

The Minnesota Atheist

Minnesota Atheists

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Positive Atheism in ActionSM

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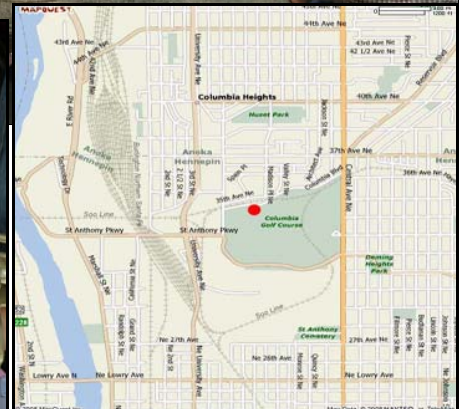
As always, lots of food, good music, interesting conversations and a chance to meet new friends in Minnesota's largest secular community. There's

Picnic Season!

another one on August 17th, 12:00 to 3:00 at Columbia Park.

Bring the whole family. The Freethought Band will play and we'll have another folk jam.

Donate non-perishables for the food shelf, and enjoy! It's summer!



Photos by Steve Petersen

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Annie Laurie Gaylor
Dick Hewetson
Robert M. Price, PhD**

**MNA Meetup members: 277
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 **A "Lazy" Summer** by August Berkshire

Outreach

Summer is a quiet time for Minnesota Atheists. Except for participating in five festivals (Juneteenth, and Gay Prides in Minneapolis, Rochester, LaCrosse, and Duluth), two parades, three free-thought picnics, a host of other atheist social get-togethers, holding board and committee meetings, putting out a weekly radio show, two monthly TV shows, and a couple newsletters, creating promotional materials, and constantly updating our website, we don't do much of anything.

You may have heard that there was a gang shooting at the Juneteenth Festival while we were there. A woman standing close to me was hit in the leg by a stray bullet. Several people rushed to her aid. I handed one of them my belt to use as a tourniquet and kept a careful watch on her face to make sure she didn't go into shock. Meanwhile three or four Evangelical Christians from a nearby booth came and hovered close to her with arms outstretched, reciting a short impromptu prayer. Mercifully, they soon left and real (medical) help arrived.

MN State Fair

Air America Minnesota (AM 950 KTNF), the home of our "Atheists Talk" radio program, will be having a booth at the Minnesota State Fair this year. We were invited to submit a raffle prize. One of our advertisers, Q.Cumbers restaurant in Edina, generously donated 4 passes for us to use. Both Minnesota Atheists and Q.Cumbers will be promoted at the State Fair through the radio station's presence there.

The "Cracker" Incident

The big scandal this past month is that our very own PZ Myers, author of the famed science



August Berkshire

blog Pharyngula, has gotten himself into hot water, and hell fire, yet again. By now he must be toast, which makes him not that dissimilar to a cracker, which is what he called a eucharistic wafer that had been taken from a Catholic

Church. It all began when Webster Cook, a student at the University of Central Florida, walked out of a Catholic Church service holding a wafer as "hostage." The wafer was eventually returned but not before the student received death threats and calls to expel him from the university.

And not before PZ had a chance to offer his "mild" opinion... On July 8, he posted the following in his blog entry titled "It's A Frackin' Cracker":

"Can anyone out there score **me** some consecrated communion wafers? ...I'll show you sacrilege, gladly, and with much fanfare. I won't be tempted to hold it hostage... but will instead treat it with profound disrespect and heinous cracker abuse, all photographed and presented here on the web. I shall do so joyfully and with laughter in my heart."

The crowd, as they say, went wild. The story was featured in the *Star Tribune*, the *City Pages*, and the on-line *Minnesota Independent*. PZ received his own death threats and calls to have him expelled from his university.

Bill Donohue, a self-appointed watchdog against all slurs Catholic, and head of the Catholic League (which has no official connection to the Church), started a personal crusade against him. This, of course, only served to increase attention to the point PZ was trying to make: it's hard to believe that in the 21st Cen-

tury there are still people who believe a wafer literally becomes the body of a person who, if he ever lived, has been dead for 2000 years.

In a July 24 post on his blog, titled "The Great Desecration," PZ wrote: "I pierced it with a rusty nail (I hope Jesus's tetanus shots are up to date). And then I simply threw it in the trash, followed by the classic, decorative items of trash cans everywhere, old coffeegrinds and a banana peel. My apologies to those who hoped for more, but the worst I can do is show my unconcerned contempt. By the way, I didn't want to single out just the cracker, so I nailed it to a few ripped-out pages from the Qur'an and *The God Delusion*. They are just paper. **Nothing must be held sacred.** Question everything."

For more on the story, go to: PZ's blog (scienceblogs.com/pharyngula) or his listing in Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PZ_Myers).

Dogged Pursuit

Bob Schmitz has been doing an extraordinary job as chair of our First Amendment Watchdog Committee. His diligence and sharp eye have tracked down a number of possible violations of separation of state and church, both in Minnesota and nationally. If you would like to join the committee, contact Bob at allibobi@comcast.net or (612) 245-3357.

MNA Building

Members of the MNA Building Committee looked at a promising property in south Minneapolis. It is in a decent location, has adequate space (2000 sq. ft.), and good off-street parking. The price is a little high for us but the building hasn't been on the market long so we're waiting to see if the price will come down. However, there used to be a

(Continued on page 4)

Membership Report 2008

Membership Type	Member- ships	Members
Individual	188	188
Household	52	75
Student	4	4
Sustaining	24	26
Life Members (3 have died)	31	28
Donors		12
Newsletter subscription		25
Membership Totals:	296	321
Total active supporters:		358

(Continued from page 3)

gas station on the property and it's not clear that the property has passed all the necessary EPA tests for ground contamination. Meanwhile, the search continues for other properties.

