

The Minnesota Atheist

Minnesota Atheists

Established 1991

Positive Atheism in Action SM

Volume 19 Number 5

May 2009

May Meeting

ACLU MN vs. AV TiZA

Put the energy from the Day of Reason to good use on May 17, as Chuck Samuelson, Executive Director of ALCU MN drops by the Ridgedale Library at 2 p.m. for a presentation on ACLU MN's current lawsuit against a charter school in Apple Valley known as TiZA. Those who are not familiar with the case will learn about how this charter school has violated the separation of church and state and what steps the ALCU MN takes leading up to a lawsuit to attempt to resolve issues without litigation.

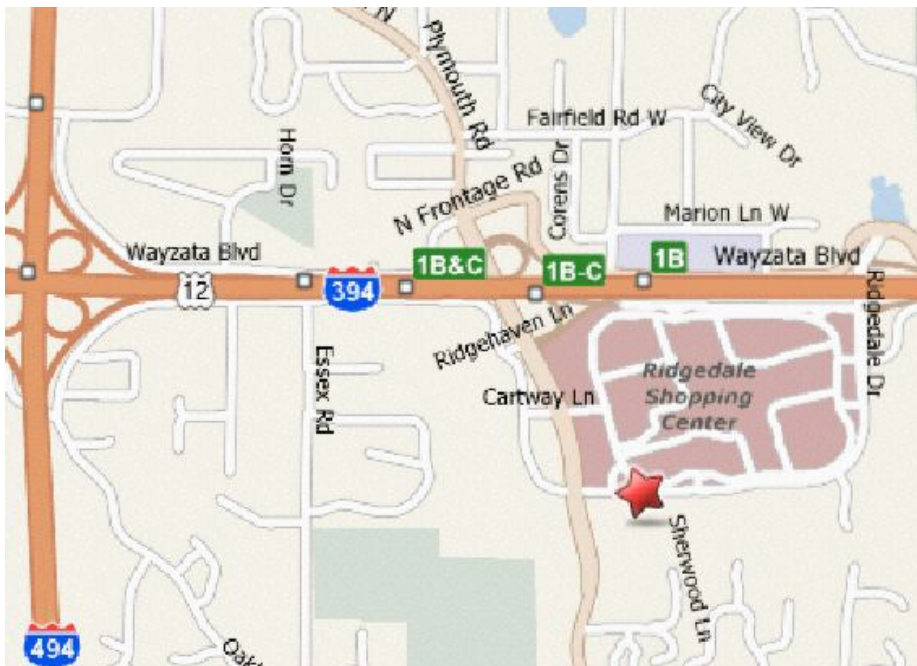
TiZA is accused of violating the separation of church and state on several issues. The school has

a prayer posted at the entrance, girls are prohibited from wearing short sleeves, and school buses don't leave until the hour after school ends, which is when religious studies classes are held, which most students are enrolled in.

This case is important for several reasons. There are clear concerns at the school, with regard to the endorsement of a particular religion. However, when the Minnesota Department of Education investigated claims, they did not see any violations, but urged the school to better separate religious expression from the school day. What this means is that the rules

for Charter Schools in Minnesota need to be written more clearly to protect the separation of church and state so litigation becomes unnecessary. Other religious groups are also watching the outcome of this lawsuit to see how the court will rule. If ACLU MN is not successful, this could mean that your tax dollars could be used to fund other schools with shared religious service facilities, daily worship, and after school religious studies classes.

After the meeting, we will be gathering for an early dinner to discuss the meeting further.



**MNA Meeting on
Sunday May 17th
Ridgedale Library
12601 Ridgedale Drive
Minnetonka**

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

In This Issue...

| | |
|----------------------|----|
| President's Column | 3 |
| Irwin Celebration | 3 |
| Losing Miller's God | 4 |
| Column Response | 5 |
| Book Review | 6 |
| Book Review | 7 |
| April Meeting | 8 |
| <i>Rota Fortunae</i> | 9 |
| Column Response II | 10 |
| Spaghetti Dinner | 11 |
| Cryptogram | 11 |
| Cable Report | 12 |
| Financial Report | 12 |
| <i>Earth</i> | 13 |
| The Sunny Skeptic | 14 |
| Things To Do | 15 |

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

Minnesota Atheists Mission Statement

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

The Minnesota Atheist

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

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

**President's Column
by Bjorn Watland**

Positive Atheism is not "Friendly Atheism."

Face it. Just by identifying as an atheist, you will offend some people. If you go one step further and voice your opinion and one more step to actually question what someone means when they say, "I'm a believer," you've already turned a lot of people off.

This is the main reason why people engage in self-censorship. I've done it myself. I would rather keep my mouth shut than cause a rift between friends or family. However, how can we benefit from keeping quiet? How can we benefit from speaking out?

