues between fictitious people to help illuminate more difficult ideas. It is also replete with examples that pointedly, simply, and humorously demonstrate the absurdity of religion – and especially the damaging belief that one religion is superior to all others. And, should all of this still be

too much for a young person to grasp, Illustrator Leslie White's fifteen drawings interspersed in the book drive home each major point in an unforgettable (and often hilarious) manner.

Before ending with a helpful bibliography, Hitchcock makes the argument that, while physical abuse is not tolerated in this country, mental abuse gets a free ride: punch your kid in the face, he says, and the cops will come to your door. Tell them

that god will burn them forever in hell if they don't accept Jesus into their heart, and everyone applauds your faith. Comparing religions to the marketing strategy of the fast-food industry, Hitchcock reiterates his original argument that if religions did not indoctrinate children, religion would cease to exist. That was a thought that even I – someone who left the teenage years behind quite a while ago – found stunning and insightful.

Do yourself a favor: buy a copy of this book. If you're too old to benefit from its arguments, give it as a gift to the young person in your life.

Visit [www.disbelief101.com](http://www.disbelief101.com) for more information, and to order the book.

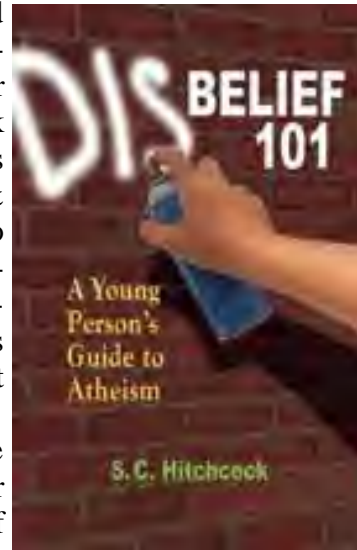


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# Why Do Americans Fail To Understand Science?



by Ryan Sutter

On July 10, Minnesota Public Radio Midmorning discussed the topic “New polls indicate a dim view of U.S. scientific achievement.” The polls in question were from the Pew Center and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The short of it is, the vast majority of scientists (97%) accept that life evolved over time from a shared common ancestor but only 61% of the general public believes the same. On the topic of global warming, the divide is even greater. 84% of scientists are convinced that global warming is real and caused by human activity but only 49% of the public agrees.

Nothing new here, really. Americans love them some science when it can bring them high-definition *Dancing With the Stars* or omega-3 enhanced Twinkies or Internet nudity, but if scientists say something inconvenient or out of line with the dogma learned at daddy’s knee, well, then scientists clearly don’t know what they’re talking

about, or it’s just opinion and nobody really knows, right?

Sigh... So, why bother writing about this at all? I mean, whoop-de-doo, people would rather cling to cherished beliefs than learn. Big deal. That’s not really the part I want to write about. It’s more the proposed solution they were discussing on the show. The solution they were pitching, I kid you not, was that scientists maybe need to learn to communicate better.

Seriously? The problem is that scientists are lousy communicators? Really?

Allow me to illustrate why this is a wee bit misguided:

Let’s say that you are a parent and your five year old asks why the sky is blue. You explain how light gets bent when it comes through the air and makes it look blue. They have a hard time grasping the concept of light being bent and changing color, but you tell them it’s like a rainbow, and they believe you. You’ve probably communicated the basic concept well enough and in the absence of anybody else undoing your effort, your child will grow up believing this; refining it as they age. Now, let’s throw in a monkey wrench. You tell your child this but one of their friends tells them that science is wrong - that the sky is blue because it’s God’s favorite color or because there are oceans above the clouds that are blue and that’s also where rain comes from. Your child now maybe is-

n’t so sure which answer is correct. The problem isn’t that you communicated poorly, it’s that somebody else gave your child false information and muddied the picture.

Scientists regularly write excellent, readable, understandable books, and shows like *Nature* and *Nova* constantly inform and educate. There are whole channels devoted to elucidating even the most mind-boggling of scientific discoveries. But, there is also a concerted effort to undermine all of this. Organizations like Answers in Genesis and The Discovery Institute work around the clock to spread disinformation, to distort and counter actual science with propaganda, logical fallacies, and flat out lies, almost exclusively in the name of Christianity. They produce heavy handed propaganda like Expelled to spread fear, uncertainty, and doubt, equating science with fascism, Nazism, immorality and (gasp!) atheism with nary a true fact at their command. They don’t need facts; they just need rationalizations and emotions because they know this is enough for most people.

When marketing doubt and uncertainty, it is only necessary that one comes up with something that sounds plausible because that will satisfy most of the people who ever consider the topic. The entire creationist/ID

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movement is based on developing arguments that appear sound and then presenting them in the most carefully chosen language possible so that people can continue to doubt science. (If you don't like the term propaganda, how about marketing?) They market the idea that there is controversy in the scientific community, that there is a conspiracy among atheist intellectuals to attack faith, and they provide



seemingly valid points of contention. What they don't do is correct their claims when those claims are debunked by actual science. They just keep repeating them, knowing full well that they can accomplish their goals by stubborn repetition, evidence be damned. If somebody already believes that they know why evolution is a crock, why would they bother to actually read a book about it or listen to reasons why 97% of scientists accept it as a fact? For the majority, the answer is clear. They won't. They have better things to do with their time.

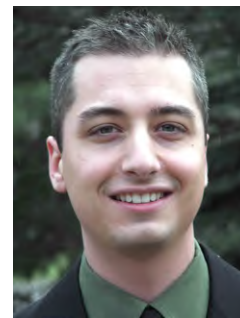
Unfortunately for the future of science education in this country, propaganda is more effective than evidence, no matter how

well presented the evidence may be. A sound bite is more persuasive than a tome like Dawkins' *The Ancestor's Tale* or Sean Carroll's *Endless Forms Most Beautiful*. There is no propaganda machine working against computer science, or rocket science, only against the biological and (recently) climate sciences. It is no wonder that these are the areas where people doubt. The correlation is plain.

I offer mature thinkers this advice: Consider the source of what you read and if you think there is a controversy, please, for goodness' sake, examine both sides from sources allied with each. If you read book A, then be sure to read another book that critically examines book A, or better yet, a book from somebody who represents the other side of the argument. You will find that the propagandists leave out essential information, misrepresent things, and raise arguments that have been answered again and again. The truth is out there, if only people were willing to look at it. Until American's start doing that, no amount of improvement in scientists' communications skills will change anything.