The \$300,000 Question

Several people have asked how we will finance a building. We currently have about \$100,000 in our Building Fund. We have received a promise for an interest-free loan from an MNA member for another \$100,000. That still leaves us \$100,000 short. Would you be willing to lend Minnesota Atheists \$5,000-\$10,000 interest-free for five years? Or, join our 300 Club and pledge to give us \$1,000 over the course of three years. Please contact me or another board member (see page 2) if you can help.

The End of an Era

The final 4th Sunday brunch at Old Country Buffet in Fridley occurred on July 27. Started by the late Fern Wodtke (winner of an MNA Friendly Atheist award) over 10 years ago, it had been continued recently by her grandson Brett Welch. Now that Brett's moving to Scotland (See the story about Brett on page 17) the brunch will probably be moved to Q.Cumbers restaurant in Edina. As always, check your Atheists Weekly E-mail (AWE) for the latest news of atheist/humanist gatherings. And don't forget to bring a copy of AWE for a \$2 discount at Q.Cumbers!



Brett Welch

June & July Fund Reports

Building Fund: \$2,036.66

Kathleen Alme	\$100.00
Robin Anderson	\$25.00
Gary Bolt	\$50.00
Dean Borghorst	\$200.00
Jack Caravela	\$250.00
Tom Dooley	\$100.00
Guy Harper	\$100.00
George Kane	\$250.00
Chris Matthews	\$100.00
Shirley Moll	\$50.00
Ted Nagel	\$300.00
Steve Petersen	\$50.00
Matthew Richardson	\$130.00
Richard Trepanier	\$10.00
James Whitney	\$75.00
Jeffrey Wolfe	\$100.00
Vern Young	\$100.00
Anonymous	\$40.00

Visibility (General) Fund: \$595.50

Mary Adams	\$15.00
Dean Borghorst	\$50.00
Dan Hanson & Keith Grennier	\$5.00

Shirley Moll	\$50.00
John Robinson	\$10.00
Tom Stavros	\$7.50
Richard Trepanier	\$10.00
Bjorn Watland & Jeannette Sorensen	\$208.00
Vern Young	\$100.00
Cash	\$140.00

Radio Fund: \$2090.54

August Berkshire	\$1,067.50
Dean Borghorst	\$50.00
Matthew Dittloff	\$25.00
Cynthia Egli	\$15.00
Ken Holmbeck	\$300.00
Matthew Laberge	\$100.00
Vanita Mishra	\$40.00
Shirley Moll	\$50.00
Steve Petersen	\$50.00
Arthur Schunk	\$15.00
Tom Stavros	\$7.50
John Tremblay	\$50.00
Richard Trepanier	\$10.00
Cash	\$310.54

Member Bios on the Web

Are you proud of being an atheist? Are you proud of being a member of the Minnesota Atheists? Do you wish there were something you could do to dispel the mythological villain-image that many Americans associate with the word "atheist"? Minnesota Atheists now have member profiles available on the website, MinnesotaAtheists.org, for members to tell a little bit about themselves and their journey of faith and reason, their history with the Minnesota Atheists, or whatever they like. This is your chance to show anyone who might have misconceptions about what atheists are really like: positive, intelligent, moral, or just as regular and average as everyone else. Tell us who your heroes are, what books you read (or don't read), include a picture if you want. Send us your profile if for no other reason than to be Google-able. Please be brief and use discretion. Send your profile to web@mnaatheists.org.

"Atheists Talk" Radio Report

by August Berkshire

In the past two months we aired programs 21 to 28 of "Atheists Talk." Mike Haubrich was the host for all of these shows. Those programs were:

June 1 – "More Than Darwin" with Mark Decker, interviewed by Lynn Fellman.

June 1 – "Freethought Toastmasters" with Laura Hutt, interviewed by George Kane.

June 8 – "The Physics of Superheroes" with James Kakalios, interviewed by Scott Lohman.

June 8 – "The Problem of Evil" with August Berkshire, interviewed by George Kane.

June 15 – "The Evolution 2008 Conference" with Mark Borrello, interviewed by Lynn Fellman.

June 15 – "Back to the Barrens" with George Erickson, interviewed by Grant Steves.

June 22 (Juneteenth Special) – "African American Freethinkers in the Civil Rights Movement" with Michael Estes, interviewed by Steve Petersen.

June 22 (Juneteenth Special) – "African Americans and Religion" with Michael Estes and Eric Harmon, interviewed by Steve Petersen.

June 29 (Gay Pride Special) – "Truth Wins Out: Exposing 'Ex-gay' Ministries" with Wayne Besen, interviewed by Scott Lohman.

June 29 (Gay Pride Special) – "Project515.org: 515 MN laws that discriminate against gays" with Jane Bowman, interviewed by Cynthia Egli.

July 6 (Independence Day Special) – "The Founding Fathers' Views on Separation of State and Church" with Edward Tabash, interviewed by Lynn Fellman.

July 6 (Independence Day Special) – "U.S. Supreme Court Cases on Separation of State and Church" with Edward Tabash, interviewed by George Kane.

July 13 – "Top Secret" with Robert M. Price, interviewed by Grant Steves.

July 20 – "Fag Bug: A Campaign Against Homophobia" with Erin Davies, interviewed by Mike Haubrich.

July 20 – "The End of Biblical Studies" with Hector Avalos, interviewed by Grant Steves.

As you can see, a lot of people contribute to the success of our "Atheists Talk" radio program. Minnesota Atheists recently signed a continuation of our contract for another 25 weeks, which will take us to the end of 2008. The cost will be **\$8,750**.

In an effort to raise money, we have been selling ads on the show. This should raise about \$3,000. The MNA Board also voted to change the beneficiary of our 5th Sunday Spaghetti Fundraisers from the Building Fund to the Radio Fund. This will probably raise about \$1,000.

That still leaves a lot of money that we have to raise from donations.

