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Minnesota Secular Government Caucus November Public Meeting

Rep. Mike Freiberg, Rep. Athena Hollins, and Sen. John Marty

In the Fall of 2022, about two dozen Minnesota State Representatives and Senators formed the Minnesota Secular Government Caucus (MSGC) to combat the Christian Nationalist agenda. The caucus is co-chaired by Senator John Marty, Senator Jen McEwen, Representative Mike Freiberg, and Representative Athena Hollins.

At our November Public Meeting, one or more of these caucus members will discuss three bills of particular interest to Minnesota Atheists that will be before the next session of the Minnesota legislature. (As of this writing, it seems likely that Rep. Mike Freiberg, Rep. Athena Hollins, and Sen. John Marty will appear.)

1. The “End-of-Life Option Act.”

This bill would allow an individual to request medical aid in dying medication, provided certain requirements are met. Among those are that the person:

- is at least 18 years of age;
- has a terminal disease with a prognosis of no more than six months to live;
- is determined to be mentally capable as defined in statute; and

Continued on page 2

Sunday, November 17, 2024

1:00 p.m.: Library and Underground
Parking open. Zoom starts.

1:15–1:45 p.m.: Business Meeting

1:45–2:00 p.m.: Break, Presenter
Set-Up,
Social Time

2:00–3:30 p.m.: Program

3:30 p.m.: Leave for dinner

Dinner:

Los Ocampo
615 University Avenue West
St. Paul, MN 55103
(kitty-corner from the library)
<https://www.losocampo.com>

Rondo Community Library

461 Dale St N

St Paul, MN 55104

(There is free underground parking
off of University Ave.)

Online:

[https://us06web.zoom.us/
j/82344512218?pwd=VWNDclk2b-
VUxeWJDtnAzU3BhQnNRdz09](https://us06web.zoom.us/j/82344512218?pwd=VWNDclk2b-VUxeWJDtnAzU3BhQnNRdz09)

Or call in:

+13092053325,,82344512218#,,,*6
76832#

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- is not subject to guardianship or conservatorship.

2. The “Minnesota Recovery Options Act.”

From American Atheists: “This bill would ensure that, when Minnesotans are required by the state to receive treatment for substance use disorders, they can receive appropriate treatment without religious coercion. Under current Minnesota law, individuals in the criminal legal system can be required to participate in religious treatment programs that conflict with their beliefs, which is unconstitutional and can hinder successful treatment. Passing HF 3486/SF 3459 will improve access to appropriate substance use disorder treatment, while protecting every Minnesotan’s right to religious freedom. We urge you to pass this critical measure to protect the health, well-being, and civil rights of Minnesotans.”

3. The challenge to the Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) program.

This program allows high school students to enroll in courses at a college or university and earn both high school and college credit. There is no charge to the student; the tuition is paid by the state. A student may even take classes at a religious school. Current law states that schools “must not require a faith statement from a secondary student [in the PSEO program] seeking to enroll,” which the schools require of their regular college students. Public funds should not be used to discriminate against students on the basis of religion. However, two Christian colleges have filed a lawsuit arguing that the new restriction is unconstitutional, under the free exercise clause of the First Amendment. The MSGC is among the principal parties defending the law.

Cryptogram

By George Francis Kane

Azjdledqx: Pxu tzp mugdubul ezqe ezu Xut

Euleqfuxe dl q odbdxugk dxlidjuo mppv qofdjqmgk

lhdeuo ep ezu lidjdehqg xuuol pr zdl xudczmpj.

Pxu tzp rpggptl ezu euqazdxcl pr Azjdle dxlprqj ql

ezuk qju xpe dxapxldleuxe tdez q gdru pr ldx.

Qfmjplu Mdujau, “Ezu Oubdg’l Odaedpxqjk”



News and Notes

Democracy is on the Ballot

By *George Francis Kane*

This is the last issue of The Minnesota Atheist of 2024. According to our production schedule, you should be receiving it already knowing the winner of the presidential election. I write this with the cautious verb “should” rather than the confidently predictive “will” because of plans by both major parties to carry the electoral struggle beyond the casting and counting of votes. Republicans are planning myriad challenges of state and local votes, which Democrats warn will stress-test our election procedures. Republicans aver that these challenges will be warranted because Democrats are already stress-testing these election procedures by falsifying the vote.

To idealists who insist that our democracy is only legitimate if the election is won by the candidate who receives the most votes, our electoral process is already broken. The candidate who received the most votes did not win office in the Electoral College in 1876, 1888, 2000, and 2016. Our elections may not always be “democratic,” but at least the Electoral College is constitutionally defined. The campaigns by both major parties are designed with the objective of victory there. But what if the Electoral College were denied the opportunity to discharge its constitutional responsibility?

