

The Minnesota Atheist

Ethics, Science, or Religion - Which Has the Answer?

“If God does not exist, anything is permitted,” concludes Ivan Karamazov, a character in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. “Anything is permitted” – leads to ethics. What is the right thing to do? How has evolution influenced our ethical behavior? Has religion influenced our behavior? Are our values defined by our culture or our biology? As emotions develop, how do they help form our morality and values?



On Sunday, November 20, Dr. Grant Steves will speak to Minnesota Atheists members on “Ethics, Science, or Religion – Which Has the Answer?” The above questions will be addressed in this presentation.

Grant is a former Board member of MNA and a past chairperson. He served as host for

the Minnesota Atheists television show *Atheists Talk* and has been interviewed on the Minnesota Atheists radio show. He has also contributed articles and reviewed books for this newsletter. In the past, he has lectured on cults and fundamentalism. Grant has also delivered speeches at the Day of Reason. Listening to him is a real treat; some have said he has “the voice of God,” which we know is untrue since Grant is not mute. Nevertheless, he is a commanding speaker. Please join us!



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If You Go...

When:
Sunday, November 20, 2011

Where:
Roseville Library
2180 Hamline Avenue
Roseville, 55113
(at corner of Hamline and B2)

Schedule:
1:00-1:15 p.m. – Social time
1:15-1:45 p.m. – Business Meeting
1:45-2:00 p.m. – Break
2:00-3:30 p.m. – Presentation
4:00-whenever – Dinner

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may be edited. Publication is not
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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.

MNA Meetup members: 979
Life memberships: 30

Honorary Members

Hector Avalos, PhD
Dan Barker
Gerald Erickson, PhD
Annie Laurie Gaylor
Dick Hewetson
Robert M. Price, PhD

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.

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Benson v. Alverson Update

by August
Berkshire

There have been three recent developments regarding *Benson v. Alverson*, the court case in which Minnesota Atheists has filed the sole amicus curiae (friend-of-the-court) brief on behalf of the Appellants.

As you may recall, the case involves three same-sex couples (collectively known as “Marry Me Minnesota”) who are trying to get their out-of-state legal marriages recognized in Minnesota, as well as to obtain the right for other same-sex couples to obtain legal civil marriages in Minnesota.

MNA Legal Fund Fundraiser

On October 9th Minnesota Atheists held a \$50 per person fundraiser to raise money for our Legal Fund. Speaking at the event were Appellants **Doug Benson & Duane Gajewski** and **Tom Trisko & John Rittman**, the plaintiff’s lawyer **Peter Nickitas**, and our lawyer **Marshall Tanick**.

It was moving to hear the heartfelt stories of the couples involved. Anyone who had any doubts that we were doing the right thing in filing our amicus brief would have had those doubts erased when they heard how the current religiously based (and biased) civil marriage laws had hurt our fellow Minnesotans.

Peter Nickitas spoke of some of the legal aspects of the case. But it was our own legal veteran, Marshall Tanick, who regaled us with behind-the-scenes insights into the working of the court and his impressions of the three judges who would be hearing the case. (He thought they were intelligent, fair-minded, and might well be sympathetic to the type of justice we were seeking. The three judges were picked at random from a larger pool of Appellate judges, and Marshall thought we had gotten a pretty good draw.)

We ran a discounted ad for the fundraiser in *Lavender* magazine (a large Twin Cities-based GLBT publication) to try to spur attendance, though admittedly it had little effect except to put us on their radar.

Our fundraiser was a great success, bringing in over \$3,000, which was enough to cover our costs so far. We owe a tremendous amount of thanks and gratitude to our member Chris Matthews, who donated \$2,000.

Lavender magazine

The Oct. 20, 2011 issue of *Lavender* magazine featured a lengthy article by reporter Kaitlyn Walsh, entitled “**The Secular Side of Marriage Equality: Minnesota Atheists add nonsectarian viewpoints to a debate often dominated by religion.**” Here are some excerpts:

The amicus brief filed by Minnesota Atheists supports the couples in their effort to get rid of the law and argues the unconstitutionality of DOMA [Defense of Marriage Act], noting the law’s theological basis.

“[DOMA is] a religious law that’s not just a difference of opinion,” Berkshire said. “It’s a religious law that’s harming people.”

The amicus brief gives several sectarian arguments why same-sex marriage is considered unacceptable by some religious institutions, but says there is no secular reason to bar same-sex couples from opportunities given to heterosexual couples.

“The government should not even be looking at religion,” Berkshire said. “The government should only be looking at secular arguments and there are no good secular arguments against equality. There’s no reason not to grant it.”

To read the entire article, go to: lavendermagazine.com/our-affairs/the-secular-side-of-marriage-equality.

Appellate Court Hearing

The three same-sex couples (the Appellants), having previously lost in Trial Court, appealed their case to the Minnesota Appellate Court. They sued both Hennepin County and the State of Minnesota (the Defendants).

Written briefs were filed by the Appellants and Defendants. An amicus brief on behalf of the Appellants was filed by Minnesota Atheists. These and other documents can be found at MarryMeMinnesota.org.

Two amici briefs were filed on behalf of the Defendants. The first was by a coalition consisting of the Minnesota Catholic Conference, the Greater Minnesota Association of Evangelicals, and Upper

President’s Column continued on page 14.