If we stay quiet, the people we know will form an opinion of what atheists are like from what they read or what others tell them. If we shut up, our friends and family will think that having a Christmas pageant at a public school is a nice idea or that Intelligent Design deserves a fair shake with evolution. Not all of our friends and family will behave this way, but your opinion matters. Your point of view shouldn't be hidden

just because you don't happen to believe in a god.

So, how do we benefit from speaking out? Many friends and family I've spoken to are surprised that I'm an atheist. This means that the stereotype in their mind of what an atheist is, is something different than what I represent. The best way to break down stereotypes is to let people know you're an atheist. It doesn't have to be in an assertive way. Maybe you have an atheist t-shirt or sticker. Maybe you read an atheist book in the lunchroom at work. If you're talking with someone and they say something like, "I just can't believe how someone can deny God's existence when there is such diversity of life on Earth," you can respond with something like, "I think life on Earth is fascinating, but I don't think that God exists." This may spark a heated debate, but what is most im-



portant is to explain your position and listen to your friend make theirs. It's not your job to change their mind. What is most important is that they understand your perspective.

Atheists can gain so much with such small discussions. We're not running around insulting family and friends for their beliefs, but that doesn't mean that there aren't consequences. Some family and friends will think differently about you. Some may feel it is their duty to change your mind about believing in God. What I've found helpful is if I remind them that I respect their right to believe and I deserve the same respect in return.

Despite these risks by taking small steps, atheism can begin to stop being a curse and become a dignified position. We don't have to be concerned with "winning" every discussion, but the better we are at presenting our opinions the more people will develop their stereotypes about atheists from you, rather than from somewhere else.

Celebration of David Irwin's Life & Legacy

Saturday, May 16, 2009, 6-9pm

The Quatrefoil Library will honor their co-founder at a party at the Library on May 16, 2009, 6-9 pm. Help to continue a dream come true along with his co-founder, Dick Hewetson, wine, hors d'oeuvres, and music by a jazz trio.

David was a book collector, who, with Dick Hewetson, had a vision of opening a GLBT Library for the community. His tireless efforts have succeeded and the Quatrefoil is

open and doing business with more material than ever before!

To continue David's lasting legacy, contributions to the new Irwin

Fund, supporting the Library, are appreciated.

Visit:

<http://www.quatrefoilibrary.org/>



Losing Miller's God



by August Berkshire

On April 8, 2009, I went to the College of St. Catherine, a Roman Catholic university in St. Paul, to attend a presentation by evolutionary biologist Kenneth R. Miller. The lecture was entitled “Finding Darwin’s God,” after his book by the same name, which came out about ten years ago.

I remember reading *Finding Darwin’s God* awhile back. The first half of the book was an excellent defense of evolution and critique of creationism. The second half of the book was a poor defense of god belief. I remember thinking that if Miller had only applied the logic from the first half of his book to the second half, he would be an atheist.

Miller was one of the star witnesses on the side of science in the “intelligent design” case in Dover, Pennsylvania a couple years ago. He’s now come out with a new book, *Only a Theory*.

“Darwin’s God” that Miller refers to is evidently a supernatural creator that Darwin implies exists in the final sentence of *Origin of Species*: “There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on ac-

ording to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.”

Miller sees an overall god-intelligence in the universe, but not the day-to-day micromanaging of evolution that Intelligent Design advocates allege. This god is supposedly the First Cause and set nature’s laws in motion – including genetic mutation, natural selection, and heredity; in other words, evolution – and then stepped back and let the universe run itself. So, this god works through unguided evolution to create new species.

What Miller didn’t tell us during his talk was that by the end of his life Darwin had become an agnostic. In other words, Darwin himself had lost Darwin’s God.

One of the reasons Darwin abandoned the all-powerful, all-loving Christian god was because of the cruelty he saw in nature.

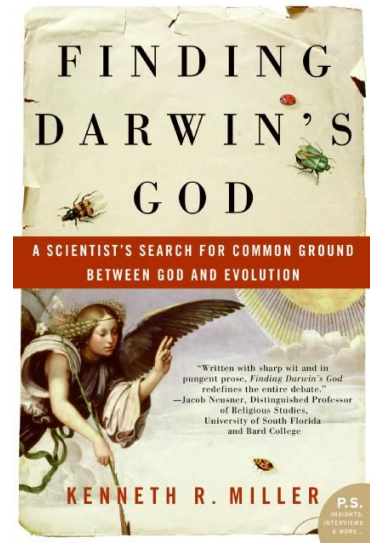
After Miller’s lecture I spoke with him and asked him how he, a Catholic, could reconcile the cruelty in nature with the idea of a loving god.