Please be as generous as you can to keep our historic atheist radio program on the air! You can send a check (with "Radio" in the memo line) to Minnesota Atheists, P.O. Box 6261, Minneapolis, MN 55406, or make a dedicated donation with PayPal or a credit card on our website (MinnesotaAtheists.org).

Another way you can help is to listen to the radio program live (AM 950 or am950ktnf.com/listen) on Sunday mornings, 9:00-10:00 a.m., and call (952-946-6205) or e-mail (radio@mnatheists.org) a question to us during the show. We want to hear from you!

Also, don't forget to support our sponsors, who support our radio show with their advertising: the **American Humanist Association** (americanhumanist.org), the **Humanists of Minnesota** (humanistsofmn.org), the **Secular Coalition for America** (secular.org), and **Q. Cumbers** restaurant in Edina (qcumbers.com). The organizations are excellent and the restaurant has great food!

Below: Host Mike Haubrich (left) and Grant Steves (right) interview Hector Avalos, author of *The End of Biblical Studies*.



Cable Report

by Steve Petersen

This past July Grant Steves interviewed Minnesota Atheists members Keith Lodermeier, James Zimmerman and Ryan Sutter. The two-part program was entitled "From Faith to Reason."

If you have ideas for a program please contact Grant at: achair@mnatheists.org. If you would like to help on the cable program or sponsor the program on your cable access station please contact me, Steve Peterson, at chair@mnatheists.org.

Cable Crew: Art Anderson, Brett Stembridge, Shirley Moll, Steve Petersen, George Kane and Grant Her-

manson.

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

Cable Schedule

Burnsville/Eagan Community Television: Channel 14. Check their web site www.bect.tv for day and times. Sponsor: Kevin Hardisty

Bloomington: Ch. 16. Monday 9:30 p.m., Tuesday 5:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m.. Sponsors: David and Joanne Beardsley.

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

Rochester: Ch. 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: Ch. 14. Wednesday 10:30 p.m. Sponsor: Steve Petersen.

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

Stillwater: Ch. 16. Tuesday 7:00 p.m.; Wednesday 9:00 a.m. Sponsor: Lee Salisbury.

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

White Bear Lake, Hugo, Lake Elmo, Mahtomedi, Maplewood, North St. Paul, Oakdale, Vadnais Heights: Ch. 15. Friday 8:30 p.m. Sponsor: Michael Seliga.

Below from left: Keith Lodermeier, Ryan Sutter, James Zimmerman, Grant Steves.



Freethought Cryptogram

ODI HEMQTI XB RQOIQTIT OE IBOUASRBD U VELIXQPIQO ODUO RB IQORXISN QIMOXUS RQ
 PUOOIXB EH XISRVR EQ, ODUO RB, U VELIXQPIQO ODUO RB QEO EQSN CXILIQOIT HXEP
 HULEXRQV EQI XISRVR EQ ELIX EODIXB, AMO USBE RB CXILIQOIT HXEP HULEXRQV XIS
 RVREQ RQ VIQIXUS.

ITTRI OUAUBFD, "ODI OXMI PIUQRQV EH ODI IBOUASRBDPIQO FSUMBI."

Last month's solution: The fundamental questions begin as mysteries and end as politics.

This month's solution is on page 13.

Top Secret: The Truth Behind Today's Pop Mysticism

Robert M. Price, Prometheus Books, 340 pages

Review by Grant Steves

Top Secret is Robert M. Price's critique of modern spirituality and therapeutic gurus, guides, and charlatans. Religion has always given birth to charlatans, those that prey on the merits of naiveté of the masses. We had Joseph Smith, who claimed to have translated gold tablets, and Mohammed, who brought a message from god. A modern guru, Rhonda Byrne, has presented *The Secret*. Price describes this work, which purports to reveal the laws of thought and reality, as the rehashing of things taught before. Byrne abuses the concepts of science to give meaning to her teachings. She is one who believes we create our own reality by visualizing our success. Moreover, like so many belief systems, if you fail to achieve your goal – you are the problem. The fault is not in the writings, but in the person who does not have faith. Faith will move mountains if they are as imagined as the faith itself.

Dr. Price has exposed this kind of material before in his book, *The Reason Driven Life*, a direct response to the *Purpose Driven Life*. He excels at stripping away the veneer of these pseudo-teachers.

If you watch talk shows, you have been exposed to teachings of Wayne Dyer. He heads a cottage-industry of books, DVDs, CDs, and paraphernalia of warmed over Eastern philosopher teachings - from Buddha to Lao Tzu. He popularizes what most people have neither the time nor curiosity to find and read.

Dr. Deepak Chopra is a clean-shaven version of the Maharishi Mahesh Yoga. Chopra presents Hinduism-lite for American audiences. *How to Know God* is his attempt to explain Christianity in a Hindu context. In the process, he exposes his ignorance of the Bible. Dr. Price reveals the pseudo-understandings of “Chopra's opportunistic and selective use of biblical data...a clue to how he also uses the data of physics and nutrition.”

Whether Dr. Price is dissecting the teachings of Pema Chodron (her birth name is Deirdre Bloomfield Brown) or her drunken teacher, Chogyam Trungpa, he is clear, broadly understanding, and at times whimsical. As he says, “Why the stage name unless it's a shtick?” The mystery of an Asian name creates an aura of profundity that ‘Deirdre Brown’ does not. Dr. Price peels back these secrets to reveal what is really standing behind the created personae.

The chapter, ‘A Course in Malarkey,’ is a scathing indictment of the tedious book, *A Course in Miracles*. A book “channeled” to secular Jew and psychiatrist Dr. Helen Schucman. This long, ponderous book spits out pithy sayings like: “The ego's purpose is fear, because

Noah and Nature

Originally printed on July 18, 2008 in the St. Paul Pioneer Press, Letters to the Editor, by MNA member Norman Barrett in response to an article about Camp Noah.