October Meeting Review

Dr. Hector Avalos, professor of religious studies at Iowa State University, spoke at our October meeting, where he was inducted as an honorary member of Minnesota Atheists. The meeting was held at the Maplewood Public Library and was well attended. Photos from the event are courtesy of Steve Petersen.

At right, Minnesota Atheists President August Berkshire presents Dr. Avalos with his honorary membership certificate.

Below, attendees listen to the presentation.



New Promotional Cards Available

Minnesota Atheists has a new "Saved by an Atheist" card. August Berkshire designed the card and MNA member "E.Z.," a professional graphics designer who wishes to remain anonymous, 'polished up' the card. The cards are available at our third Sunday meetings and at festivals at which we have a booth. Or contact us at info@mnatheists.org or (612) 588-7031 and we'll be happy to send you some!

Saved by an Atheist!

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Meetings • Social Events • Friendship • Activism • Newsletter
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News and Notes



George Kane

I hate to portray atheists as victims.

After all, religions are so good at wallowing in self-pity that we can never hope to match them. Christians always don the mantle of victimhood whenever they are forbidden to use sectarian prayers as part of public meetings, or to teach creationism in public schools. Muslims scream

that they are the victims of bigotry if an ink drawing of Mohammed is published in a newspaper – and they kill people for it.

I also despise victimhood because it is unseemly and personally corrosive. Nevertheless, there are times when we must call attention to anti-atheist bigotry, to assert legal rights where applicable and to shine a light in the faces of the bigots. Two recent examples deserve to be well known.

The Center for Inquiry's Michigan chapter booked Richard Dawkins for a speech at The Wyndgate Country Club in Rochester Hills Michigan, near Detroit. When the owner of the club saw Dawkins interviewed by Bill O'Reilly on October 5, and realized that Dawkins is an atheist, he cancelled the event. The Wyndgate's representative explained that the owner did not wish to associate with individuals such as Dawkins, or his philosophy.

The sold-out event had to be moved to a different venue, as the owner rejected pleas to reconsider. The CFI-Michigan has decided to sue the Wyndgate Country Club for damages, arguing that even private organizations are constrained by laws against discrimination in public accommodations. Their legal claim is based on the clear precedent that laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of religion also protect atheists. Rights based on freedom of religion must also be granted to those who are not religious.

The owner is free to refuse a speaker whose political or economic ideology he dislikes, but he may not discriminate based upon the speaker's views on religion. He will therefore claim, of course, that his decision was not based on Richard Dawkins'

opinions about religion. This claim will not inoculate him against a violation of Dawkins' religious rights, however, as its veracity must be determined by the court. In this case, it is a transparent pretext.

The other case of discrimination does not have the same legal objections, but is even more shocking because it involves turning down a large donation because it came from an atheist organization. The Todd Stiefel Freethought Foundation offered a \$250,000 matching grant to the American Cancer Society to sponsor a national team in their Relay for Life. The intent of the grant was to encourage atheists groups to donate to this worthwhile charity.

According to accounts reported on AlterNet.org and later examined by P.Z. Myers in his Pharyngula blog, the donation was at first enthusiastically welcomed. The American Cancer Society approved the application, which was potentially worth a half million dollars to them. They even provided an intern to manage the program. Then, at some point, the American Cancer Society began refusing to return calls from Todd Stiefel.

When they finally got back to him, they told him that they had decided to restrict team sponsorship in the Relay for Life to corporations, and suggested that Stiefel's foundation simply donate the money instead, without further involvement. This seemed inconsistent with them welcoming, for example, national team sponsorship by the Girl Scouts. Stiefel suggested funding the matching grant program through the Foundation Beyond Belief, which is a charitable 501(c) 3 corporation, but this was rejected. He then suggested that the Foundation Beyond Belief merely be listed as a national sponsor, a list that includes several charitable non-profit corporations, but that proposal too was rejected.

When AlterNet asked the American Cancer Society why they refused the Foundation Beyond Belief as a National Team Partner in the Relay for Life program, they replied that "We have repeatedly tried to come to an agreement regarding the offer but have been unable to do so. The public debate that has ensued, we believe, undermines the shared passion both organizations have for our mission of saving lives from cancer." This only evades the question. Is there any explanation possible other than that the grant was rejected because it came from atheists?

MINNESOTA ATHEISTS BOARD OF DIRECTORS NOMINATIONS AND ELECTIONS

Nominations for the Minnesota Atheists board of directors will occur during the business portion of our **January 15th, 2012** meeting. **Elections** will be held during the business portion of our **February 19th, 2012** meeting.

Nominations will open and close at the January 15th meeting. We will publish candidates' statements in our February 2012 newsletter.

There are nine positions to fill, elected in the following order: President, Associate President, Chair, Associate Chair, Treasurer, Secretary, and three Directors-at-Large. Our bylaws provide that anyone who runs for one position and loses may run again for any other position that has not yet been elected.

Some incumbents will be running for reelection but it is important to remember that *all seats* are technically open. All terms are for one year. Now is your chance to step forward and help guide Minnesota Atheists!

Candidates for all but the three director-at-large positions must have been dues-paying members of Minnesota Atheists for at least one year as of the time they assume office on March 1st, 2012. Candidates for the three director-at-large positions must have been dues-paying members for at least six months.