The ultimate failure of this stress-test would be that the presidential election would be decided by a vote in the incoming House of Representatives. This election would be even more undemocratic, as each state delegation would have one vote. Montana would have the same representation of California, although the latter’s population is more than 35 times greater. If the House vote is strictly by party, it is probable that the Republicans will win, and Donald Trump will be the president.

The next administration may be a decisive stress test for the separation of church and state.

The Heritage Foundation has spearheaded Project 2025 to implement a Christian Nationalist takeover in the event of a Republican presidential victory. It has plans for directing executive agencies to write social policy according to a “Biblical definition of family.” This means in opposition to reproductive rights and the rights and protections of the LGBTQ+ community. Project 2025 plans to weave Christian dogma into the public-school curriculum, and to divert government funding away from public schools to church-run schools instead.

If Project 2025 is implemented, the decades-long culture wars already stressing secular government will continue with renewed vigor in the courts and the states. For more than two decades the Supreme Court has been whittling away at the separation of church and state, replacing government non-involvement with requirements for government support.

Anti-democratic forces have the initiative in state and local governments, and in the courts.

[Project 2025] has plans for directing executive agencies to write social policy according to a “Biblical definition of family.”

The only knock-out blow that I can see, that would render their threat to secular government impotent would be if electoral defeat splits the Republican party, pitting a MAGA-led Christian nationalist faction against a more traditional party of big-business.

There are a couple of ways that this stress test may work out. If the eventual 47th president is not the candidate who won the election, the legitimacy of our democracy will be severely shaken. Confidence that our government represents the will of the people and confirms the consent of the governed will collapse. This may bolster support for authoritarian dictatorships around the world. The United States may still be a world leader militarily and economically, but this will herald an age in which dictatorship will be viewed as the natural order of humanity.

If we survive the stress test cresting in the election, then democracy, human rights and secular government will survive, although still in a state of siege. I cannot see the nation emerging into a secure and optimistic happily-ever-after. The anti-democratic and anti-secular forces

Book Review

Separating Church and State: How the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union Led the Nation in Religious Liberty

Author: Bruce J. Dierenfield

By George Francis Kane

Separating Church and State covers the history of the early years of the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union. It is the definitive history of church-state legal struggles in Minnesota from the MCLU's founding in the early 1950s through the 1980s, and will certainly be of intense interest to members of Minnesota Atheists. The author, Bruce J. Dierenfield, is a history professor, a long-time member of the American Civil Liberties Union and a founder of the Western New York chapter of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State.

The source of most church-state struggles for the MCLU in its early years was the public schools, where Christians sought maximum access to the vulnerable student population. The MCLU fought battles over bible distribution in the schools, classroom prayers, Baccalaureate and graduation prayer ceremonies, Christmas celebrations, religious music and other intrusions of religion into Minnesota's public schools. Other church-state struggles covered in the book included public funding of the activities of churches and related groups, including the Fort Snelling Chapel, and government attacks upon the rights of religious minorities such as cults and Native Americans.

Bruce Dierenfield is an excellent storyteller, although some chapters ended without satisfying resolutions. He weaves each chapter with a stunning level of detail culled from contemporaneous news coverage, MCLU records and the notes of the staff.

Many of the legal struggles were driven by MCLU staff such as Randall Tigue and Bob Bruno, but the central character of the book is Matthew Stark, long-time President of the MCLU and Executive Director. One chapter is devoted to Stark's biography.

The following quote from Matt Stark conveys a message that is important for all atheists and secularists: Being a supporter of the separation

of church and state requires a wider focus than the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

Fundamentally censorship is a church-state issue. Reproductive freedom is essentially a church-state issue. Gay rights is a church-state issue. All of those battles essentially involve government attempting to voice somebody's religious beliefs on the rest of the population, and so I think any affiliate that wants to be vigilant on issues of gay rights, reproductive freedom, and censorship has got to be active in church-state. It's the liaison between church and state that threatens civil liberties in all of these other areas.