I am dismayed that you published the story about the program for children who survived disasters (“Camp asks: What would Noah do?” July 14) with no examination of how the belief that an all-powerful being is responsible for weather events — rather than well-understood natural forces — can cause serious harm to young children.

Furthermore, using the Noah story, in which the majority of human beings and untold (morally inculpable) numbers of animals are drowned by this same all-powerful being, as a way to teach children about its supposed mercy, has flaws too numerous to state.

While Camp Noah's goal of teaching children how to cope with disasters is admirable, couching the curriculum in a framework dominated by an all-powerful and often capricious (if the Bible stories are to be believed) being is a recipe for even greater disasters.

Norman Barrett, Minneapolis

Requests for Newsletter Submissions

If you would like to be added to our list of members that receive an email for article requests every month, please email editor@minnesotatheists.org. You would not be expected to contribute every month, but it would simply alert you of when we need articles if you are interested in contributing. Even if you can't contribute, we are still interested in your suggestions for articles.

only the fearful can be egotistical,” or “God created nothing besides you, and nothing besides you exists, for you are part of Him.” Through all the convoluted teachings in *Miracles*, it never once defines miracles. It is a book that teaches that the victim is to blame – not the advice.

Dr. Schucman has found an advocate in Marianne Williamson. She cloaks the tedium of *The Course in Miracles* in *A Return to Love*. Williamson explains that “only love is real.” This is a “negative of other emotions. I will pay attention to nothing else...I shall dismiss them all as ‘illusion’.” We find that, “Faith is believing the universe is on our side, and that the universe knows what it's doing.” Faith not defined, but it “believes the universe.” It is a circular definition. Dr Price's analysis of Williamson's book should caution us to avoid it or at least read

(Continued on page 18)

Humanist Joint Convention

by Steve Peterson

In June, the American Humanists Association, the International Humanists and Ethical Union and the Secular Student Alliance held a joint convention in Washington D. C. There were awards to Judge John Jones who presided over the Dover ID trial where he issued a stunning defeat to the Creationists. Jones was presented with the Humanist Religious Liberty Award. The AHA presented Representative Pete Stark (D-Ca) with the Humanist of the Year Award for being the highest ranking elected person in the United States to openly state that he does not believe in a god. Before the award, Rep. Stark went around to each table for a brief hello and discussion. Eleanor Smeal, founder and president of the Feminist Majority and past president of National Women's Organization was presented with the Humanist Heroine Award. On Saturday evening there was a talk from and award to Carolyn Porco, planetary scientist and leader of

the Cassini space mission to Saturn who received the Isaac Asimov Science Award. Philip Pullman, author of *The Golden Compass* and twenty other books, received the International Humanist Award.

Also on Monday, Steve Petersen, Shirley Moll and Fred Roos participated in the lobby day organized by the Secular Coalition for America. The SCA had set up appointments with over forty members of congress from around the country. We met with legislative

assistants for Rep. Kline, Rep. Ellison and Senator Klobuchar. The only congressperson that refused to meet the SCA was from Minnesota. Rep. McCollum refused to meet and no reason was given. We lobbied against religious proselytizing in the military and school vouchers in the DC school system.

Below: Minnesota Atheist Shirley Moll with Rep. Pete Stark, the only open atheist in Congress.



The Minnesota contingent from left: Jenda Huang, Kalyn Williams, Hannan Heidt, Joe Foley, Jeff Campbell, Michael Jacobson, Marshall Lewis, Suzanne Perry, Andy Butler and Steve Petersen.

Above: Fred Roos and Shirley Moll.

Photos by Steve Petersen



Junteenth Booth

Junteenth, which celebrates the end of slavery, dates back to 1865 when Union General Gordon Granger, landed at Galveston, Texas with news that the Civil War had ended and that the enslaved were now free. This was two and a half years after President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. The delay was due to the continued fighting until General Lee surrendered in 1865.

Photos by August Berkshire

Summer Membership Drive

Now through the end of August, any **donation** over \$5, and every **new or renewal membership** will receive a blue 3"x4" Minnesota Atheists removable window sticker. You can stick them in your car, in your house, or any glass surface you'd like. The face has an ultra removable adhesive, so your statement can be as permanent or temporary as you'd like.



Volunteers Needed for Public Relations Committee

Despite our radio program, our web site, our cable TV program, the distribution of AWE to nearly 700 people each week, despite the presence of our booth at so many public celebrations throughout the state, despite our outreach events such as the Day of Reason at the state Capitol, Minnesota Atheists yet remains a well-kept secret.

I recently joined the Atheist Nexus online discussion board where someone formed a discussion group named "Minnesota Atheists." When I found it, twenty people belonged to the group who were eager to get to know other atheists. Not one of them mentioned our

group. One of them had taken part in our Pub Crawl and knew of our online Meetup group. Nobody else had heard of us. One wondered, on his first post, how Minnesota would handle a gathering of atheists in a public place!

I have met other self-aware atheists who were surprised to learn that there was an active local group of others like themselves. Perhaps the local atheists who have never heard of us far outnumber the atheists who have joined or attended one of our events.

How do we get our word out? I'd like to form a Public Relations Committee to maximize our exposure the media. If you would like to join, please notify George Kane, nup@Minn.net.



GAY PRIDE 2008



Top left: Atheist Matt Stark was the parade's Grand Marshal.

Photos by Steve Petersen, Tom Riddering and Michelle Losey.



Bad Religion Releases Deluxe "New Maps of Hell," Singer Graffin Gets Lifetime Achievement Award

by Greg Peterson

On April 26 Greg Graffin, front man for the storied punk rock band Bad Religion, was honored with the Outstanding Lifetime Achievement in Cultural Humanism by the Harvard University Humanist Chaplaincy. Yes, Harvard's secular community has its own chaplain—Greg Epstein.