To run for office, you must be nominated by another Minnesota Atheists member. You cannot nominate yourself. (It's usually not too hard to find someone else at the January meeting to nominate you.)

You need not be present to be nominated (or elected). If you wish to nominate someone who will not be at the January 15th meeting, please check beforehand to make sure that person is willing to serve if elected.

Nominees should send candidate's statements of up to 150 words to the newsletter editor, James Zimmerman (editor@mnatheists.org), by January 20th, 2012. We would also like to have a jpeg headshot of each candidate.

For more information about nominations, elections, or holding office, contact any board member (see page 2 for board members' contact information). For information about publishing your candidate's statement or photo, contact the editor, James Zimmerman, at editor@mnatheists.org.

It is only with your support that we can have a successful organization!



Highway Clean-up

Thanks to the Minnesota Atheists members who assisted with our October 2nd Highway 10 clean-up near Rice.

Pictured (from left to right): Rachel Dickinson, Rachel Wilson, Morgan Christian, Shirley Moll, Rob Taylor, August Berkshire, Deb Doucette, Clint Buhs, and Art Anderson. Not pictured (because he took the photo): Steve Petersen.



St. Cloud Times: Christian Theology has Contradictions

(The follow letter from Minnesota Atheists' President August Berkshire appeared in the October 6, 2011 issue of The St. Cloud Times. -ed.)

The recent letter "God not to be blamed in individuals' evil acts" states that we should not hold God responsible for 9/11. This is often known as the free will defense: God could have done something to prevent human evil but he voluntarily holds back some of his all-powerfulness for the greater good of human free will. If we misuse our free will, God is not to be blamed.

This all seems to make sense until we run into contradictions within Christian theology.

If the Bible is to be believed, then God intervened to save the Jews from Pharaoh, apparently without violating their free will. This begs the questions of why this god didn't intervene to save the Jews from Hitler, or 3,000 Americans from the 9/11 bombers.

Furthermore, Christians believe that God created a heaven in which life is perfect (i.e. there is no evil), and yet it is presumed that the people in heaven still have free will (i.e. they are not robots). If God can do this in one realm (heaven), what prevents him from doing it in another realm (Earth)?

It is not only lack of evidence and compelling reasons for belief that lead to atheism, it is contradictions within theology itself.



FREETHOUGHT CRYPTOGRAM

BY GEORGE KANE

S offr qhofwmcshozha ki Oswbzhzmt cfsyufm qm ck
 jf bswg ki cuf fsmg smmqtrczkh cusc ofmzah zm cuf
 kheg secfwhscznf ck yushyf, sho cfsyufm qm ck mffv
 kqc awsofo wstrm ki mekbeg zhywfsmzha yktreflzcg.

-Wzyuswo Osbvzhm, *Cuf Ako Ofeqmzkh*

(Answer on page 18.)

The Rapture II: We're Still Here

Billed as a “four-times-in-a-lifetime (and counting)” celebration, on Saturday, October 22nd, Minnesota Atheists and other non-believers celebrated Harold Camping’s latest non-event with “The Rapture II: We're Still Here,” at the 400 Bar in Minneapolis. The event featured live music from several local bands, including The Minneapolis Burlesque and Cabaret Social Club, Valley Meadows, Robots from the Futures, Madame Love Dog, and I Am Fuzz. During the intermission, Board of Directors member Eric Jayne conducted a debaptism (his hairdryer of reason, incidentally, spelled out the word TOXIC using religious emblems). As a fundraising effort for Minnesota Atheists, t-shirts sold for the reasonable price of \$6.66. The event raised \$84 for Minnesota Atheists, plus ten t-shirts were sold. Thanks to August Berkshire for the photos.





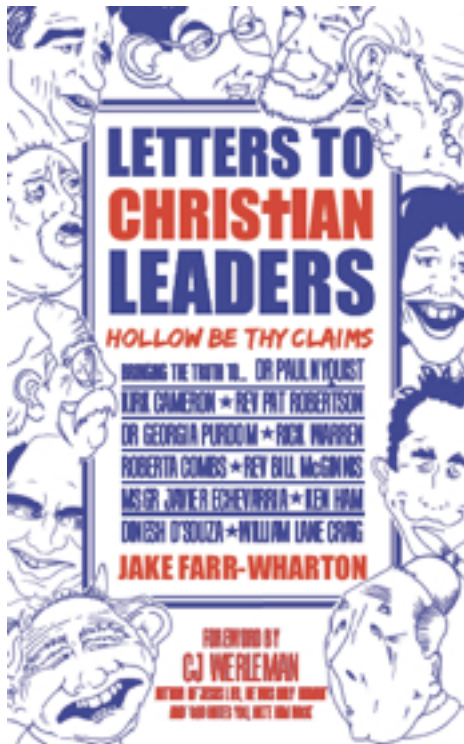
Letters to Christian Leaders: A Hatchet Job

When I was asked to review the book "Letters to Christian Leaders" by Jake Farr-Wharton I was happy to do so. The premise of the book, a series of letters to leading Christian cultural figures, sounded potentially interesting. I read the book jacket and was a little concerned by the claim that it contained a "dash of toilet humor" but assumed it was just going to take a witty, sarcastic, or generally snarky tone.