I first asked why God couldn’t have made all creatures vegetarians, so that some animals wouldn’t have to painfully and cruelly kill and eat others. Miller said that that would mean that God would be stepping in and interfering with the natural evolutionary processes that he had set in motion. (Evidently God avoids miracles these days.)

I then asked Miller about painful human birth defects where the child dies very young. Why couldn’t God have arranged it so that all genetic mutations were neutral or beneficial mutations? His answer was the same: that that would mean that God would be stepping in and interfering

with the natural evolutionary processes that he had set in motion.

It seems that Miller understands the theological problem with a god who has to constantly intervene in his creation. He once stated “[I]f God purposely designed 30 horse species that later disappeared, then God’s primary attribute is incompetence. He can’t make it right the first



time.” (“Educators debate ‘intelligent design’ ” by Richard N. Ostling, *Star Tribune*, March 23, 2002, p. B9.)

It seemed to me that this god wasn’t of much use. “So in other words,” I said, “this world operates exactly the way we would expect it to operate if there were no god.” Miller agreed, citing retired Vatican astronomer George Coyne who said that the universe doesn’t need God.

Again, I asked him how he was able to reconcile the problem of natural evil with a loving god. He said that he was able to do so, but he didn’t provide details as to how. I told him I have never been able to do it.

Other people were waiting to talk

(Continued from page 11)

Response to Column in Star Tribune



by **George Kane**

The argument in “Imagine there’s no heaven ... (or hell),” David Lebedoff’s opinion column in the April 5 Star Tribune, is built upon vacuous suppositions and unbridged chasms of logic. The market collapsed, Lebedoff concludes, because the rich and powerful have lost meaning in their lives and abandoned themselves to the antisocial values of hedonism. Yet a 2008 Pew poll shows that 74% of Americans believe in life after death, and no studies show that this belief is at all lower among the economic elite.

In fact, their behavior is determined by the market economy. Those who manage “our production and our wealth” act to maximize profit, as they have done for centuries.

Lebedoff tells us that “If you only go around once, then the main thing is to have fun.” Yet godless ethical systems, such as utilitarianism and rationalism maintain no such goal. Neither has any empirical study ever found a higher level of moral behavior among Christians than among atheists. To

the contrary, atheists are practically unrepresented in the prison population.

Lebedoff writes that “The fanatics who murder for 72 virgins dishonor the concept of afterlife,” yet surely the same people Lebedoff judges as disgraced would with equal conviction condemn him. This shows that the moral direction provided by belief in an afterlife is arbitrary and subjective. He concludes that “the nation that responds to their attack with renewed unity does truly achieve the framework that restores moral behavior.” But the economic collapse that began his diatribe occurred after this mythical “renewed unity ... restore(d) moral behavior.”

Atheists look for moral direction in the consequences of their actions, rather than pleasing a supernatural god. People who decide their behavior on their belief in rewards and punishment in an afterlife are not guided by the same moral impulse. They are merely intimidated.

Read another response to Lebedoff’s column on page 12 –ed.

Electronic MNA Newsletters

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

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

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

Mark Your Calendars!

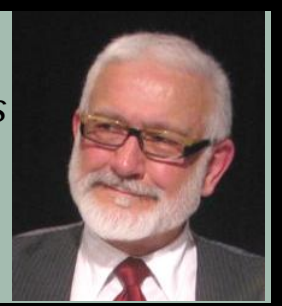
Intergroup Secular Labor Day Picnic at
Sechler Park
Northfield, MN

Sunday, September 6th, 11:00 am - 3:00 pm

More than 8 freethought groups from the Midwest will be coming together in secular solidarity to celebrate Labor Day weekend. Potluck food, games, and a fossil hunting excursion are just a few of the events planned. More information will be available as the date draws near. Hope to see you there!

Comments from the whip
Grant Steves

Book Review
Introducing Anthropology of Religion
Jack David Eller
Routledge , 2007 352 pages



American atheists are familiar with and focused on Christianity in its various forms. However, it is important for us to expand our knowledge of what religion is and how it operates in various cultures. In understanding the evolution of religion, we will understand its role in any society, regardless of the dogma that is manifested.

Dr. Eller defines religion as a “profoundly human and social phenomenon – arising from an addressing intellectual, emotional, and social source – in which the non-human and ‘supernatural’ are seen as profoundly human and social.” Religion as a social construct can be studied by scientific means. We are able to

examine its elements and discover how they are developed in a particular culture.

Religion is about beliefs that explain what kinds of things exist in the world, what they are like, and what they have done. Beliefs are “‘discursive,’ something to talk about and to ‘know,’ both flowing from and to a view of religion and culture as a language or a ‘text’ to be spoken or read.”