In a press release announcing the award (which last year went to Salman Rushdie), Epstein said, "so much attention gets heaped onto polemicists like Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens, but Graffin is a truly deserving candidate for the face of atheism."

By his own admission, Graffin doesn't fit easily a rock star stereotype: "I always put education high on my list of priorities because I always thought, 'Wouldn't it be neat if you can have a singer of your favorite band who also has something more to offer than looking cool—which I don't—or dressing cool—which I don't.' I believe thoughts and ideas are far more long-lived than fashion. Those are the things that I try to inspire young people to do, whether it is in the lecture hall or on stage..."

The lecture hall Graffin refers to is at UCLA, where he teaches Life Sciences courses. He earned a PhD in

Zoology at Cornell while touring and recording as a member of Bad Religion, whose latest work is an enhanced version of *New Maps of Hell*, released last year.

In his acceptance speech at Harvard, Graffin said that his "naïve and untested hypothesis" is that good entertainment must provoke thought, and the deluxe *New Maps* certainly succeeds at that level. Some previous efforts were more straightforward in their message—there is nothing subtle about "Sinister Rouge," which takes on the Roman Catholic Church's child-raping priest scandals and violent history—where "New Maps" opts for a more impressionist approach.

A venerable band this musically capable (Bad Religion began in 1980 when Graffin was 15 years old) shouldn't restrict themselves to a narrow style, any more than a truly talented chef should make only tacos. The deluxe *New Maps* is an impressive work that restores a fan's faith in the band's direction.

Regardless of Graffin's musical directions, he seems settled in his preference for rationality over mythology.

"I guess you could say one aspect that was interesting in science that wasn't addressed in my life was

many of the larger questions," Graffin told an interviewer. "Many people are raised in a traditional religious environment; I was not raised in that environment. I had a lot of questions about origins. I was drawn immediately in high school to Darwin's *Origin of Species* as a pretty grand idea, and that drew me into paleontology and earth science."

For atheists not familiar with the work of Bad Religion, it is comparable to some of the harder-rocking songs of Green Day. "Come Join Us," for example, is an iconoclastic song, which Graffin introduced in concert as containing "the scariest three words you'll ever hear from a religious person." The last stanza sums up Graffin's message and attitude admirably, sung from the perspective of a cultic evangelist:

Independent, self-contented, revolutionary / Intellectual, brave, strong, and scholarly / If you're not one of them, you're us already..! So come join us.

In case it's tough to follow the turnabout twist in the lyrics, the "them" is us. With few people publicly praising atheism in such bold terms, no wonder Graffin won that award.

Rochester Gay Pride

Minnesota Atheists made a stand in support of equal rights for all people, regardless of sexual orientation by having a booth in Rochester on Sunday, July 13th. Robin Anderson, Bjorn Watland and Jeannette Sorensen (right) joined with members of Rochester Area Free-thinkers (RAFT) to staff the booth and answer questions from the curious crowd. Reactions were positive, and people enjoyed the buttons and "Get Out of Hell Free" cards. Visitors to the booth included a couple from South America, a Muslim, a Presbyterian, and two female Mormon missionaries. We look forward to visiting Rochester again.



Public Policies Committee Report

by George Kane

Several years ago, the Board created a Committee on Public Policies. We realized that we needed to establish our political positions to provide guidance for our lobbyists and newsletter editors, as well as to present our positions clearly to our members and the world. Of particular concern for us was to identify what issues truly fall under the banner of atheism, to avoid internal conflict over questions on which atheists may responsibly disagree.

Unfortunately, until this spring, the committee hadn't met. I was eager to get the process rolling and so had to accept the project leadership. I was joined on the team by August Berkshire, Steve Petersen, Cynthia Egli, Grant Steves, and Shirley Moll. We divided draft responsibility for topics and then got together for group editing sessions. A ground rule was that each member of the team held a veto over every policy so that disagreements over policies would be referred to the Board of Directors.

The committee reported to the Board at its June meeting with policies on government endorsement of religion, display of religious symbols on public property, prayer at government sessions, government funding of church-based programs, taxation of churches and other nonprofit corporations, gay rights, and reproductive rights. Policies that are committed but did not make it through the review process in time for this initial release were public education, women's rights, end-of-life choices, and stem cell research. At the meeting of the Board in which the policies were adopted, one committee member objected to a single sentence in the gay rights policy statement. However, since the issue was stylistic



George Kane

rather than a question of policy, the Board accepted the policies as submitted, referring the question of rewording back to the committee for consideration in a future revision.

The entire public policy statement is available on our web site at <http://mnatheists.org/content/view/133/71/>. Here are some highlights.

Government endorsement of religion:

Minnesota Atheists is committed to rigorous adherence to the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." As this principle has been extended to all branches of government by the 14th Amendment, and interpreted by court decisions, it guarantees that government may not prefer one religion over another, or religion over non-religion.

Display of religious symbols on public property:

Opponents of the Establishment Clause work to create symbolic government endorsement of their religion by placing religious symbols prominently on public property. Most common among these displays are Ten Commandments monuments and Christmas nativity scenes. While we believe that these displays should always be considered an unconstitutional endorsement of religion, courts have ruled that they are permissible as part of a larger display of diverse content, as long as its history has shown that it has not created the perception that it is an endorsement of religion.

We believe that these displays should be challenged whenever compliance to this standard of diverse content is in question. Our First Amendment Committee will recom-

mend actions to the Board based on the individual merits of each case it comes upon. Responses to be considered include litigation if a plaintiff can be found. Then we may work with groups that specialize in First Amendment cases, such as the American Civil Liberties Union of Minnesota, the Freedom from Religion Foundation, and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, or even religious groups that also support the Establishment Clause. Alternately, we may offer a comparable secular monument to create content balance.