That much is true. The tone of the book is definitely snarky, but frankly, it goes so far beyond snarky that the word fails to do the book justice. This book doesn't contain a "dash" of toilet humor, the book is essentially an endless tirade of abuse, profanity, and smugness. The author takes every opportunity to

by Ryan Sutter

heap bile upon the targets of his chapters, mixing in actual facts here and there but generally just telling such Christian luminaries as Kirk Cameron, Roberta Combs, Pat Robertson, and Dinesh D'souza how stupid and pathetic they are. It's like reading a book-length Internet rant written by a foul-mouthed 15 year old. The tone and quality of writing are likely to turn off most rational readers and probably every Christian reader. In addition, the book is shoddily edited and assembled. Proofreading errors abound (President "Barak" Obama features heavily in the first chapter).



Letters to Christian Leaders
by Jake Farr-Wharton, ©2011
Dangerous Little Books, 256 pages

Freethought and liberal politics are strongly intertwined with a subsequent dilution of the message of the book. It is hard to tell if this is an anti-right-wing culture

war book or an anti-Christianity book. It is as if the author has forgotten that there are Christians of all political persuasions.

To summarize: Letters to Christian Leaders is a sloppily written, weakly researched, profanity laced, fundamentally misguided book that, in my opinion, does more harm than good in the battle to free minds from enslavement to religion. If it were funny, that would be something, but unless you find references to bodily orifices inherently funny, you'd be better off with Lewis Black, George Carlin, Ricky Gervais, Penn Jillette... basically anybody else.



THE FREETHOUGHT FOLLIES IS COMING!

See the flyer inserted into this newsletter to find out more.

Gospel Goof Ups: How the Bible Makes a Compelling Case *against* the Nativity



by Eric Jayne

Every year around Christmas, the church I belonged to as child held a Nativity play for the congregation. The performers consisted of about 20 kids from the elementary and middle school aged youth groups. It's possible that I played different parts, but I can't remember being anything other than a shepherd year after year. Strangely though, shepherds are not even mentioned in the birth narrative written in the book of Matthew. In fact Mark and John don't even mention the miracle birth at all! Only in Luke is there a mention of shepherds. While this may appear to be a somewhat minor discrepancy between the two accounts there are many more significant discrepancies that have been merged together and supplemented with elements not even mentioned in either narrative to form the Nativity (and crèche) commonly celebrated by Christians everywhere.

Many reading this are aware of Herod the Great and his alleged infanticidal campaign to slaughter every boy two years old and younger in and near Bethlehem. This story is written only in Matthew and it's the only place where the wise men come in to play. According to Matthew, Herod was not about to have another king born in the land he rules—whether or not he's ordained by God—so he tricked an undisclosed number of wise men (nowhere in the Bible is it mentioned that there were three of them, but there were three gifts given by the wise men: frankincense, gold, and myrrh) to follow the star of the east and report back to him the exact whereabouts of the “King of the Jews.” This event calls into question the wisdom of the wise men if they were so gullible to disclose the exact location of Jesus to a jealous state ruler. Thankfully for Jesus, and televangelists everywhere, an angel told the wise men to take a long detour back to Herod while at the same time telling Mary and Joseph to hide in Egypt until further notice.

Apparently the author of Luke's gospel wasn't privy to any of the miraculous information found in Matthew because in Luke's account there were no wise men, no Herod-led slaughter, no dramatic escape to Egypt, no star of the East, no frankincense, no gold, and no myrrh. Another significant difference between Matthew and Luke is that in the former, Jesus was taken to Nazareth after Mary and Joseph returned from Egypt, while in the latter, Joseph and Mary left Nazareth to return to

Joseph's hometown of Bethlehem for a mandatory census. Luke indicates that Mary and Joseph *came from* Nazareth *before* the birth of Jesus but Matthew indicates that Mary and Joseph *went to* Nazareth *after* the birth of Jesus. To be sure, we're not talking about subtle differences between the only two birth accounts written in the Gospels. We're talking about completely different accounts.

If you're looking for shepherds and a manger, you won't find them in Matthew but you will in Luke. Matthew says that Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus were in a house (2:11); only while Luke brings up the manger. Neither mentions an inn, innkeeper, or stable, by the way. There are different accounts of whose dreams are invaded by angels too. Matthew only points to an angel appearing in Joseph's dream while Luke mentions an angel in Mary's dream. Matthew says that Jesus' paternal grandfather is Jacob while Luke says it's Heli. Adding to the confusion is that Jesus is supposed to have been miraculously conceived without the help of Joseph's baby batter so it shouldn't matter who any of Joseph's ancestors are in the first place!

Expanding on this point, and at the risk of sounding crass, Luke 1:34-35 (NIV) provides the following exchange between the angel Gabriel and Mary about the confusion of how she can conceive a child without having sex: “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you...” Clearly, abstinence-only is not as foolproof as many would have us believe.

Most readers are undoubtedly aware that the birth story of Jesus is purely fictional and is preceded by many other virginal births (Plato, Buddha, Vishnu, Zoroaster, Horus, Ra, Mithras...). Most readers are also aware that Christmas is the result of many co-opted pagan celebrations in the early 4th century after it became the religion of choice of the Roman emperor Constantine. These facts, however, are not nearly as compelling as a simple reading of the Bible. As is often the case, a critical reading of the Bible is the quickest path toward rejecting the accuracy of Bible stories and Christian beliefs.

Merry Christ-Myth and Happy New Year!