## Bless You



by Keith Lodermeier

An odd chant for losing bits  
of soul, ejected from the nose.  
Who is the *bless you's* recipient?

The invisible you-motes that  
float,  
cast by the diminished "I"?  
Or is it for the new whole?

Is the tune a verbal butterfly  
net for corralling the spittle chi-  
meras  
which then are pinned to a cork  
display?

*A collection of exquisite animus,  
the immaterial exhibit of man,  
the palpable celestial mucus.*

Perhaps it's the desperate soul's  
plan  
to take the piggybacked leap  
to nothing, or for the virulent  
dance:

the squints, shudders, and re-  
leases.  
Part of the ghost has been given  
freely  
up to the air in vital sneezes.

Cannibals, sick eater of souls are  
we  
who should say: "Bless me."

## *The Atheist Association of Uganda*

*By Kirumira Mpagi Michael  
Former missionary, now President of Atheist Association of Uganda*

Greetings from the Atheist Association of Uganda! It's a pleasure to have a chance to write to fellow Atheists. I am writing to you after a member of MNA took an interest in our work here in Uganda and the East African region which consists of countries Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi. This extraordinary man, whom we call a brother, now, is Matthew Richardson.

I am writing from the Uganda, a country whose president (President Museveni), his wife, and daughters, are pastors and run a church alongside the State issues. Their church, called The Covenant Nations Church, is led by Museveni's daughter, Patience Rwaboogo Museveni. Her church service airs on LTV here in Kampala.

We have heard President Museveni himself telling Ugandans to trust and respect God by not challenging him on many issues failing our country. His wife Janet Museveni is the patron of all Ugandan Pentecostal churches and when she was running for Member of Parliament for Ruhama county, she declared that she was sent by God to run for political office.

Now she is a minister in charge of Kalamoja, a north-

eastern region of Uganda, where famine and hunger are killing citizens. Since she came to Parliament, she moved two bills that made 8th October National Prayer Day.

In addition to Uganda's failing state institutions, 80% of all information broadcasted, both on air and in print, is religiously connected. We have more than 30 radio stations purposely built to promote religion. All powers



**Kirumira Mpagi Michael**

are in the hands of the President; nothing can be done without his endorsement. Even the secular media houses made 75% of their broadcasting religious. Then we have the unfriendly bullying religionists: women and men, young and old, Muslims and Christians, stand on every street of Kampala shouting to passers-by to turn to their gods and pray for a decaying city which they branded the "City of God." Many people contribute money

to them. Standing on the corner preaching is like a job. Churches and mosques turn their outside loud-speakers to maximum decibels from dusk to dawn, competing with one another.

AAU is a national educational charity supporting and representing people who seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. Our vision is of a world without religious privilege or discrimination. We promote Atheism, Humanism, and campaign for an open society, a secular state, and work with others of different beliefs for the common good.

We make sense of the world using reason, experience and shared human values. We take responsibility for our actions and base our ethics on the goals of human welfare, happiness and fulfillment. We seek to make the best of the one life we have by creating meaning and purpose for ourselves, individually and together.

We stand for 1) teaching of secular values in education, 2) phasing out government funding for religious schools, 3) removing religious references from statutory oaths and pledges, 4) abolishing parliamentary prayers, 5) ending state support for religious institutions and religious personnel, and 6) the removal of tax advantages for religious institutions.

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We stand against religious indoctrination of minors, the wearing of religious attire in schools, Government support or endorsement of any religion or favoritism of any belief whatsoever and the religious dominance of the National Broadcasting cooperation.

Having mentioned all of that, I take pleasure in announcing that AAU is paving the way to take a private bill to the parliament of Uganda calling

for greater changes of the constitution to embrace suitable laws

determining the separation of state from religion.

rica makes my heart ache and inflames the stomach ulcer that I get from anger and feelings of impotence that I got after failing to achieve change throughout the great journey of activism in which I engaged myself for the past 10 years

However, I'm not discouraged. I have promised my heart to continue until change comes to Africa. My desire is to stop the selfish horrors of humanity around the world.

To contact or donate:  
Atheist Association of Uganda  
P.O.Box 72244,  
Clock tower station  
Kampala Uganda



East Africa.

[www.aauganda.net](http://www.aauganda.net)

Writing of these issues is an easy task, but the situation in Af-

### Freethought Cryptogram

Vgl ztav vgtv vgljl my t eloljtn xlnmlz mo t

zdvdl nmzl my ou lrmfloal uz mvy vjdvlg.

-Antjloal Ftjjub

(For answer, see page 16)

## Ireland's Blasphemy: A Relic of the Dark Ages



by **Victor Tanner**

On July 9, the Republic of Ireland passed a law against material that is "abusive or insulting in relation to matters held sacred by any religion". Why would the government of an enlightened secular country choose to enact a blasphemy law at this point in history? Though many countries, some of which may surprise you, still have blasphemy laws on the books, these laws are often vague to the point of meaninglessness and are seldom enforced. For instance, the Greek Penal Code defines a blasphemer as "one who publicly and maliciously and by any means blasphemes God" yet makes no attempt to clarify who "God" is or what these malicious acts may consist of. Whether these laws were intended to placate religious individuals or to protect religious institutions, they accomplish neither.

By their very nature, laws

against blasphemy only make sense in a mono-theocratic system. In today's world, a myriad of faiths can be found in any given society. And, by their very nature, the basic tenets of any world religion may denigrate all other religions. Islamic faiths, for instance, while still holding Jesus in high regard, do deny the resurrection, a blasphemy to any Christian. The Catholic Church has been having problems with the Jewish faith ever since the reforms of the Vatican II. In what appeared to be a good natured attempt to change their doctrines to no longer target Jews for conversion, they inadvertently caused major stirs within their own congregation by implying that the acceptance of Jesus as was not necessary for salvation. Upholding blasphemy laws for all of a nation's citizens would be simply impossible. We must remember that these laws originated in the days of state sponsored religion in which an individual's rejection of the church would also be taken as their defiance of the government.