Prayer at government sessions:

The Supreme Court of the United States has given the federal and state legislatures the right to open their sessions with prayer, and prayer has generally been permitted at City Council meetings. Minnesota Atheists holds that in fact the practice is a *prima facie* violation of the Establishment Clause but that if it is permitted it must be non-sectarian and non-denominational. It should be compatible with the views of the entire community, including the nonreligious. The presiding celebrant should be rotated among organizations representing the diverse beliefs of the community. If a representative of Minnesota Atheists should ever have an opportunity to provide the invocation for a government meeting, the invocation should be respectful of the body and its members and appeal for sound judgment and to universal values such as justice and human rights.

Government funding of church-based programs:

Minnesota Atheists supports the blanket prohibition against payment to any religious society as stated in Article 1, Section 16 of the Minnesota State Constitution: "... nor shall any money be drawn from the treas-

(Continued on page 13)

ury for the benefit of any religious societies or religious or theological seminaries.” We oppose also federal funding of social welfare programs that are run by church-based organizations, and would like the courts to recommit to the standards of *the Lemon Test*. Even if government funds are strictly segregated so that none go directly to religious activities, the tax-paid subsidy permits the organization to divert other funds away from the social program.

We therefore call for closing the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. We are also opposed to all earmarks for religious societies in funding bills and call for whatever action is needed to provide legal standing to affected taxpayers to litigate against establishment clause violations.

Taxation of churches and other nonprofit corporations:

Income: IRS tax exempt status provides an exemption from income taxes and allows donors to claim a deduction for funds they donate. Currently, without much review, the IRS gives most religions nonprofit status upon application. The church, however, gives up its right to participate in partisan politics and must not endorse candidates for public office. Secular nonprofits have similar restrictions, although the application and filing process is more in-depth, requires filing an IRS 990 tax form, and provides for annual review of financial statements. Time and again churches violate the requirement to stay out of politics. We call for the IRS to step up enforcement of violations and for all nonprofits to be held to the same standard of reporting.

Property: Today most church property is exempt from taxation. Some states tax church property that is used to generate income, and some do not. Secular nonprofit holdings have a similar exemption but must meet more requirements, while some states that exempt churches from

property taxes do not exempt the properties of secular nonprofits. The prevailing law of the land was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Walz v. Tax Common of the City of New York 1970*, which established that churches should be exempt from property taxation because they provide a public benefit with their charitable works. The court held that this does not violate the Establishment Clause because it does not take money out of the treasury. The *Walz* decision assumes that religions provide a greater good than the costs to society of the lost tax revenue. Consider that most property taxes are used to pay for police and fire services and, in some communities, public schools. We contend that the tax should go with the land and that all properties should pay their fair share thereby lowering the tax rate of each owner as a way of providing for the good of each owner.

Gay Rights:

Minnesota Atheists supports equal rights for all citizens regardless of sexual orientation. This support is based on three rules of law:

1. The Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution.

Section One of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution states “...nor shall any State... deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” Thus the Equal Protection Clause demands that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) citizens be treated the same under the law as heterosexual citizens.

2. Secular laws must have a secular basis.

Any law that would reduce the rights of any class of citizens must have a secular justification. There is no secular reason to deny equal rights and equal protection under the law due to a person’s sexual orientation.

3. Religious tenets for which the only basis is belief in the supernatural should not become

civil law. To turn such religious tenets into civil law is to create a theocracy.

Religious arguments against equal rights and equal protection under the law for GLBT people are based solely on belief in a particular type of god who advocates limiting such rights and protections. As we cannot demonstrate that this god exists, much less confirm its instructions to humanity, we cannot base any secular laws on this supernatural belief.

Reproductive Rights:

The right of women and couples to plan their reproductive lives is the target of a broad range of continuous legal attacks by conservative Christians. Their tactics to end abortion rights include excessive state and local regulation, federal legislation, campaigns to stack the judiciary with opponents of abortion, and constitutional amendment. They also support legislation and FDA regulations to ban or restrict access to varieties of contraceptives. Minnesota Atheists opposes these efforts because of our principle that public policy should never be based on religious values and superstitious thinking.



Answer to Cryptogram

The Founders intended to establish a government that is entirely neutral in matters of religion, that is, a government that is not only prevented from favoring one religion over others, but also is prevented from favoring religion in general. Eddie Tabasch, “The True Meaning of the Establishment Clause.”

Eat & Talk & Eat & Talk & Eat &...

Sometimes it seems like we spend all our time eating and talking, but if that's what you enjoy, Minnesota Atheists offers lots of opportunities!

In addition to the picnic reported on the front page and the spaghetti dinner on the facing page, we offer a lot of regular meetings with food. Check out the "Things to do, Places to go" listing on page 19.

Right: The Public Policies Committee.

Below: The Secular Supper group in which the members take turns hosting a dinner party.

Below right: The 2d and 4th Monday Happy Hour at La Casita Restaurant.

Bottom: The 4th Sunday breakfast Social.



Fifth Sunday Spaghetti Dinner



Sunday, June 29, was an incredibly busy day. It started with the Gay Pride parade and booth in Loring Park, then topped off with a spaghetti dinner. Thirty-seven people attended the spaghetti dinner. Of the proceeds, \$390.54 went to the radio fund and \$100 went for the Building Fund. There were several different spaghetti dishes available and Italian ice cream for dessert. No one left hungry! Sunday, August 31, is the next spaghetti dinner and considering the cost of \$6.66, we are hoping someone will bring devil's food cake or deviled eggs. We will see you then for a wickedly happy time.



Obama Promises to Invigorate Faith and Government Partnership

by George Kane

The greatest disaster for the separation of church and state from the Bush administration is his creation by executive order of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. This office provides federal funds directly to social service programs run by churches and other religious societies, promoting the conservative plan to extract government from providing social services. In the recent case *Hein v. Freedom from Religion Foundation*, the Supreme Court ruled that taxpayers have no standing to challenge the Establishment Clause violations of this office, making it the responsibility of the president alone.