—Matt Stark, 1996

This book can be ordered directly from <https://itascabooks.com/products/separating-church-and-state-how-the-minnesota-civil-liberties-union-led-the-nation-in-religious-liberty>

Treasury Report July, 2024

By Chris Matthews

General/Visibility Fund Donations

\$100	August Berkshire
\$70	Ben Zvan
\$50	Ross Meisner
\$20	Michelle Tjernagel
\$10	Marilyn Nienkerk
\$2	PayPal Giving Fund
\$55	Private donations
\$348	Cash donations
655	Subtotal

\$655 Total Donations

Expenses

\$33	IT, General
\$110	Misc

\$143 Total Expenses

Current Building Fund — \$157,846

September 2024 Meeting Review Standing Up to Project 2025 and Other Threats to Democracy

By *George Francis Kane*

On Saturday, September 21, Hemant Mehta gave a presentation at the First Unitarian Society in Minneapolis titled “Standing Up to Project 2025.” The event was co-sponsored by Minnesota Atheists and Humanists MN. For both organizations it was the resumption of a lecture series that is annually on a 3-month hiatus for summer picnics. I estimate that there were about 100 attendees.

Hemant Mehta is a veteran atheist activist who has worked with or presented at the convention of several national atheist/Humanist organizations. He came to prominence as “The Friendly Atheist” by “auctioning his soul on e-bay.” In that project, he auctioned his time to attend religious services and to report on them from an atheist perspective.

The September presentation did not actually dwell much on the Project 2025 plan for the makeover of government upon the election of a conservative Republican for president. By this time, of course, the identity of that conservative Republican had been established as former president Donald Trump. Rather than detailing the project timeline or the specific plans for each executive agency, Mehta instead focused more broadly on the Christian nationalist vision for the future of America.

Mehta also spoke about current and ongoing attempts of Christian nationalists to impose their religion on government activities. For example, he recounted how the Oklahoma Superintendent of Public Instruction, Ryan Walters, was undertaking to require Bible instruction in every 5th through 12th grade public school classroom. The annual education budget that he submitted included \$6 million for Bibles.

Mehta discussed the countermeasures being taken by secularists in different legislative venues. Jared Huffman of California is one founder and leader of the Congressional Freethought Caucus who has gained national recognition by fighting the culture wars battles against Christian nationalists. Nationally, Mehta claimed,

there are about 160 legislators who identify as non-religious, and so far, they are not being challenged on their faith in their electoral campaigns. In Minnesota, the Secular Government Caucus is active and rapidly growing.

After his presentation, Mehta fielded questions from the audience. One questioner inquired if critical thinking classes would inoculate future voters against Christian nationalist disinformation. Mehta responded that the schools should be teaching critical thinking anyway, and that the most important weapon against disinformation is reporting by fact checkers.

Another member of the audience asked if the most effective way to fight the culture war is to try to motivate uninvolved voters or to hammer specific dividing-line issues. Mehta responded that we should not waste our time trying to change the minds of people who are already set in their opinions.

Mehta predicted that if Trump is elected president, there would be many retirements on the Supreme Court, so that he could replace aging conservatives with a stable of young conservatives.

After the meeting, attendees socialized with food and beverages. August Berkshire and his partner, Rachel Wilson, staffed a table to speak with people about Minnesota Atheists.

Project 2025

PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION PROJECT

Democracy continued from page 3

will be enraged by their loss and determined to sharpen their struggle. Our political institutions will survive for now, and change will continue to be incremental, rather than revolutionary.

I do not think that anything can stop the historic rise in religious disbelief and non-affiliation, but the security of fully secular government seems very distant.

Upcoming Monthly Events

Hybrid Freethought Toastmasters Meeting 1st and 3rd Monday of every month from 6:30–8 p.m. Larpenteur Estates Party Room, 1280 Larpenteur Ave W, St Paul. freethought.toastmastersclubs.org.

Hybrid Minnesota Atheists Board Meeting 1st Wednesday of each month at 6:30 p.m. Email chair@mnatheists.org for the meeting link.

Freethinking Females

Online 2nd Monday of every month at 7 p.m.

In Person Last Monday of every month at 5:30 p.m., Sweeney’s Saloon, 96 North Dale Street, St. Paul.

Shattering the myth that atheist groups are male dominated with a females-only event.

In Person Blasphemer’s Brunch 2nd Saturday of every month at 10:30 a.m., Pizza Lucé, 800 W 66th St, Richfield

In Person Bowling for Deities Last Saturday of every month at noon, (usually) at Flaherty’s Arden Bowl, 1273 West County Road E, Arden Hills

In Person Trivia Night Every Sunday from 5:30–8 p.m. Venn Brewing, 3550 E 46th St Suite 140, Minneapolis

Online M.A.S.H! (MN Atheists Social Hour!) Every Tuesday (**note the day change**) from 5:30–6:30 p.m. RSVP in Meetup and a Zoom link appears in the announcement.