We come to realize that belief is a fuzzy concept, and that it is culturally specific, rather than culturally universal. He informs us that some societies have no word that would translate as a belief. We are led to understand that in some cases there are at least five levels of personal belief: “acquaintance or familiarity with the belief, understanding of the belief in the conventional way, advancing the belief as ‘true,’ holding the belief as

important or central to the believer’s life, and following the belief as a motivational or guiding force.” Any belief in society will fall anywhere along this spectrum of description.

Closely related to beliefs are the symbols used to represent those beliefs. Symbols are the transcendent and abstract way of relating what religious belief is about.

Symbols and language are closely related. Language is used to communi-

Religion has evolved beyond the tribal experience and is now a global phenomenon.

cate objective facts and subjective feelings. A subset of language is religious. It is a language that encourages humans to be consummate with nonhuman beings or agents. Humans create a language to relate to spiritual entities. Humans who direct this power of religious dimensions also use emotions. He draws the conclusion that religious talk provides those dimensions. The conclusion he arrives at is that religious talk provides a model or paradigm for human thought, action, and organization to communicate with their supernatural entities.

Observation of religion reveals behavior that is created as ritual both verbal and nonverbal. Examples are found in myths, prayer, chanting, and singing. Religion is a mode of action as well as a system of belief. Religious rituals are designed to have social effects. The rituals are believed

to have healing effects or transformative influences.

Eller examines the influence of religion on a culture’s morality and social order. Religion is involved in change in a society, but religion itself also changes. New religions are created during the process. These religious movements may help the revitalization of tradition or create more modern experiences.

Religion has evolved beyond the tribal experience and is now a global phenomenon. Because of this global reach and diversity of religion, it creates differences that provoke violence. These religions serve to justify violence. Religion explains the need of the violence, and the justification for perpetrating it.

Other movements create tensions and pull religion in different directions. We are pulled toward secularism and irreligion. The development of secularism confronts the religious belief system and its rituals. At the same time, fundamentalism emerges as a reaction to secularism. The tension that is created makes a resolve to expose religion as a social construct without supernatural connections. In turn the fundamentalist has the need to persuade others into accepting their return to a more conservative bend.

Eller concludes with an examination of religion in the United States as it affects the courts and Public Square.

His book has been described as one of the most “engaging, comprehensive, and compelling overviews of anthropology of religion ever pub-

(Continued on page 10)

Book Review

Lost Christianities

Bart D. Ehrman

Oxford University Press, 2005 320 pages

Vic Tanner



The early history of Christianity is murky and confusing, even to scholars. Even though Christianity separated itself from many other religions by relying heavily on written texts, many of those documents – documents that would fill in many gaps in the movement's early history – are missing. The loss of some of these documents is just due to serendipity. But the untimely disappearance of some of the texts, however, was entirely intentional due to a concentrated effort by the orthodox churches to wipe the record clean of any belief that they deemed heretical. This purging of documents left only hints and faint memories of rival movements in the Christian religion. In *Lost Christianities*, Bart Ehrman looks at some of the early forms of Christianity that have all but disappeared from existence.

In the first section, *Forgeries and Discoveries*, Ehrman explores some of the more popular textual finds in the world of Christian archeology and examines their validity. Many of the non-canonical Christian texts that have been found have been deemed forgeries (though, it is important not to be too judgmental in the use of the word since there are even forgeries in the New Testament we have today). One of the most well known recently discovered Christian documents is the Gospel of Peter, which features a resurrection scene that would seem rather out of place in any Sunday service today; Christ, freshly arisen from the tomb, stands like a giant with his head in the sky and the cross walks behind him

speaking to the crowd. As wild as it may seem, the Gospel of Peter is a genuine ancient document and, according to the number of ancient copies we have, it appears to have been much more popular than the



Gospel of Mark. In another discovered document, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, we learn that the Apostle Paul had a female traveling companion (totally platonic, of course) that assisted him in spreading the word. There is the intriguing case of the Secret Gospel of Mark which implies that Christ is to have taken a homosexual lover.

The second section of the book, *Heresies and Orthodoxies*, provides fascinating descriptions of the major Christian belief systems of antiquity. There were the Gnostics, who taught that the world we know was the creation of an incompetent god and that Jesus was the possessor of secret knowledge that he would pass on only to the spiritually elite. There

were the Ebionites, that fully accepted the practices of Judaism, and there were the Marcionites, that fully rejected them, claiming that the Jews were followers of an amoral god. There were movements that believed in one god; there was one that believed in 365 gods. There have always been variations in any religions movement, but the concept of “orthodoxy” seems to have been rather unique to the Christian church. If it had not been for the strict concept of orthodoxy that began with the Roman church, the face of Christianity would be virtually unrecognizable today.