Last month, Minnesota Atheists adopted a policy that calls for this office to be closed, and for federal funding of church programs to be terminated. The presumptive presidential nominee of the Democratic Party, Barack Obama, to the contrary calls for expanding the program, increasing the federal funding of church social services, and enlarging their client base.

In a speech on July 1 in Zanesville, Ohio, Obama unveiled his plan for partnership between the White House and faith-based grassroots groups that will be “a critical part” of his administration. Obama partisans will at least be pleased that, on this issue, he cannot be accused of a policy flip-flop. He has supported government funding of church social service programs all along. He has said in the past that they are especially effective in addiction recovery programs, an assertion for which there is no confirmation from follow-up studies.

Obama has only two criticisms of the faith-based programs of the Bush administration. The first,

and most significant, is that they were consistently underfunded. The second is that the grants from the office became political patronage, photo-ops to promote evangelical groups in Bush’s political base. He plans to remedy these problems by increasing both funding and the influence of faith-based groups on administration policies.

Obama also chided groups like Minnesota Atheists that work to strengthen the separation of church and state, for not facing the facts: “I know there are some who bristle at the notion that faith has a place in the public square. But the fact is, leaders in both parties have recognized the value of a partnership between the White House and faith-based groups.”

As a sop to secularists, he identified two possible failings that could create a problem for the separation of church and state: “First, if you get a federal grant, you can’t use that grant money to proselytize to the people you help and you can’t discriminate against them – or against the people you hire – on the basis of their religion. Second, federal dollars that go directly to churches, temples, and mosques can only be used on secular programs. And we’ll also ensure that taxpayer dollars only go to those programs that actually work.”

Minnesota Atheists’ policy statement rebuts Obama’s analysis: “Even if government funds are strictly segregated so that none go directly to religious activities, the tax-paid subsidy permits the organization to divert other funds away from the social program.” We must remain skeptical, too, that Obama will or even wants to keep the promise that proselytizing and religious activities will be barred from government-funded programs. The Bush administration has declined

to monitor the programs for religious content, claiming that to do so would violate the constitutional requirement for neutrality towards religion, by imposing content-scrutiny that is not applied to secular charities. Since Obama does not want to appear hostile towards religion, he will probably be reluctant to change this policy.

Obama promises that partnership with government will “strengthen faith-based groups.” This directly violates the *Lemon Test*, that government action must not be intended to advance religion, nor involve government in excessive entanglement with it. Yet it is central to Obama’s vision that religion should flourish in social action in every community. After praising two supplemental education programs, Obama concludes “That’s the kind of real progress that can be made when we empower faith-based organizations. And that’s why as President, I’ll expand summer programs like this to serve one million students.” Even more chillingly, Obama promised that “my Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships will also have a broader role – it will help set our national agenda.”

Obama concluded his Zanesville speech with a clear commitment to make the partnership of church and state the core of his domestic policy: “We know that faith and values can be a source of strength in our own lives. That’s what it’s been to me. And that’s what it is to so many Americans. But it can also be something more. It can be the foundation of a new project of American renewal. And that’s the kind of effort I intend to lead as President of the United States.”

At least we know where he stands.

Brett Welch to study at St. Andrews

Minnesota Atheists' philosopher-in-training, Brett Welch, is leaving for post-graduate studies at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland's oldest University.

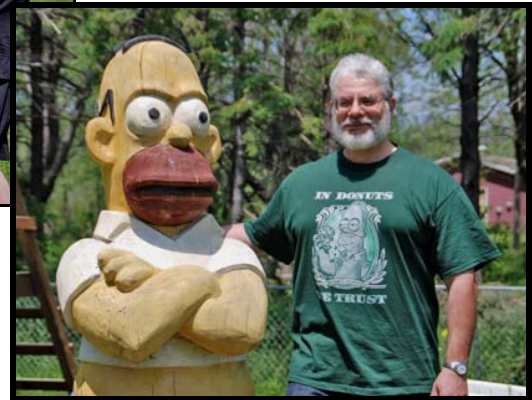
Brett, easily recognized by his flowing, Darwinesque beard, was honored with a party hosted by Robyn Moore at her home and attended by many of his Minnesota Atheists friends. Brett and his late grandmother, Fern Wodtke, were the long time hosts of the 4th Sunday Breakfast Social.

Photos by Tom Riddering and Norman Ehrenreich



Above: Guest-of-honor, Brett Welch (Center) opens his Bon Voyage gifts with George Kane (left) and President August Berkshire.

Above right, hostess Robyn Moore is delighted to receive a gnome candle from candlemaker August Berkshire.



Right: Jim Berri shares a moment with his donut buddy Homer.

Below: Brett's friends wish him well with his studies in Scotland.



Review of *WALL·E* by James Zimmerman

WALL·E
Pixar Animation Studios
97 minutes
Directed by Andrew Stanton

With *WALL·E*, Pixar delivers yet another feast for the eyes in the same tradition as *Toy Story*, *Finding Nemo*, and *Cars*. The visual quality is impressive, the soundtrack eclectic and the characters – even the robotic ones – are very human.

As is true of most science fiction, *WALL·E* presents a decidedly non-theistic view of human's future. As the story takes place over 800 years in the future, the story-tellers take it as a given that there has been no rapture or God-sponsored Armageddon in the interim. Religious claims that God will step in and right the ills of the world have all come to naught by the time *WALL·E* begins. Scenes involving humans also do not show any belief in superstition or the supernatural.

But finding enjoyment in the film for what it leaves out would be missing the point. Since, as stated above, no gods or goddesses ever stepped in to solve humanities problems, anything that needs to be fixed must be done by humans themselves.