Online In Depth — Discussion and Debate Every 2nd and 4th Tuesday of the month from 3–4 p.m.

For more events and instructions for connecting to online events, visit:

www.meetup.com/MinnesotaAtheists 



The “Nones” That You Know

Jawaharlal Nehru

By Milo Grika

Jawaharlal Nehru (14 November 1889 – 27 May 1964) was second only to Mahatma Gandhi in leading the Indian nationalist movement in the 1930s and 1940s. Upon India’s independence from Britain in 1947, he served as the country’s first prime minister for 16 years, championing parliamentary democracy, secularism, science, and technology.

The spectacle of what is called religion, or at any rate organised religion, in India and elsewhere, has filled me with horror and I have

frequently condemned it and wished to make a clean sweep of it. Almost always it seemed to stand for blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition, exploitation and the preservation of vested interests.

—Jawaharlal Nehru

Cryptogram Answer

Christian: One who believes that the New Testament is a divinely inspired book admirably suited to the spiritual needs of his neighbor. One who follows the teachings of Christ insofar as they are not inconsistent with a life of sin.

Ambrose Bierce, “The Devil’s Dictionary”

Minnesota Atheists Membership and Donations

Membership Levels

- Student membership *Free*
- One-year individual membership \$35
- Three-year individual membership \$90
- One-year household membership \$45
- Three-year household membership \$115
- One-year sustaining membership \$75
- Three-year sustaining membership \$200
- Life membership \$600

Donation Funds

General Fund \$ _____

Building Fund \$ _____

Atheists Talk Fund \$ _____

I would like my donation(s) to be

- private
- public
- attributed by my name only

for reporting in the Minnesota Atheists newsletter and on the website. (By default, each donation will be considered private.)

Name _____

Street Address _____

City, State ZIP _____

Just email newsletter Email address _____

(Required for student memberships and email subscriptions)

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

Student memberships include a subscription to the PDF version of *The Minnesota Atheist* delivered by email. Student memberships do not have voting rights and are not able to run for the board.

All paid memberships include a subscription to the printed version delivered by postal mail. If you would prefer the PDF version delivered by email, please check the box and provide your email address.

Please make checks payable to:

Minnesota Atheists.

Students, please enclose a copy of your fee statement or school identification.

Minnesota Atheists
PO Box 120304
New Brighton, MN 55112

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Minnesota Atheists

Positive Atheism in action since 1991

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

Minnesota Atheist Board of Directors

Board Email
board@mnatheists.org

President
Ben Blanchard
pres@mnatheists.org

Associate President
Stephanie Zvan
apres@mnatheists.org

Chair
Michelle Morlan
chair@mnatheists.org

Associate Chair
August Berkshire
achair@mnatheists.org

Secretary
Hertzey Hertz
sec@mnatheists.org

Treasurer
Chris Matthews
treas@mnatheists.org
763.428.3424

Directors at Large
Heather Hegi
dir1@mnatheists.org

Mike Trombley
dir2@mnatheists.org

Alyssa Ehni
dir3@mnatheists.org

The Minnesota Atheist Newsletter

Editorial Board
editor@mnatheists.org

Editorial Board
George Kane
George.Francis.Kane@gmail.com
651.488.8225

Heather Hegi
dir1@mnatheists.org

Shirley Moll
srmoll@comcast.net

James Zimmerman
zgoatee@gmail.com

Editor
Milo Grika
editor@mnatheists.org

Chief Photographer
Richard Trombley

Membership and Change of Address
Steve Petersen
address@mnatheists.org
651.484.9277

Minnesota Atheists Media

AtheistsWeekly Email (AWE)
Chris Matthews
awe@mnatheists.org

NOTE: The numbers for “Regular memberships” and “Life members” are based on financial data. These membership numbers undercount actual members, since one household or sustaining membership could represent more than one person.

Minnesota Atheists Affiliations

Atheist Alliance of America
Atheist Alliance International
American Atheists
The American Humanist Association
Council for Secular Humanism
The International Humanist and Ethical Union
Secular Coalition for America

Minnesota Atheists Membership (as of Dec. 31, 2023)

Regular memberships: 67
Life members: 53
Meetup subscribers: 4,089

Minnesota Atheists Goals

Minnesota Atheists practices positive, inclusive, active, friendly, neighborhood atheism in order to provide a community for atheists, educate the public about atheism, and promote separation of state and church.



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PO Box 120304

New Brighton, MN 55112

612.588.7031

info@mnatheists.org

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