Would it even be possible for blasphemy laws to be tried fairly in a court of law? Could a judge, no matter how skilled in interpretation of the law, be relied upon to be as knowledgeable in their interpretation of holy writ? If blasphemy laws had been upheld in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany, we would never have seen the ingenuity of the Dutch Radical scholars, whose quest for the historical Jesus is common place today. As late as 1970, John Marco Allegro had to publish his notorious book *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* outside his native England for fear of prosecution of blasphemy.

Blasphemy laws do not and cannot succeed in their objective of keeping the religious from feeling slighted. They are an obstacle to free speech and, in essence, nothing more than a relic of medieval totalitarian thinking that only enforces the bigotry that they try to prevent. No other type of belief system has laws enacted merely to protect them from criticism.

### President's Column (continued)

(Continued from page 3)

PZ Myers presented his keynote address, "Counting Coup," on Saturday night. While many may recognize him for his unapologetic bashing of the religious (this is the focus of his talk, his skill is to get people to pay attention by whacking them

with colorful words), even he sees himself as part of a larger movement. He knowingly ignores diplomacy, choosing instead to cause reactions that will cause some to think differently than they had. After the talk, an audience member asked, "When is diplomacy okay?" "Diplomacy is always okay," Dr. Myers

responded. He thanked the efforts of people like Sean Faircloth who are able to speak more kindly to others.

I would recommend supporting the efforts of the Secular Student Alliance and our local alliance member, the Campus Atheists, Skeptics and Humanists at the University of Minnesota. You can visit their sites at [www.secularstudents.org](http://www.secularstudents.org) and [www.cashumn.org](http://www.cashumn.org).

## Obama Makes Health Care a Religious Issue



by **George Kane**

With his health insurance reform initiative bogging down in the face

of declining public support, President Obama is calling on religious leaders to turn it into a moral crusade. On one day in August he held two teleconferences to this end. In the morning he asked about 1,000 rabbis to preach his political agenda in their sermons on Rosh Hashanah, while that afternoon he spoke to a mostly Christian audience of about 140,000 religious leaders in a conference call and webcast.

Obama told the rabbis that “we

are God’s partners in matters of life and death.” Rabbis who attended said they believed he was “using religious organizations to promote policy.” He even read one of the central prayers for Rosh Hashanah, implying scriptural support for insurance reform.

Addressing the larger group, President Obama adopted the rhetoric of the Christian tradition, framing insurance reform as a moral rather than a political question, while emphasizing the 47 million Americans who lack insurance. He described opponents of his program in Biblical terms: “There are some folks that are, frankly, bearing false witness.” President Obama also spoke of the “core ethical and moral obligation...that we look out for one another,” adding that “in the

wealthiest nation on earth, we are neglecting to live up to that call.” The term ‘call’ is commonly used by Christians to refer to a ‘call from God,’ a scriptural concept.

While making health care available and affordable to all Americans is quite properly framed as an ethical concern, that concern is simply for the welfare of the populace. This is a purely secular issue that is not made more important by cloaking it in religious language. By courting religious leaders to advance his political goals in their sermons, President Obama shows more concern for his religious constituency than for the principle of separation of church and state.

## Highway Clean-up

Our long tradition of helping beautify our highways and getting some atheist recognition (in the form of a road sign informing motorists that this stretch of highway is maintained by Minnesota Atheists) continues.

On Sunday, September 27, Minnesota Atheists will be performing its Adopt-A-Highway Cleanup. The work goes from 1:00-3:30 on Highway 10 in Rice. We'll meet at The Old Creamery Cafe, 405 Main St., Rice, 56367 (west of the stoplight on Hwy. 10). Phone: 320-393-4100. Arrive at noon for lunch beforehand and/or stay for dinner afterwards. Gloves and sturdy footwear are recommended.

Transportation is available from the Twin Cities. Contact: Deb Doucette (Randall) 320-749-2025, August Berkshire (Minneapolis) 612-338-4548, Steve Petersen (Shoreview) spetersen175@gmail.com, or Jack Caravela at [achair.mnatheists.org](http://achair.mnatheists.org) for more details. Also, call if it looks like it will rain to see if the event has been postponed.

Hope to see you there!

## Edward Kennedy: Feb 22, 1932—Aug 25, 2009

*Excerpts from a speech Sen. Kennedy delivered at Jerry Falwell's Liberty Baptist College in Lynchburg, Virginia on October 3, 1983:*

The separation of church and state can sometimes be frustrating for women and men of deep religious faith. They may be tempted to misuse government in order to impose a value which they cannot persuade others to accept. But once we succumb to that temptation, we step onto a slippery slope where everyone's freedom is at risk. Those who favor censorship should recall that one of the first books ever burned was the first English translation of the Bible. As President Eisenhower warned in 1953, "Don't join the book-burners...the right to say ideas, the right to record them, and the right to have them accessible to others is unquestioned—or this isn't America." And if that right is denied, at some future day the torch can be turned against any other book or any other belief.

Let us never forget, today's Moral Majority could become tomorrow's persecuted minority.

The danger is as great now as when the Founders of the nation first saw it. In 1789, their fear was of factional strife among dozens of denominations. Today there are hundreds—and perhaps thousands of faiths—and millions of Americans who are outside any fold. Pluralism obviously does not and cannot mean that all of them are right; but it does mean that there are areas where government cannot and should not decide what is wrong to believe, to think, to read and to do. As Professor Laurence Tribe, one of the nation's leading constitutional scholars, has written, "Law in a nontheocratic state cannot measure religious truth"—nor can the state impose it.

The real transgression occurs when religion wants government to tell citizens how to live uniquely personal parts of their lives. The failure of Prohibition proves the futility of such an at-

tempt when a majority or even a substantial minority happens to disagree. Some questions may be inherently individual one or people may be sharply divided about whether they are. In such cases—cases like Prohibition and abortion—the proper role of religion is to appeal to the conscience of the individual, not the coercive power of the state.  
[...]

...John Kennedy said: "The family of man is not limited to a single race or religion, to a single city or country...The family of man is nearly 3 billion strong. Most of its members are not white—and most of them are not Christian." And as President Kennedy reflected on that reality, he restated an ideal for which he had lived his life—that "The members of this family should be at peace with one another."