Pardon a Turkey This Thanksgiving

In the spirit of the holiday season, I'd like to suggest that you not only spare a turkey, but also the cows, pigs, and chickens that you consume every day. This is, of course, an unpopular opinion to voice. A majority of Americans are deeply attached to their succulent meat, and it is often seen as offensive to preach a change in another's life choices. But atheists, more than any other demographic group, should remember that majority status does not by itself guarantee that one is in the right. We should consider even the most unpopular opinions through rational and ethical thinking before passing judgment. Animal welfare proponents who speak up about the moral issues surrounding factory farming may indeed have something valuable to say, and this is becoming apparent in the increasing number of atheists who are turning vegetarian or vegan.

Each Thanksgiving, more than 46 million turkeys are slaughtered for their meat. And the process by which they are killed can hardly be



by Rohit Ravindran

considered humane. The most common factory farm consists of large sheds overcrowded with artificially inseminated animals that are subjected to living in their own excrement and breathing in the toxic fumes that emanate from these feces. If these birds survive the blindness, lameness and broken limbs that go with stress-based aggression from other animals, the only light at the end of the tunnel

that they could possibly look forward to is being hung on a conveyor belt for their throats to be cut, after which they are dumped, often fully conscious, into scalding water to get rid of their feathers. This is the bloody torture that we are willingly complicit in as we dress up the bird for a grand family dinner.

But why should we care? The argument that humans have evolved to eat other animals may well be true, but we should fully understand that evolution has no moral direction. Making life choices today is based on independent decision making. We no longer act on indiscriminate evolutionary instincts, like our sexual urges, without steering them through the moral prism that we use to live in a just society. It is important to examine every practice, including animal subjugation, under this same prism. We fully understand it as scientific fact that an abundant number of animals are sentient and share physical pain and suffering at comparable levels as humans. We may have trumped them in intellect, but we still share sensation, feeling, and a nervous system capable of processing these stimuli. Suffering, not intelligence, should be the relevant moral criteria. As we continually fight against -isms like racism and sexism, it is time we reevaluate the dogma of specieism that



Pardon a Turkey continued on page 16.

Atheists Talk: September - October Radio Report

A*theists Talk* Radio is produced by Minnesota Atheists. Carl Hancock directs. Producers and hosts include Mike Haubrich, Greg Laden, August Berkshire, Scott Lohman, Stephanie Zvan, and Steve Petersen. Shirley Moll helps with radio ads. The radio program is live every Sunday morning from 9:00 to 10:00 at AM 950. It is broadcast from KTNF studios in Eden Prairie. Live streaming can be accessed through our web page, www.mnatheists.org. Original music is composed, played, and recorded by Brent Michael Davids. The six month cost is \$5,320. Each donation to support the program is greatly appreciated. To donate, send in a donation to our PO box or online at http://mnatheists.org/component/option,com_civicrm/Itemid,55. All past programs can be accessed via our web page.

If you are interested in helping on the radio program please send a note to radio@mnatheists.org. Recent shows included:

"Good Sex Without God" Greta Christina #133, September 18, 2011. Interviewer: Kammy Lyon. Host: Stephanie Zvan.

Religion has plenty to say about sex. Scriptures and religious leaders tell us who to have sex with, who not to have sex with, what forms of sex are acceptable and in what sorts of relationships. But does it help? Popular blogger Greta Christina explored this question during the show.

American Atheists David Silverman #134, September 25, 2011. Carl Hancock and Steve

by Steve Petersen

Petersen interviewed David Silverman, President of American Atheists.

We discussed their current activities, including public campaigns to gain attention for atheists with billboards, aerial banners, appearances on television and radio. Silverman examined why American Atheists filed suit to keep a surviving fragmented I-beam from becoming a Christian religious symbol at the world Trade Center tragedy. Additionally, we discussed the Reason Rally 2012 Convention and a host of other subjects in the news. Scott Lohman hosted.

Donald Prothero on *Atheists Talk* #136, October 9, 2011

Donald Prothero is a palaeontologist who is very much disliked by the Discovery Institute and loved by skeptics, science aficionados, and students. He has written several books and over 200 papers for peer reviewed journals, popular magazines, and anthologies. He recently wrote *Evolution: What the Fossils Say and Why it Matters*. Prothero is Professor of Geology at Occidental College and Lecturer in Geobiology at the California Institute of Technology. He is a Fellow of the Geological Society of America and the Paleontological Society. Interview by Greg Laden and hosted by Stephanie Zvan.

"Exploring Religious Violence" #137, October 16, 2011

David Eller is a cultural anthropologist who has spent considerable time on the topics of violence and religion. In his recent book, *Cruel Creeds, Virtuous Violence: Religious Violence Across Culture and History*, he explores the intersection of the two. He examines the various types of religious violence and the interaction between the cultural and religious factors that contribute to that violence. During the show, he looked at how religion shapes a culture in ways that make violence more likely. Interview by Carl Hancock and hosted by Brianne Bilye.



Hosts Carl Hancock, left, and Scott Lohman during an airing of Atheists Talk.

Book Review: *The Matter With Us*

Rawles' cleverly titled book begins most ominously. In comparing our planet to a space craft, a stark page appearing event before the table of contents details our predicament: "The bridge of spaceship Earth is deserted," it begins, "nobody is in charge." Mentioning the fighting, looting, and squandering, Rawles coldly admits that though most passengers on the 'spaceship' wish to enjoy "the cruise of a lifetime in safety, comfort and good health," such a prospect seems unlikely. Almost as a sarcastic afterthought, Rawles adds, "And it was such a beautiful ship."