Part three nicely puts all this historical information together and uses it to examine the possible reasons that the orthodox churches survived while their theological competitors eventually died out. Ehrman also gives an overview of some of the last century's most influential philosophers. Their revolutionary theories finally broke away from the theological mold and dared to question the reliability of the New Testament. Their works are still providing inspiration for the likes of Robert Price and Earl Doherty, as well as creating major headaches for Christian apologists.

We still don't know exactly how one sect of the widely diverse 2nd century phenomena known as Christianity survived to become what we know today. What might the face of modern Christianity look like if the beliefs of the Ebionites or the

(Continued on page 8)

Review of April Meeting

by George Kane

On April 19, the featured speaker at our public meeting was Jerry Dincin of Chicago, the new president of the Final Exit Network. FEN is a four year old organization that supports the right of individuals to choose the time of their death. Minnesota Atheists has supported this issue since 1999, when we presented an award *in absentia* to Dr. Jack Kevorkian after a Michigan court convicted him of second degree murder for assisting in the death of a man with terminal ALS.

Dincin told a story of legal persecution even more extreme than the Kevorkian case. While Kevorkian directly participated in the suicide by administering a fatal injection, the Final Exit Network meticulously avoids any active role in suicides. Although FEN provided the information needed to end one's life painlessly, the client alone was entirely responsible for every step in the process. They took care to avoid ever recommending suicide to a client. The only support the FEN provided was hand-holding, to provide psychological comfort. Kevorkian was a provocateur, who tried to win the battle over assisted suicide by daring the state to prosecute him. The Final Exit Network, to the contrary, meticulously avoided violating any laws.

But the state of Georgia saw things differently. In February



George Kane

they arrested four officers of the Final Exit Network for assisting in a suicide by a member who suffered from cancer of the throat and mouth. Most astonishingly, Georgia decided to shut the FEN down by prosecuting it under

Georgia's Racketeering Influenced Corrupt Organization (RICO) law. State and federal RICO laws were written to combat the mafia. In a coordinated operation, Georgia conducted raids in Arizona, Georgia, Florida, Maryland, Michigan, Ohio, Missouri, Colorado, and Montana, and seized \$550,000 in FEN bank accounts. The seizures forced them to raise \$50,000 for legal expenses so far, and have effectively put the FEN out of operation.

Dincin expects the Final Exit Network and the arrested officers to be cleared of all charges, but that is not likely to happen any time soon. Unlike nearly every other state, Dincin explained, the laws of Georgia do not give defendants the right to a speedy trial. FEN may be kept in legal limbo, with their assets frozen, indefinitely.

An impromptu appeal from Steve Petersen collected over \$200 for the FEN's legal defense fund. Members who wish to donate to their legal defense should call 866-230-2471 or email info@finalexitnetwork.org for instructions.

Dincin stated that the Final

Exit Network supports clients "who are suffering intolerably from an irreversible condition which has become more than they can bear." The program of Final Exit Network accepts members with cancer, ALS, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, Alzheimer's disease, congestive heart failure, emphysema, and other incurable illnesses.

(Continued from page 7)

Marcionites took hold, rather the Church of Rome? Could these competing variations have ignited belief the way the eventual victors did? Or, if all these belief systems survived, would doubt as to the validity of the Jesus story have begun much earlier? Perhaps variation in beliefs is a key to the death of any religious movement and it was only the dictatorial enforcement of doctrine that has allowed Christianity to survive as long as it has. Examination of these now defunct religions may create more questions than they could possibly answer. In any case, the most important lesson to take away from Ehrman's *Lost Christianities* is that the first few centuries of the Christian phenomena were far from the unified movement that fundamentalists claim. There were, in fact, several major branches of Christian thought that caused major conflicts amongst believers; conflicts that put the theological differences between Christian sects today to shame.

Rota Fortunae

by George Kane

I have a new job with a financial services company that provides a lot of training that I have to attend. One recent training session dealt with theoretical mechanics of the market system. As you might expect in a business-training session, the presentation was freighted with assumptions, such as that the self-correcting mechanisms of the market will always return to the way they were before an episodic crisis. I consider this to be a superstitious view of the market economy.

But while listening to the lecture, I was thinking how market precepts apply to the marketplace of ideas. We are involved in a marketplace battle on several fronts, or products: atheism vs. god-belief, evolution vs. creationism, science vs. superstition, reason vs. belief, and ethics based on consequences in peoples' lives vs. divine declaration. We are confident that we have already won the intellectual arguments on merit, but the question is: why can we not drive our opponents out of the marketplace?

Psychologically, most Americans prefer the comforts of religion to the uncertainties of life, and socially they prefer commonality and acceptance in a nation where god-believers predominate. But like the economic market, religious orthodoxy waxes and wanes in cycles. Fortunately for the secular history of our nation, it was at a low ebb when our nation was born, and the founders were heavily influenced by the Enlightenment. Christianity rebounded, however,

in the so-called "Great Awakening" that followed. The political importance of religion was likewise at low ebb in the 1960s, but bounced back up in the 1980s with the rise of the religious right.