That ideal shines across all the generations of our history and

*(Continued on page 14)*

### Newbie Night—September 15th

we are proud to announce Newbie Night IX.

Newbie Nights are specifically designed for those who've never attended an MNA Meetup before or haven't had much opportunity to interact with other MNA Meetup members. It can be intimidating to be the only person in the room who doesn't know anybody else, so here's an event where *everyone* has come to meet like-minded people. Three small group discussions with conversation topics provided will give you a chance to meet lots of new, like-minded people. We've reserved the meeting room at Java Train until 9:00 p.m. Street parking is available, but you may have to walk a block.

Java Train doesn't charge us to reserve the space (since we are nonprofit), but we should reward their kindness by purchasing a beverage, snack, or meal. They have a full menu: soups, salads, sandwiches, and desserts.

Since Newbie Nights are in high demand, we're not allowing "maybe" RSVPs. We've reserved for 23, so if you are interested and will go, please RSVP at [www.meetup.com/minnesota-atheists](http://www.meetup.com/minnesota-atheists). Keep your RSVP updated if your plans change, so another Newbie can take your place!

For those who have just joined the Minnesota Atheists Meetup, and for those who haven't yet had a chance to meet their fellow nonbelievers,

## News and Notes:

# Sotomayor's Record on Separation of Church and State is Cause for Concern

by George Kane



Watching the Senate confirmation hearings for Supreme Court nominee

Sonia Sotomayor, I was vexed by the posturing of senators on the committee over so-called “judicial philosophy.” It is transparently obvious that their true concern is for outcomes, for how the Justice will rule on specific issues, rather than abstract generalizations on the ‘original intent’ of the authors of the Constitution, or deference to legislatures. The actual concern of the senators is the narrow ideological split on the Supreme Court that in recent years has produced so many 5-4 decisions on the most partisan issues.

Opposition to Sotomayor comes of course from Republicans, who would oppose anyone nominated by the Democratic president, Barack Obama. Their salient objection at the beginning of the hearings was that she remarked in speeches that a Latina judge could make “better” rulings in some cases than white males. Her opponents accused her of admitting that ethnic bias would

color her decisions, but a cursory glance at the Supreme Court shows that judicial objectivity is a flimsy pretense. Four Justices -- Roberts, Scalia, Thomas and Alito -- are consistently the most conservative, and the most hostile to the separation of church and state. They are most frequently joined by right-leaning swing Justice Anthony Kennedy. These five justices are all Roman Catholics, creating a strong presumption that their religion biases their decisions on Establishment Clause cases. While the Justices may all believe that they are committed to the law, humans are always influenced by their life experiences. In order to promote fairness in the court, it is important to develop diversity among the Justices, which Sonia Sotomayor will do only in part. She will be only the third woman and the first Hispanic justice, but she will be the sixth Roman Catholic on the nine-member court.

Minnesota Atheists has an expressive educational mission to promote the separation of church and state. While we cannot support or oppose any candidate for electoral office, we can advocate for issues, and for the appointment of judges and justices who support the separation of church and state.

Justice Sotomayor replaces David Souter, who has been the

Court's leading advocate of separation. Her rulings in the few Establishment Clause cases that have come before her make it doubtful that she will match Justice Souter's high standard.

In District Court she heard two cases of religious displays on government property. In *Flamer v. City of White Plains*, the city refused to display a menorah in a public park during Hanukkah, even though private displays, including Christmas trees, had previously decorated the park. After the city refused to issue a permit to display the menorah, the city council passed a resolution prohibiting religious and political symbols in the city's parks.

Judge Sotomayor's ruling showed little respect for the separation of church and state. She held that the park was a public forum protected under the First Amendment, and that the ban on religious and political displays was impermissible because it was based on the content of private expression. Most atheists would see the display as a government endorsement of religion, and it would probably have failed the Lemon Test. That is, the display of the Menorah would have no secular purpose, would have the primary effect of promoting relig-

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## News and Notes (continued)

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ion and would entangle the government with religious expression. Sotomayor ruled that the city could only ban the display if it could demonstrate a compelling state interest. Most disappointingly, she rejected the city's argument that the ban "was necessary to serve the compelling state interest of avoiding violations of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment," because the park was not close to the seat of government or any government buildings! At least she acknowledged that religious displays would have to be examined in total context to determine if they are permissible under the Establishment Clause, but "compelling state interest" is a difficult and subjective standard.

A few years later Sotomayor came to a similar decision in *Mehdi v. United States Postal Service*. In that case, two Muslims objected to displays of Christmas trees and Hanukkah menorahs in post offices, since they did not also include symbols to recognize the Muslim celebration of Ramadan. Plaintiffs asked that either the Muslim crescent and star be added to the display, or that the

Christmas trees and menorahs be removed. Judge Sotomayor dismissed the case, ruling that a policy that allowed Christmas trees and menorahs with other seasonal displays was constitutional. She noted also that the Muslim plaintiffs' complaint that they were offended by the holiday displays was an insufficient basis to confer standing. This standard would make it harder in the future to sue the government over Establishment Clause violations. Encouragingly, though, she at least recognized standing as taxpayers to challenge government expenditures.

In *Rosario v. Does*, Sotomayor sat on a panel of the Second Circuit Court of Appeals. The court ruled against a sixth grade substitute teacher, Mildred Rosario, who claimed that her firing violated her freedom of religion and freedom of speech. Parents complained that she told her students that "Jesus was the son of God" and that "one must come through Jesus to get to God." The court dismissed Rosario's appeal, noting that the School Board's "strong, perhaps compelling interest in avoiding Establishment Clause violations" justified its decision to terminate her. So-

tomayor joined in the ruling, which was nearly completely opposite to her earlier ruling in *Flamer*. Why does the fear of violating the Establishment Clause justify firing a school teacher, but not justify refusing religious displays in public parks?

Americans United for Separation of Church and State called for questioning Sotomayor on her church-state philosophy, but I did not see that at all. Her confirmation was certain from the outset, and Supreme Court nominees have learned to hold their cards close to their chests during Senate hearings. I am afraid that only time will tell if she is another Souter or if she will join with her fellow Catholics on church/state separation.