Witty metaphors aside, Rawles sums up the current state and future prospects of humanity into what he terms as "Nine Gordian Knots" (page 432). Any one of these 'knots,' he contends, could unravel the current precarious state of the world and even the future prospects for humans and other species. Among the grave problems at humanity's doorstep are the end of oil, climate change, environmental degradation, and armed conflict. Regarding this final problem, Rawles spends several pages dishing out copious amounts of shocking and unsettling facts that lead to the conclusion that "all five permanent members of the UN Security Council have a vested interest in perpetual, global, armed conflict" (464). The other eight 'knots' offer similarly upsetting eventualities.

Nevertheless, Rawles has no intention of leaving his readers feeling powerless and hopeless; he even titles this final chapter "Epilogue - or New Chapter?" in the hopes that the situations can be remedied. For each problem he offers practical, attainable, "quixotic things to do to counter" the impending catastrophe (481). Some of the suggestions involve donating time or money, others include voting or supporting certain benevolent organizations.

And indeed, this final, sprawling chapter (it's over 60 pages!) is only that: one chapter in a long, detailed book. Starting at the beginning, the first nine chapters go into great detail explaining how it is we have come to this point in our history. And I do mean *the* beginning; Rawles begins his book at the moment of the Big Bang. After providing an overview of that first moment in time, Rawles answers the obvious question: How do we know

by James Zimmerman



The Matter With Us
by John Rawles, ©2011
Pen Press, 516 pages

about the Big Bang? This then leads to a sidetracking subheading explaining the use of metaphor in talking about abstract concepts, such as mathematics and gravity. Rawles also sprinkles his book with several 'boxes' that explain tougher concepts, such as chaos, relativity, and the four basic forms of human relationships. These boxes are somewhat of a distraction from the main text, but as they are clearly set off by headers and borders, readers can choose to read them as they come, or save them for later (or not read them at all).

The book next explores the evolution of life from matter, and the evolution of the human mind from matter. The evolution of morality, religion, and capitalism also receive a chapter each. Rawles offers plausible, definitive reasons for religion's development and also shows how humans need to progress past religion if they are to triumph over their difficulties.

Rawles also shows how seemingly insignificant events in history have brought us to today. Most notably, he argues that the import of cheap cotton from India gave the West the industrial revolution (280). And to demonstrate that our minds – spectacular as they may be – are still nothing more than faulty matter, Rawles uses examples

from Tony Blair's administration to illustrate one human's predilection for reification, over-reliance on intuition, and belief without evidence (341-8). In each case, Blair was acting as an imperfect, evolved mass of matter can be expected to act and react.

Rawles contends that the nine 'knots' are interconnected, and a chart inside the front cover vividly depicts the threads that tie each knot to the others. Looking at the chart right away is a bit bewildering, but referring to it as the book proceeds will give readers satisfaction as they take in the interpretation Rawles offers for the whole of civilization.

Each chapter is copiously annotated (there are often over 100 endnotes for a single chapter), highly readable even for those not disposed to social or physical sciences, and indexed for future reference. Rawles' tome is a diagnostic tour de force of the human predicament. It answers: How did we get here? How will it end? And, as the back cover asks: are we pawns or players? I strongly recommend this book for all atheists who wish to have a better understanding of the matter.

Image courtesy Pen Press. Used by permission.

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN (CONTINUED)

Midwest Merkos. The second brief was filed by the Minnesota Family Council.

The nature of the groups bringing these amicus briefs should have alerted even the most casual observer that state endorsement of religious dogma was a major issue in this case.

Oral arguments in front of a three-judge panel were heard in the Minnesota Appellate Court near the State Capitol on October 26th.

One of the major obstacles blocking legal equality for same-sex couples in Minnesota is a 1971 Minnesota Supreme Court case called *Baker v. Nelson*, where that court ruled that same-sex couples did not have a constitutional right to civil marriage. This case had been backed by Minnesota Atheists' member Matthew Stark in his then-capacity as President of the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union.

In oral arguments, Peter Nickitas, lawyer for the Appellants, argued that *Baker* had been decided based on the U.S. Constitution and that the current case, *Benson v. Alverson*, should be decided based on the Minnesota State Constitution instead, whose protections had been interpreted more broadly than the federal constitution.

He also argued that the rights of a child of a same-sex couple had never been addressed by the court. (Appellants **Lindzi Campbell & Jessica Dykhuis** have a child.) Furthermore, he said this case deserved to be judged on a "heightened

scrutiny" basis, reserved for classes of people who historically have faced discrimination.

Peter petitioned the Appellate Court to send the case *back down* to the Trial Court for retrial under the proper standards.

The defendants, Hennepin County and the State of Minnesota, spent most of their oral argument time trying to run away from the case, claiming they were not the proper defendants. Addressing the State, one of the judges asked, "If you are not the proper defendant, then who is?"

The judge was aware of the 515 Minnesota laws that discriminate against gays and lesbians. The State argued that either the Minnesota Attorney General should have been the defendant or the various state agencies in charge of those 515 laws should have been the defendants. The judge didn't seem to buy that argument.

A ruling by the Appellate Court is required within 90 days, and it is not likely to arrive much sooner than that.