This brings us to the title character. *WALL·E* (Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth-Class) is one of countless robots engineered by humans to clean up the enormous amounts of garbage that have piled up over the years of

environmental mismanagement. From various advertisements and news broadcasts scattered around *WALL·E*'s world, we learn that corporate greed, consumerism and a government that did too little, too late are all to blame for the ruinous state the Earth is in by the year 2815. Civilization and culture in that year serves as an honest satire of present day humankind (warning: you might feel as if the film's creators are pointing directly at you as you slouch in your seat, chomp on popcorn and guzzle a jumbo-sized cola). The message is as clear as if it were a documentary: humans and human institutions need to find it in themselves (instead of looking to heaven) to alter the way they behave towards the planet if they wish to see it continue as a habitable sphere for their descendants.

Some of the problems humans encounter in this film are attributed to technological developments. But technology – essentially the application of science – is not entirely pernicious here; it is technology, including *WALL·E* himself that aids humans in facing their problems head on. In this way, the film does not endorse the religious belief of some that modern day conveniences are to be avoided at a risk to one's soul. Rather, it serves as a passionate, albeit entertaining, warning that we should employ our minds to work together and make the right choices about the things we create.

What's more, it is only when the humans begin to question the world around them that they begin to im-

prove their lot. The captain of the aptly-named space faring ship *Axiom* is shown spending hours researching information about a world he never has known. And it is only when they demand answers and reasons, from those in authority that they can finally live to the fullest. In defiance to his directive, the ship's captain declares: "I don't want to survive, I want to live!"

But there's more to the future life than reason and logic. *WALL·E*'s heart is as big as his vocabulary is small, and it is his love that unfolds the story. Indeed, *WALL·E* is largely ignorant of the changes that transpire in his wake. Meanwhile, the futuristic humans appear devoid of such emoting, until they literally get off their butts and look around.

The apocalyptic nature of the future does not fill the entire fill, however. In the happy ending (*WALL·E* is co-produced by Disney, after all), human curiosity and the drive to improve current and future life are triumphant over the problems of the day. Or, more correctly, we are left with a promise that the human spirit, though it may get far off track now and then, *will* triumph.

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

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

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

Positive view of self-reliance: 5/5

Championship of reason: 5/5

Bottom line (out of five): 🍌🍌🍌🍌🍌

(Continued from page 7)

with a skeptical mind.

Several other books are critiqued and exposed. The critique traces the success of the ideas and evaluates the quality of the presentations. Dr. Price has an informal style of writing that makes frequent reference to a wide range of sources. An index of key concepts is included and gives the

range of scholarship applied in this book.

The appendices are essays on the cult phenomena. In some cases, the books reviewed may become the basis of new cults. If the cult survives its growth period and first leader, it may become a denomination or church. The appendices might be read first, so you can put in to perspective the

books reviewed and their potential for developing into a cult.

This book should be widely read to help people understand the shallow, pseudo-psychology of self-help books that are sold as spiritual guides.

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

Sundays, 6:00 p.m., **Atheist/Agnostic AA**. Men's Center, 3249 Hennepin Ave. # 55, Minneapolis, Jason Herrboldt, MplsAtheistAgnosticAA@yahoo.com.

3rd Sunday, 1-3:30 p.m., **Minnesota Atheists monthly meeting**. (Beginning again in September.)

4th Sunday, 10-12 a.m., **Breakfast Social**. Q. Cumbers, 7465 France Avenue South, Edina.

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

1st and 3rd Monday, 6 p.m., **Freethought Toastmasters Club**. Larpenteur Estates apartment complex, 1280 Larpenteur Ave. W., St. Paul. (Park directly in back and follow sidewalk to Party Room.) Roger Belfay, (651) 222-2782 or George Kane, (651) 488-8225.

2nd and 4th Monday, 5-7 pm., **Happy Hour North**. La Casita, 1925 Perimeter

Road, Roseville, just west of the Rosedale mall. George Kane, (651) 488-8225.

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

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

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

4th Wednesday, **Meal and a Reel**, Uptown, Minneapolis (Hennepin Ave. and Lake St.) 6 p.m. meal, 7 p.m. movie. George Kane, (651) 488-8225. Details in Atheists Weekly E-mail.

Thursdays, 7 p.m., **Campus Atheists, Skeptics and Humanists (CASH)** gen-

eral meeting. 3d floor Coffman Memorial Union, 300 Washington Ave. S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455. Contact cash@cashumn.org.

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

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

4th Thursday, 6:30 p.m., **Minnesota Atheists board meeting**. Location varies. George Kane, (651) 488-8225.

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

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

Minnesota Atheists

www.mnaatheists.org

P.O. Box 6261, Minneapolis MN 55406

JOIN OR RENEW MEMBERSHIP

- \$35 – Individual Membership
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All memberships include newsletter

\$25 -- Newsletter Only

DONATE TO SPECIAL FUNDS

- \$ _____ General Expense / Outreach Fund
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I authorize Minnesota Atheists to bill my credit card each month (minimum \$10/month) for one year or until my card expires, whichever comes first.

Bank Name: _____

Payment by: Check (enclosed) for \$ _____ payable to **Minnesota Atheists**, or go online to our website at

MinnesotaAtheists.org and use our link to PayPal to make a credit card or other electronic payment.

Name: _____ Phone (____) _____

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

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

Seeing Things That Aren't There

The following dialogue between two characters occurred on the “CSI: Crime Scene Investigation” TV show, in an episode called “Go to Hell”. The episode first aired on CBS TV, October 11, 2007.

Reverend Rhodes (exorcist): “Mr. Grissom, do you believe in a separate, living evil?”

Grissom (investigator): “You’re a primitive man on the savannah. You see something move out of the corner of your eye. You assume it’s a hyena. You run; you live. If you assume it’s the wind and you’re wrong, you die. We have the genes of the ones who ran.”

Submitted by August Berkshire

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