Blasphemy laws do not and cannot succeed in their objective of keeping the religious from feeling slighted. They are an obstacle to free speech and, in essence, nothing more than a relic of medieval totalitarian thinking that only enforces the bigotry that they try to prevent. No other type of belief system has laws enacted merely to protect them from criticism.

## Edward Kennedy (continued)

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all the ages of our faith, carrying with it the most ancient dream. For as the Apostle Paul wrote

long ago in Romans: "If it be possible, as much as it lieth in you, live peaceably with all men."

I believe it is possible; the choice lies within us: as fellow

citizens, let us live peaceably with each other, as fellow human beings, let us strive to live peaceably with men and women everywhere. Let that be our purpose and our prayer—yours and mine—for ourselves, for our country, and for all the world.

## Concert Review:

## Green Day



by Eric Jayne

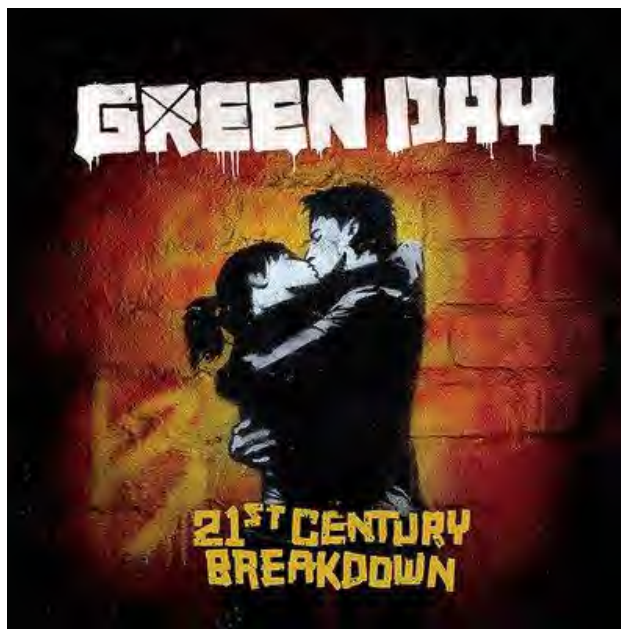
I've been a Green Day fan for over 15 years but I had never seen them perform live. Knowing this, my lovely wife suggested that I go see them when she noticed they were playing at the Target Center later that evening. She offered to stay at home with the kids while I rocked out; it was an offer I couldn't refuse. Luckily I was able to get a single third row seat relatively cheap on the internet.

Soon after taking my spot in the Target Center, front man Billie Joe Armstrong, Mike Dirnt (bassist) and Tre Cool (drummer) appeared on stage to serve up a night of unadulterated entertainment complete with explosive pyrotechnics and an enormous projection screen.

The band kicked off the show with the first three songs from their latest rock opera album, *21<sup>st</sup> Century Breakdown*. In the middle of the third of these songs, *Know Your Enemy*, Billie Joe referenced last year's Republican National Convention in St. Paul and sardonically cheered the result

of the subsequent election and fate of the GOP.

This wasn't Billie Joe's only mention of local places or events. He made the obligatory host city shout-out about 50 times, celebrated the Minnesota Twins' victory over the White Sox from the previous night, remarked that the keyboardist's mother is from Edina, mentioned a local fan's effort to organize a Green Day performance in Mankato and reminisced about early memories in Dinkytown. Billie Joe also treated the crowd to the rarely performed ballad he wrote for his Minnesota born and raised wife, Adrienne (Nesser) Armstrong. But the



crème de la crème of these Minnesota references was the unexpected and intensified cover of Prince's *Let's Go Crazy*, which the band whipped out in the middle of the show. It's available for viewing on YouTube as of this writing.

During *East Jesus Nowhere*, which is one of my favorite songs off the new album, Billie Joe instructed the audience to raise their "hands to testify" and wave them rhythmically as a mixture of hell-fire flames and evangelical imagery flashed on the projection screen behind the band. Billie Joe then coerced a young fan up on stage and used him as a willing participant in a faux Pentecostal faith-healing routine. He proceeded to put his hand on the kid's forehead and knocked him over, à la the power of Christ. This was immediately followed by pyrotechnics, pounding drums, and convulsing lights. If he were still alive, Frank Zappa would have surely appreciated Green Day's acerbic blend of music with satirical pious derision.

There were some other fortunate concert-goers who were generously invited up on stage by Billie Joe to briefly live out their rock & roll fantasies. Three sang one verse each of *Longview*, followed by stage dives, and one talented young woman played Billie Joe's guitar during *Jesus of Suburbia*.

It was a three-hour long quintessential night of godless rock & roll which was without a doubt the most entertaining concert I have ever attended. Next time Green Day rolls into town, which hopefully will be sooner rather than later, I'll make to sure I get a babysitter so my wife can join me.

## Book Review:

***What's So Wrong With Being Absolutely Right?***

by Grant Steves

The dogmatic or the enigmatic?

Dogmatism, some would say, is the assertion of an opinion without proof or an attitude of arrogance with proof, but without reference to evidence. The dogmatic position is not a religious position, but is reflective of an arrogant attitude toward one's own position.

Milton Rokeach, fifty years ago, published his book *The Open and Closed Mind*. This book presented the understanding of the dogmatic and authoritarian personality. Today, we have a new book, *What's So Wrong With Being Absolutely Right?*, by Judy Johnson. She reviews the research presented by Rokeach, and the research that has been done in the years since.

The importance of this book and the research it reflects helps us understand what happens when rigidity of thought drives the conclusion we might have. We often identify the dogmatic person as ignorant, poorly educated, having a low IQ, relig-

iously fundamentalist, or superstitious. All of these may be true, but we frequently fail to include the highly educated, the highest IQ, the non-religious, and the scientifically trained. It may be appropriate to include both groups when you examine the characteristics of the dogmatic person.

Johnson's list includes the following behavioral characteristics:

- 1) Preoccupation with power and status,
- 2) Glorification of the in-group and vilification of the out-group,
- 3) Dogmatic authoritarian aggression,
- 4) Dogmatic authoritarian submission,
- 5) Arrogant, dismissive

***What's So Wrong With Being Absolutely Right?***, Judy J. Johnson, Prometheus Books, 2009

communication style. These behavioral characteristics are frequently found in the controlling person. They cluster together to form a rigid personality that demands and does not respect. They create the other – the inferior. They put down those they disagree with and dismiss the ideas without a hearing.