Throughout the history of America, every economic recession has been followed by a recovery, and every period of sustained growth has ended in a recession. One cannot conclude from this, however, that the current recession (or any recession) will end with a market correction. Certain operations of the market are necessarily cyclical, like overstocked inventories being depleted after cutbacks in production. But other market forces work in one direction only, advancing the economy through history. For example, the ever-increasing population drives long term growth of Gross Domestic Product, rather than remaining at stasis or returning to previous levels. The loss of American jobs to emergent nations due to the internationalization of consumer markets and capital outlets, however, is unidirectional. It will be "corrected" only when the level of compensation and standard of living of the American worker matches that of workers in India and China, where those jobs have gone. Because these and other factors are never reversed by market correction, it is quite possible that the market will at some time be fundamentally transformed, whether by systemic evolution or by revolution. When economic crises are as broad, deep and widespread as the current one, they

threaten the continued existence of the market economy.

Likewise, the ground of the atheist/theist debate has significantly shifted. First, while we remain a minority, the percentage of atheists has grown significantly over the last 18 years. According to the American Religious Identification Survey 2008, those with no stated religious preference, atheist, or agnostic has grown from 8.2% in 1990 to 15.0% in 2008. In earlier times, dissidents from religious orthodoxy were rarely explicit atheists. Second, science has demystified the history of life and discredited the religious explanations, such as the Genesis narrative. Third, the global War on Terrorism has exposed fundamentalist Islam as the inspiration for paramilitary groups that pose an existential threat to secular governments around the world. This has discredited the common opinion that religion is reliably peaceful and constructive.

The Wheel of Fortune is an ancient analogy to both the caprice of life and its cyclical, repetitive nature. Shakespeare personified fate in *Hamlet* and had her "break all the spokes and fellies from her wheel." The imagery was used by Cicero, and in the Tarot it is the tenth card of the Major Arcana. But all analogies have limitations, and we should not be deluded that markets must run in cycles for perpetuity. The cycles of religion may be close to a breakdown, creating at last an opportunity for the ultimate triumph of reason.

Non-belief Does Not Equal Immorality

by Eric Jayne

[Editor's note: The follow response to an article David Lebedoff (author of The Same Man) that was published in the April 5th Star Tribune. His argument was that non-belief in heaven and hell is what led to the current woes of the economy and other immoralities. He further argued that in order to care about world events, society's best interests, and the well-being of future generations, a belief in Judgment Day was necessary to keep citizens in check. He suggested that George Orwell would agree with this argument. Here's a link to Lebedoff's article: <http://www.startribune.com/opinion/commentary/42442402.html?elr=KArksUUUU>]

David Lebedoff desperately tries to connect the economic crisis and other immoralities to free-thinking secularists who don't believe in heaven and hell. His article is littered with unsubstantiated accusations and baseless suppositions suggesting that a lack of belief in a Judgment Day naturally



Secularists believe in the sanctity of humankind and the earth on which we live.

lends itself to self-serving hedonism.

But it seems to me it's the mega-churches and mega-evangelists, like the affluent Mac Hammond and Joel Osteen, who condone greed with their message of God-approved riches for Chris-

tians. And the *Left Behind* series, with its apocalyptic message, leaves Christians with little incentive to improve our world.

We secularists—consisting of atheists, agnostics and humanists—believe in the sanctity of humankind and the earth on which we live.

Albert Einstein got it right when he said: "Ethical behavior should be based effectually on sympathy, education and social ties; no religious basis is necessary. Man would indeed be in a

UPDATE:

A few days after his letter was published, Eric received this anonymous letter in his mailbox (at right). Notice the persuasive reasoning and appeals to logic that make dismissing Christianity inexcusable.

(Continued from page 6)

lished" (Stephen Glazier, Professor of Anthropology at University of Nebraska-Lincoln). It is a brilliant scientific examination of a topic that affects all humans. Eller provides an insight into religion from the viewpoint of an atheist and scientist. He provides an understanding of the religious reality that we all must have an interest in within our world.

ERIC,

RE: YOUR LETTER TO THE EDITOR,
STAR TRIBUNE.

SECULARISTS = FOOLS.

Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.
[C. S. Lewis](#)

You don't have a soul. You are a Soul. You have a body.
[C. S. Lewis](#)



Fifth Sunday Spaghetti Dinner

On Sunday, March 29th, Minnesota Atheists hosted their traditional fifth-Sunday dinner. For \$6.66, attendees were treated to a buffet of delicious comestibles. Some sort of higher power must have been pleased with the gathering, as he / she / it saw fit to bless the crowd with agreeable weather, permitting the group to enjoy the day both inside and out.