If the judges agree with the Appellants, the case will be sent back down to the Trial Court to be reheard using new, correct standards. Whichever side loses at that level can be expected to once again bring it back to the Appellate Court.

Amicus briefs are not accepted at the Trial Court level (which is why we didn't submit one there last time), but we will resubmit our brief (no doubt with modifications) if this indeed does go down to the Trial Court and then back up to the Appellate Court.

Two other possible outcomes are that the Appellate Court either upholds the Trial Court ruling against the Appellants, or overturns it without sending it back to the Trial Court. In either of these scenarios, the losing side can be expected to appeal to the Minnesota Supreme Court, which may or may not decide to hear the case.

If it goes to the Minnesota Supreme Court, Minnesota Atheists will be there with another amicus brief, continuing our fight for the right of all Minnesota citizens to be free from religion-based laws.



Above, from left to right: Tom Trisko, Duane Gajewski, Peter Nickitas, Doug Benson, Marshall Tanick, John Rittman and August Berkshire. Peter Nickitas is the lawyer for the plaintiffs and Marshall is our Lawyer. Tom and John are a couple and Doug and Duane are a couple. Both have been married legally in Canada.

Pardon a Turkey This Thanksgiving (continued)

allows us to act in deplorable ways toward other animals.

The environmental reasons to go vegetarian or vegan are very strong, if the moral reasoning isn't sufficient. The meat industry currently contributes about 18 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions, and the waste management needed to sustain factory farms leads to devastating effects on the surrounding land, water and air. It has been widely shown that from an energy perspective, the process of bringing meat to the dinner table involves an energy input to protein input ratio of up to 54:1. The number of scientific studies that have concluded the inefficiency and wastefulness of producing meat are innumerable, and backed by every leading environmental advocacy group. In fact, the United Nations has urged that the world move towards a vegetarian or vegan diet in order to combat global issues of hunger, poverty, and environmental degradation. As stewards of this planet, it is our responsibility to rethink every life choice that threatens the sustenance of this planet, and this includes our diet.

It is true that most of us are well shielded from the reality of what goes on inside a factory farm. Paul McCartney's famous quote, "If slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be vegetarian," is very compelling at bringing us to face the harsh implications of our dietary choices. It didn't do the job for me, though. Growing up eating meat, I often witnessed the shrieking cries of chickens on the streets of India as they were grabbed from overcrowded cages and plopped up on wooden

surfaces, to have their necks chopped off in one quick stroke of a heavy blade. I would be temporarily numbed as the injustice of what had just occurred shook my conscience, but it never diminished the taste of fried, juicy chicken I would later consume. Much later, as I entered my sophomore year in college, I grew increasingly intrigued by the study of philosophy, and I started exploring the depths of my beliefs and life choices. This path led me to become an atheist and renounce meat at around the same time. I do not see this as a coincidence - while embracing a rational way of living, we cannot remain immune to the ethical and environmental implications of meat-based sustenance. As a progressive social movement, atheists should be on the forefront of social change, not the stragglers at the back of the line. I hope you shall agree, and make ethical choices as you celebrate the oncoming holiday season.



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October Treasurer's Report

Building Fund

Total Building Fund \$0

Legal Fund

(anonymous) \$20
 Eleanor Rittenour \$10
 Simmie Parlow \$25
 Jeanne Bowbeer \$50
 Andy Flamm \$50
 Jeff Simon \$50
 George Kane \$87
 Douglas Benson \$150
 Vernon Young \$150
 Christopher Matthews \$1,000
 Total Legal Fund **\$1,592**

Radio Fund

M. Vitums \$10
 Arthur Scearcy \$50
 Total Radio Fund **\$60**

General/Visibility Fund

Dale Howey \$10
 Meghan Kosowski \$10
 Total General/Visibility Fund **\$20**

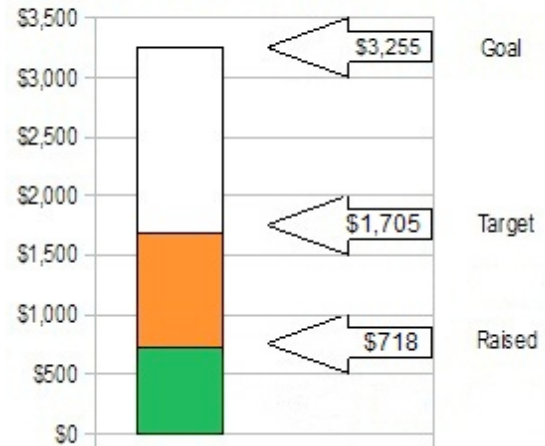
Total Income: \$1,672

Compiled by

Chris Matthews

Radio Show Fundraising Goal

for 5 months ending December 31



Current Building Fund Total \$129,955

Amount Raised in first 11 weeks: \$718
 Amount Remaining to Reach Goal: \$2,537



Top Expenses for October

Legal Fund \$3,150
 Radio Show \$1,025
 Storage \$426
 Ads & PR \$305

Planning your estate?
 Don't forget to include
 Minnesota Atheists.