Johnson also includes the following cognitive characteristics:

- 1) An intolerance of ambiguity,
- 2) Defensive, cognitive closure,
- 3) Rigid certainty,

- 4) Compartmentalization,
- 5) Lack of personal insight.

The cognitive characteristics describe too many of those who narrowly govern and protect their areas of expertise. In their need for certainty, they refuse to expose themselves to new ideas and cling to their yellowing ideas.

Even as such persons read these lists, Johnson claims, they will deny it describes them (no personal insight) and direct their anger towards the proposed belief systems. They need to realize that to help others escape dogmatism, they must admit to their own. Being dogmatic scars a person, but it need not destroy them.

These lists do not identify groups or people, but addresses characteristics of individual processes. It is always easy to label others as dogmatic. It is difficult for us to reflect on ourselves as dogmatic. Our opinions are based on fact and reasonable, but the other person is the one whose opinions lack evidence and is unreasonable.

Judy Johnson's book should help us reflect on our own thinking process. We need to ask how dogmatic we are. A conclusion we have about dogmatism is that the person who is dogmatic is the person most apt to be swept up in a conversion process. This is because of the psychological pillars that underlie dogmatism:

- 1) The Need to Know – this drives us to learn, but it may

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be hijacked by manipulators.

- 2) The Need to Defend against Anxiety – anxiety created in our environment disrupts our adventure into learning and causes fear and doubt.
- 3) The Need for Social Connection – as humans we need others for psychological growth and health. Our identity is created in this crucible of development.
- 4) The Need for Common Dignity – we have a need for honor or respect. Others have an influence on our development.

It appears that in all the characteristics of dogmatism, we see a person out of balance. The dogmatism may come from the culture in which you are raised or the psychological problems you may have. A person raised in a closed religion is most apt to be a dogmatic adult. However, a person raised in an intellectual environment might become dogmatic as they become convinced of their certainty.

The potential for dogmatism in any person is always a possibility. It might surprise many that a high IQ or being highly educated does not exempt one from being dogmatic. Too often educated people believe they are exempt from being dogmatic, and this may result in a failure to learn and a failure to have the adventure of discovery. As Thomas Kuhn wrote in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, paradigms change very slowly. The scientific and educated community is

frequently not the first to embrace a new theory. Evolution as a way to explain our beginning is still challenged by some and believed by the intellectual scientific community. Who is dogmatic? Who is caught in the web of certainty? Who is the one needing to change?



## Spotted in Minnesota

From the Department of Redundancy Department comes this find at a book store in St. Paul:



Christian *fiction*? Minnesota Atheists wonders...how do the employees know which Christian books do NOT belong in this section?

## I'm Perfect You're Doomed: Tales from a Jehovah's Witness Upbringing

Most of us know that Jehovah's Witnesses are notorious for going door-to-door hocking their religion. They're kind of like Girl Scouts except the former sells an intangible dubious product that exploits fear while the latter offers delicious chocolate-covered Tagalongs and Thin Mints that exploit your sweet tooth. When it comes to the Jehovah's Witnesses most of us either say "no thanks" or skip the nominal pleasantries and opt to simply close the door in the middle of their spiel.

If you've ever wanted to know more about the motivation of these door-to-door doctrine peddlers and the culture within the Jehovah's Witness community, Kyria Abrahams offers an unabashed memoir of her journey from devoted member to disfellowshipped apostate. Currently a stand-up comedian, Abrahams delivers plenty of wit and genuinely humorous anecdotes of her experiences. As the book progresses, however, it takes on a very serious and dark tone riddled with self-destructiveness.

The reader is first introduced to a young, eight-year-old Kyria Abrahams who performs a skit with another Jehovah's Witness in front of their congregation. Abrahams explains that since they were both female they were not allowed to speak directly to

**by Eric Jayne**

the congregation (as that would put them both in a position of authority; one of many Jehovah no's). According to Abrahams, performance skits are commonly employed by female members so that they are able to participate in discussions and idea exchanges in a non-authoritative manner.

As Abrahams leads the reader through her childhood years she

*I'm Perfect, You're Doomed: Tales from a Jehovah's Witness Upbringing, Kyria Abrahams, 352 pages, Touchstone, 2009*

explains that many worldly (which means virtually anything unrelated to the worship of Jehovah) inanimate objects are not only thought to be absent of Jehovah but often times possessed by demons. In fact it wasn't a loveless marriage or financial hardship that caused one of the many moments of familial conflict in the Abrahams' home. Instead, it was caused by supposedly demonically possessed dinnerware that had been purchased at a flea market. You'll have to read the book to learn about the fate of the innocent dinnerware.

Abrahams also explains that it wasn't just saucers and mugs that serve as demonic portals. In the minds of Jehovah's Witnesses, some Saturday morning cartoons

like the Smurfs might have your little tyke capable of singing Ozzy Osborne songs backwards and revealing satanic commands.

As Abrahams grew older she started to develop skepticism. For example, after attending a worldly friend's birthday party she questioned why birthday celebrations were banned by her religion. Unfortunately, at that point Abrahams was still firmly shackled to the Witness doctrine and carried her beliefs into adulthood. This is where Abrahams' memoir makes a transformation from

funny to disturbing. Without giving away too much away, I found many similarities between Abrahams' dissenting journey out of Jehovah's Witness and Ayan Hirsi Ali's account (*Infidel*) of her incredible dissent from Islam.

If you're looking for an introduction or reference guide to Jehovah's Witness, this book is not going to help you much. Abrahams does a good job briefly explaining the basic rules and terms within the Jehovah's Witness faith, but the strength really lies in her witty and biting recount of her religious environment blended with difficult psychological issues that were only exacerbated by indoctrination.

*Film Review*

George Kane

## Film Review: *Harry Potter*

Whenever possible I select for the fourth Wednesday

Reel and Meal a movie of particular interest to the atheist community. A few years ago, Christian parents were objecting to the Harry Potter books for glorifying the occult, and demanding that they be removed from school libraries, and lead actor Daniel Radcliffe has recently revealed that he is an atheist. So when *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* came to Lagoon Cinema in July, it was a natural selection. Ten of us turned out for the movie, after most of us enjoyed dinner across the street at Uptown Drink.