The next dinner (a building fundraiser) will be held on May 31st. See page 15 for more details.



(Continued from page 4)

with Kenneth Miller, so we parted company, agreeing to disagree. As I walked back to my car, I thought: Miller has all but admitted that there is no actual evidence for a god, and that certainly a god wasn't involved in the daily process of evolution. And yet Miller believes in a god. This must mean that he believes on a basis other than evidence. In other words, on faith. Evidently the belief came first and the rationalizations second.

Miller was raised by Roman Catholic parents and is "coincidentally" a Roman Catholic himself. Of all the varieties of god belief he could have chosen, he "just happened" to pick the one he was raised with. Indoctrination has trumped evidence. To me, this seems like a very unintelligent design.

Freethought Cryptogram
Iaoqfqcs qh npa hqfp ct npa cjjiahaz
liagnkia, npa pagin ct g paginoahh vcioz,
gsz npa hcko ct hckooahh lcszqnqesh.
-Bgio Ugid

Cable Report

by Steve Petersen

In April we recorded two programs. Grant Steves interviewed Tim Stanley of Planned Parenthood of Minnesota and the Dakotas. The subjects covered were Planned Parenthood in Minnesota and the Region and Planned Parenthood's National Program. If you would like to help on the cable program or sponsor the program on your cable access station or have ideas for a future program please contact me at spetersen175@comcast.org.

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

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

Cable Schedule:

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

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

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

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

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

St. Cloud: Channel 12. Thursday



Above: Grant Steves, left, discusses Planned Parenthood with Tim Stanley. Photo credit: Grant Hermanson.

8:30 p.m. Sponsor: Jack Richter.

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

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

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



Financial Report— March 2009

| | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Building Fund: | \$1,228.48 |
| Guy Harper | \$50.00 |
| Geraldine Jensen | \$20.00 |
| Brian Knoblock | \$678.76 |
| Christopher Matthews | \$50.00 |
| Vanita Mishra | \$100.00 |
| Daniel Norte | \$35.72 |
| Bjorn Watland | \$44.00 |
| James Whitney | \$25.00 |
| Vern Young | \$100.00 |
| Anonymous | \$125.00 |

| | |
|--------------------|----------------|
| Radio Fund: | \$40.00 |
| Matthew Dittloff | \$25.00 |
| James Krahn | \$15.00 |

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Visibility (General) Fund: | \$305.52 |
| Kirk Buchanan | \$15.00 |
| Rod Chelberg | \$10.00 |
| Neil Clark | \$15.00 |
| Kenneth Heacock | \$150.00 |
| Geraldine Jensen | \$10.00 |
| Paul Redleaf | \$60.50 |
| Anonymous | \$45.00 |



James Zimmerman

Film Review: *Earth*

***Earth*, 96 minutes, released April 22, 2009
Directed by Alastair Fothergill and Mark Linfield**

Disney attempts to recapture the success of their 1950s series *True-life Adventures* (their collection of multi-Oscar winning nature documentaries) with the release of *Earth*. *Earth* is the first in a line of proposed projects under the Magic Kingdom's DisneyNature independent film label, created in 2008.

Striving to present events in chronological order over the course of a single calendar year, *Earth* has been billed as "following the migration paths of three animal families." But that's only part of the story, as the three families (polar bears, elephants, humpback whales) combined account for only about half the screen time. Interspersed throughout, *Earth* shows the mating rituals of New Guinean birds-of-paradise, the predator-prey relationship of wolves and caribou, the demanding search for water across the African continent and, in a humorous segment, a family of ducklings' first "flight" out of the nest.

Being Disney, the film-makers use every trick of the trade. With footage largely culled from the BBC program *Planet Earth*, we are treated to expansive aerial scenes of migrating throngs of animals, slowed down footage of great white sharks breaching out of the water to capture their meals (a taste of nature so captivating it deserves—and gets—repeated showings), time-lapse segments of a forest floor greening and flowers opening up their enticements to their unsuspecting pollinators. Filming took place in 64 countries, including

Nepal, where the producers were given access to spy planes enabling them to record the first ever footage of aerial shots over Mt. Everest. The documentary covers the planet from north to south—it begins on the Arctic ice and ends on the shores of Antarctica. In between we are shown forests, waterfalls, oceans, jungles, mountains, and deserts and there is scarcely a moment when the screen does not amaze—from the small close-ups of a duckling scrambling to its feet to the low-earth orbit shots of the sun rising over the orb of the planet. All told, at \$40 million, this is the most expensive documentary ever created.