Find us! We are on the web at mnatheists.org and on Meetup and Facebook:



www.meetup.com/minnesota-atheists



www.facebook.com/pages/Minnesota-Atheists

October Cable Show Report



by Steve Petersen

In October George Kane interviewed Lee Salisbury for two programs. The first was titled “The Accuracy of Bible Prophecy.” Lee used Thomas Paine’s book *The Age of Reason* as his source to present his arguments. The following program was titled “Was the USA Founded as a Christian Nation.” Both can be viewed on the following cable stations or via iTunes.

If you would like to sponsor our program in your community, or have an idea for a program please contact Steve Petersen at achair@mnatheists.org or 651-484-9277.

Cable Crew:

George Kane, Brett Stembridge, Shirley Moll, Steve Petersen, Wendy Steinberg, Grant Hermanson and Art Anderson.

Podcasts:

MinnesotaAtheists.org. Available via Itunes. Made possible by Grant Hermanson.

Cable Schedule:

Burnsville / Eagan Community Television:

Channel 14. Times vary; check their web site, <www.bect.tv>, for day and times. Sponsor: Kevin Hardisty.

Bloomington: Channel 16. Monday 9:30 p.m. and 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, Moundview/ New Brighton: Channel 14. Wednesday 10:30 p.m. Sponsor: Shirley Moll.

St. Cloud: Channel 12. Thursday 8:30 to 9:00 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: Jim Bodsberg.

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



George Kane, right, interviewed Lee Salisbury for our October television show recording session.

FREETHOUGHT CRYPTOGRAM ANSWER

A deep understanding of Darwinism teaches us to be wary of the easy assumption that design is the only alternative to chance, and teaches us to seek out graded ramps of slowly increasing complexity.

-Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*

Minnesota Atheists

www.mnatheists.org

P.O. Box 120304, New Brighton, MN 55112

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

All memberships include the newsletter. To pay by credit card or PayPal, please visit our website.

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

Name: _____ Phone: _____

Address: _____

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

Things to Do, Places to Go: A Calendar for Atheists

In addition to these regularly scheduled events, there are many more events every month. Please subscribe to Atheist Weekly e-mail on our web site, mnatheists.org, and join our Meetup group.

Sundays, 9:00am-10:00am *Atheists Talk* Radio. AM 950 KTNF in the Twin Cities or stream live at <http://www.am950ktnf.com>. Contact us during the show with questions or comments at (952) 946-6205 or radio@mnatheists.org.

Sundays, 6:00pm-7:00pm Atheist/Agnostic Alcoholics Anonymous. Men's Center, 3249 Hennepin Avenue South Suite # 55, Minneapolis Meet in the basement. Open to all genders.

2nd Sundays, 1:00pm Minnesota Atheists Little Canada Book Club, Caribou Coffee 3354 Rice St, Little Canada, MN 55126

3rd Sundays, September through May, 1:00pm-4:00pm. Minnesota Atheists Public Meeting. Various libraries. Business meeting, educational program and dinner afterwards at a nearby restaurant.

5th Sundays, 5:00pm Flying Spaghetti Monster Dinner. Old Spaghetti Factory, 233 Park Ave., Minneapolis. Get together for drinks and pasta. A collection is taken for the Radio Fund.

1st & 3rd Mondays 6:00pm Freethought Toastmasters. Larpenteur Estates Party Room, 1276 Larpenteur Ave. W, St. Paul 55113. This group meets the 1st and 3rd Monday of every month. George Kane, chair@mnatheists.org.

2nd and 4th Mondays, 5:00pm-7:00pm Freethought Dinner Social. Davanni's, 8605 Lyndale Avenue South, Bloomington, MN. For more information call Bob or Marilyn Neinker at 612-866-6200.

1st Tuesdays, 11:30am-1:00pm Freethought Lunch. Old Country Buffet, County Road B2 between Fairview and Snelling. Bob or Marilyn Nienkirk at 612-866-6200.

4th Tuesdays, 7:00pm Maple Grove Book Club. Byerly's Meeting Room - 12880 Elm Creek Blvd N Maple Grove, MN 55369

Every other Tuesday, 7:00pm Secular Bible Study. Various locations. See the Meetup page <http://www.meetup.com/Secular-Bible-Study/>.

1st Wednesdays, 7:00pm Minnesota Atheists Burnsville Book Club. Davanni's, 14639 County Road 11, Burnsville MN 55337. Meet in the Party Room.

3rd Wednesdays, 11:30am-2pm Lunch at Dragon House Restaurant. Dragon House Restaurant 3970 Central Avenue Columbia Heights. Private room reserved. Bill Volna 612-781-1420

3rd Wednesdays, 6:30pm Minnesota Atheists Monthly Board Meeting. Party Room, 1276 Larpenteur Avenue, St. Paul, 55113. Open to all members. George Kane, chair@mnatheists.org.

1st Thursdays, 6:00pm-9:00pm *Atheists Talk* television show. MTN Studio A, 125 SE Main Street, Minneapolis. Steve Petersen at 651-484-9277.

To sign up for the Atheists' Weekly Email (AWE), send a request to awe@mnatheists.org.

To sign up for Minnesota Atheists Meetups, visit atheists.meetup.com/493.



“I am an atheist. I don’t understand religion at all. I’m sure I’ll offend a lot of people by saying this, but I think it’s all nonsense.”

-Andy Rooney, quoted in “Rooney Offers His Opinion” by Keith Barry, *The Tufts Daily*, Nov. 19, 2004.

Check us out on the radio!
AM950 on Sundays at 9:00 a.m.