If you have read all of the Harry Potter books, or even seen *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, I suggest that you stop reading this review now. I have never read any of the Harry Potter books, but I very much enjoyed the first four movies on television. I have not seen the fifth movie, which has not yet been on television, but I thought I knew what to expect from *Half-Blood Prince* – imaginative fantasy, dazzling special effects, memorable magical characters and fast-paced action. While this sixth movie did a creditable job on these counts, it failed as a mystery. Perhaps ‘mystery’ is a misnomer. More properly it should be called befuddling, as this movie was made only for Potter fans that have read the books, or at least seen the last movie.

I was confused from the opening scene, a foreboding black-and-white montage of a bloody-faced Harry being led by Dumbledore away from

*parazzi* taking a barrage of flash photos. I presume that this was a flashback to *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. This was followed immediately by black-clad villains careening through the air at fantastic speeds, trailing black smoke behind them. Who were they? What was the shop they attacked? Whom did they capture?

While the movie never answered these questions, it was at least obvious that they were villains. Severus

### ***Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, 153 minutes, released July 15, 2009**

Snape and Draco Malfoy, known to the audience since the first Potter film, completed the cast of agents of the Dark Lord, Voldemort, who does not appear in the movie. My only question on this score is how Dumbledore could be so blind to the villainy of Snape and Malfoy that he permitted them both to stay at Hogwarts Academy.

It was even remarked that Draco must be a “death eater,” because both of his parents were “death eaters.” Unless I missed it, there was never an explanation anywhere in the movie of what death-eaters are (but it doesn’t sound good).

Several mysteries drive the plot. What memory of Tom Riddle, the young Voldemort, was Horace Slughorn hiding? What is the Dark Lord’s plan? What is the deed for which he has selected Draco Malfoy,

for which Severus Snape takes an unbreakable oath to complete if Malfoy fails? Why are wizards disappearing, and why was Ron Weasley’s home attacked by the riders on black smoke?

As well as I’ve been able to piece together the answers to these questions, there is hardly enough substance to justify the mystery or to sustain the plot. Horace Slughorn told Tom Riddle the magic of the horcrux, which could make one immortal. But why did Harry have to spend most of the movie plying Professor Slughorn, when Dumbledore must have known about horcruxes? After all, he had previously traveled away from Hogwarts looking for one before Slughorn spilled the beans. The deed for which Voldemort had selected Draco was the murder of Dumbledore, but I wonder, considering the movie’s end, why that should be very hard.

The concluding scene sets the stage for the final movie, with Harry announcing that he is leaving Hogwarts to pursue the Dark Lord, and Hermione vowing that she and Ron will join him, as they are an inseparable team. But that only made me wonder, what help had they really provided to Harry in this movie?

Often during the movie I had no idea of the significance of any scene as it played out, or its relevance to the plot. When I did think I had figured something out, it seemed trivial. I’m sure that a true J. K. Rowling *aficionado*, who has read all of the books, will have ready answers to the questions that perplexed me. But in my old-school opinion, a movie should stand on its own.

*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*: for fans only.



*Comments from the Whip*

Grant Steves

# Differences

In 1968, at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, I witnessed the chaos of demonstrations and anger. The nation watched as the police bashed college students with batons. You would hear the calls of these protestors to not trust anyone over thirty. I was not thirty at the time, but I felt strongly about discrimination against anyone because of their age, gender, race, or sex. Any characteristic that is not a choice must be protected from discrimination. Everyone who reads this essay can think of individuals in each group who fall short of their standards. However, that should not allow us to discriminate against the person because of their age, gender, race, or sex.

We should argue the case and its merits and not attack the person. The words we use are what shape our thinking, and our thinking selects the words that express who we are.

Forty years after the 1968 Democratic Convention, we still have people who fail to respect individuals because of their age, gender, race, and sex. The blinders of prejudice perhaps are more difficult to see, but they remain. The prejudiced person, whether religious or atheist, is not a welcome companion. Within the atheist community, some expect rational thinking. We would anticipate a group accepting differences more readily. The reality is that the atheist community is a slice of American culture.

In joining the atheist community, I had no expectations. The frustration of American society is found with us too. I have discussed ideas with individuals who are clearly racists. I have had dialogue with

people about gender differences and found individuals who are uncomfortable with men, women, or gays. I have found individuals who reject people because of their age. My sensitivity to these issues was shaped after forty years of teaching. At the end of my career, my age was clearly obvious. Adolescents each day would remind me of my age. Their discrimination comes from a culture that is youth oriented and does not give people any respect they have not earned.

What I taught them was that respect should be given to everyone in our first encounter. If we want to disrespect a person, after that, we should do so because of strong disagreements on issues. Our community is diverse and needs to be tolerant of all members. We need to be inclusive of others. We need to build bridges of understanding in our community. Where we have policy differences, we must realize the need to negotiate with reason.

## Financial Report

### Financial Report for July and August:

<b>Building Fund:</b>	<b>\$1,865.66</b>
Guy Harper	\$50.00
Mike Haubrich	\$129.22
Vanita Mishra	\$100.00
Daniel Norte	\$71.42
Alvin Shimek	\$1,000.00
James Smith	\$65.00

James Whitney	\$50.00
Jeffery Wolfe	\$200.00
Vern Young	\$200.00

<b>Visibility Fund</b>	<b>(General)</b>	<b>\$649.00</b>
Helen Daniels		\$25.00
Thomas Dooley		\$15.00
Cynthia Egli & Arthur Schunk		\$5.00

James Koran	\$25.00
Deborah Peterson	\$15.00
Jim Salutz	\$50.00
Philip Stratton	\$25.00
Anonymous	\$489.00