James Earl Jones provides narration, and besides fawning over the beauty and light-heartedly commenting on the funnier moments, he offers several truly fascinating bits of information. While we watch the uneasy alliance between elephants and lions at a small, lone watering hole, Jones notes that the elephants, with their superior size, dominate by day, but the lions, with their legendary feline vision, dominate the night. He also points out that half of the world's oxygen is produced, not in the rain forests, but in the coniferous tree line where arctic meets temperate.

The narrator takes the opportunity to comment on environmental issues; not surprising as this film was released on Earth Day, and its subject matter lends it to such discussions. The warnings and respect the film's creators dispense, however, are subtle: the main message here is the planet's beauty, after all, and the dia-

logue is careful to not turn off those who do not consider themselves green. They are successful in this regard; it's much easier to win people over to caring for the earth when showing them footage of the precious and spectacular planet, rather than forcing them to listen to a politician.

Earth is appropriate for children, though some might be scared by scenes of animals capturing their prey. In true Disney fashion, the scene cuts before anything brutal happens, but there are brief shots of carnivores tagging their prey with the paws and clamping down on the necks of their victims. If you do go, and your little ones haven't gotten too antsy by the end, stay for the credits: a split-screen shows the audience how some of the unique and difficult scenes were captured on film (perhaps this is Disney attempting to preemptively answer the charges of staged shots that marred the *True-life* film *White Wilderness*). Both informative and humorous, these brief glimpses at the cinematographer's adventures is among the most entertaining of the entire documentary.

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: 4/5

Bottom line: 4/5

The Sunny Skeptic

Crystal Dervetski

Atheists Ask Atheists, part 2

In the course of writing publicly about atheism, I have come

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

“Do you believe in ghosts/UFOs/Big Foot/Etc.?”

Well, I personally do not. I am skeptical about almost everything. I think that not believing in a god means that you probably couldn't believe in an afterlife, and hence it would be difficult to believe in ghosts, at least in any traditional sense or definition.

You will find atheists who do believe in these things. What I tell people who are new to the group is that the only thing you will find that we all have in common is that we are atheists, meaning only that we do not believe in a god or gods. Other than that, every other topic or idea is pretty much fair game, and any similarities you do encounter are just icing on the cake.

“So you think that nothing happens after you die?”

Correct. Most atheists do not believe that anything supernatural happens after a person dies. Many natural

processes occur after death; these processes have been proven time and again by science and observation. Much is made of the idea of the laws of thermodynamics, and the idea that energy can neither be created nor destroyed, so the energy from our bodies and minds must live on after we die. It does live on in natural processes, such as decomposition, but most atheists usually do not believe that it lives on spiritually. Again, you may find atheists who believe that something supernatural occurs after you die, so it really depends on the person.

“Doesn't it scare you that nothing happens after you die?”

You will find that most atheists experience a real sense of well-being



concerning the idea that there is not an afterlife. The possibility that an afterlife does not exist doesn't mean a free-for-all, or “do-anything-you-want kind of existence. Rather, it involves the realization that this is the only life we have to live, and we must make the most of it while we are here and alive. Many atheists find it odd and strange that people who believe in an afterlife can at times be more frightened of the idea of death than those who aren't waiting for anything.

“What is a Minnesota Atheists Meet Up like for a new person?”

Meet Ups can be intimidating, whether you are new or not. Meeting new people is almost always the same: some people are nervous, some are excited, and *no one* knows what to expect. The great thing about a Minnesota Atheists Meet Up is that you already know that you have something in common with the other people around you, so that's a wonderful starting point for conversation.

From what I've seen from Meet Ups, you get out of it what you put into it. If you are willing to meet new people, they will be willing to meet you. Help to keep the conversation rolling, and just relax and have fun! The people that I have met at Meet Ups so far have been very kind and welcoming at all of the events.

Find Minnesota Atheists Meet Ups for the Minneapolis/St. Paul area and Mankato area here:

<http://www.meetup.com/minnesota-atheists/>

<http://www.meetup.com/Southern-Minnesota-Atheists-Meetup-Group/>

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

Cryptogram answer

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.

-Karl Marx

Minnesota Atheists

www.mnatheists.org

P.O. Box 6261, Minneapolis MN 55406

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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

3rd Sunday, 1-3:30 p.m., **Minnesota Atheists Monthly Meeting**. Steve Petersen, 651-484-9277

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

5th Sunday, **Fundraiser Dinner for Building Fund**. Price: \$6.66. (May, August, and November 2009).

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

Kane, nup@Minn.net.

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

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

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

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

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

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.

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

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

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

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"Of all the planets in our universe, there is only one we know can support life. Just the right distance from its sun, with a perfect climate, it's been called the lucky planet. All life on Earth is built on chance and powered by the Sun, but the delicate balances of our world are faltering as the planet struggles to support our growing demands. This is the time to take stock of what we have, and what we stand to lose."

— *Earth*, opening narration

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