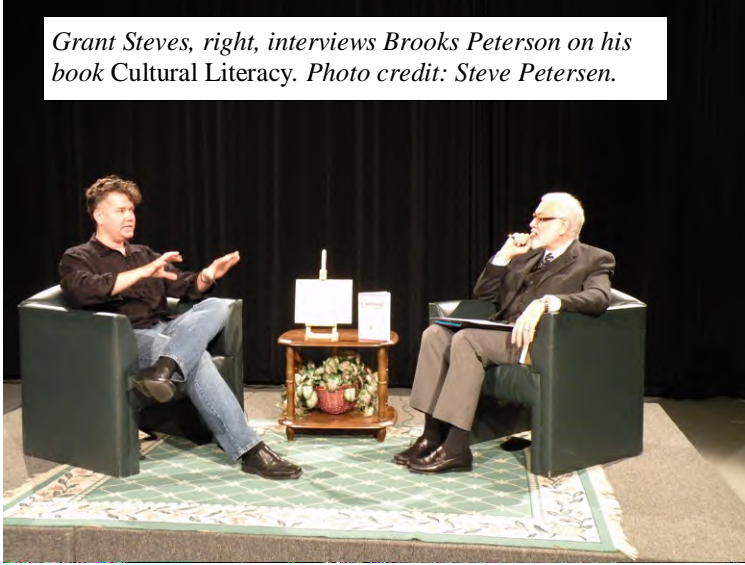
### Cryptogram answer

The fact that there is a general belief in a future life is no evidence of its truth.

-Clarence Darrow

# Cable Report

Grant Steves, right, interviews Brooks Peterson on his book *Cultural Literacy*. Photo credit: Steve Petersen.



The July cable program featured an interview with Brooks Peterson, author of the book *Cultural Literacy*. Grant Steves hosted and the two of them discussed what cultural literacy is in the first program. The second program focused on how one might improve their cultural literacy. The two programs brought out how atheism represents a culture, and how it might relate to the general culture.

In August, we did a two part pro-

gram called "Faith and Reason at the Movies," with James Zimmerman as moderator and Crystal Dervetski and Vic Tanner as panelist. Part one covered faith and reason in motion pictures from the 1940s to 1970s. The panel members gave reasons why they felt all free thinkers should watch each film. Some of the films discussed overtly champion faith (such as *The Ten Commandments*), others asked difficult questions about the nature of humanity and morality (such as *Rope*) and others were quite disparaging of religion (such as *Inherit the Wind*). In part two, James, Crystal, and Vic continued their discussion of faith and reason in motion

pic-

Vic Tanner, left, and Crystal Dervetski feign interest in host James Zimmerman's defense of the film *Rope*. Photo credit: Grant Hermanson.



tures. They discussed more recent productions, including *Contact*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *The Matrix* and documentaries *The Devil's Playground* and *Jesus Camp*. Crystal gave a passionate critique of her favorite religious-themed film, *Equus*.

**Cable Crew:** Art Anderson, Brett Stembridge, Shirley Moll, Steve Petersen, Wendy Steinberg 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](http://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.



Crystal Dervetski

## Surveying the Survey

Recently, Minnesota Atheists sent out a survey to gauge interests and opinions of our membership. The response was absolutely overwhelming, mostly in a good way. There appear to be many questions regarding what Minnesota Atheists as an organization actually does, what we offer, and who we are as a group of people. I had already started answering some questions in previous articles. In one, I had discussed why we ask new members how they found out about Minnesota Atheists, and why they chose to become members, as there seemed to be some confusion in this area as well. Now that we have the survey data fairly complete, I'm going to start tackling some of the bigger issues that were brought up in the free form responses.

One of the biggest requests is 'more': more variety, more locations, more young people, more racially diverse people, more diverse people in general, etc. It makes a lot of sense; obviously we all want a large group that offers many different activities for many different individuals. In working together toward our future, how do we achieve this goal of 'more'?

The biggest thing I've learned in organizing a local freethought group

is that **a group of people is only as good as those people who come to events.** This sounds very simple, but it is also a much neglected concept.

The Day of Reason at the State Capitol will have much more political impact if we can even just *show up*. We're close to having more people at the Day of Reason than the religious groups do outside at the National Day of Prayer. We need people to come out to make this happen. It's honestly just as simple as that for this kind of event; you don't even need to socialize if you don't want.

A picnic is going to be much more fun and entertaining with 100 people instead of 30 people. It's easier to move around and meet new people, play a game, or find an area where you feel you fit when more people show up. Here would be where the benefit of actually socializing comes into play: if you have something you want to talk about, you just need to find a group of people and start talking. With this active participation, you can also lead the conversation to topics you find more of interest, or you can find another group that is more to your liking. Do we all just sit around and talk about sci-fi like we're at some kind of convention? Absolutely not! If that's what you want, you can certainly find it. But if that's not what you enjoy, why not try walking over to that other group of people?

Having more people come out and socialize also solves a couple of other issues that people have brought up. For instance, we can achieve more variety in events and have more locations if we have more volunteers and people willing to organize activities for Minnesota Atheists. It's nice to have ideas of what we could be doing, but it's even better if you're willing to come help make those ideas a reality. Our organization is based on volunteers, as we are a non-profit organization. The very nature of volunteering means that we aren't paid and unfortunately don't have an unlimited number of hours to spend on atheist events. I've already written a piece detailing just how easy it is to get out and organize an event, it's not that hard, but someone does need to be there to organize so things run smoothly. The board of directors and organizers are always here to help you when you have an idea, so don't be shy. Tell us your idea and what you can do to help, and in some way we can make it a reality for our group.

The short answer, how can you have 'more' within our group, is to *just show up*. Come on out to an event. Make the time, make the drive. Try it out even if you're scared or don't know if you will fit in. (You will somewhere!) We can't be a diverse group if you don't help contribute to our diversity.

### Electronic MNA Newsletters

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# Minnesota Atheists

www.mnatheists.org  
P.O. Box 120304, New Brighton MN 55112

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## 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**. (No meeting in July or August.) See MNAtheists.org for details.

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. (May, August, and November 2009).

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

**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>.**

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**“The only reason ‘the question of God’s existence’ is in any way outside the domain of science is because it is such an amorphous subject that the believers will always rapidly move its definition beyond testability when pressed.”**

**—P.Z. Myers, Pharyngula, “Unscientific America and Those Awful Atheists,”  
July 9, 2009**

**“Check out the Minnesota Atheist Podcast  
At  
Mnatheist.org.”**