

# THE MINNESOTA ATHEIST

## Life and Death as an Atheist with Hector Avalos

It is often claimed that there are no atheists in foxholes. Dr. Hector Avalos, Professor of Religious Studies at Iowa State University, will explain how his experience with chronic illness and numerous near-death incidents have made him a better atheist and encouraged him to live a productive and enjoyable life.

He is the author of numerous books, including *The Bad Jesus: The Ethics of New Testament Ethics* (2015), *Fighting Words: The Origins Of Religious Violence* (2005), and *The End of Biblical Studies* (2007). His work has been the basis of several episodes of the podcast "Inquisitive Minds" (available on iTunes). He is a regular columnist for *The Ames Tribune*, writing on issues of religion and culture.

He is a recent recipient of a "Regents Award for Faculty Excellence", which is presented by the Board of Regents, State of Iowa, to recognize tenured faculty members who are outstanding university citizens and who have rendered significant service to the university or the state of Iowa.

This marks the eighth time that Prof. Hector Avalos (aka "Mr. October") has spoken to our group: seven Octobers (2006-2010; 2015-2016) and our August 2013 conference. We are very grateful to him and his wife Cindy that they are willing to drive here so often.



Hector Avalos

### Inside this issue:

President's Column 2

News and Notes 3-4

Cable Report 5

Meeting Review 6-8

Letter to the Editor 9

Replies and Responses 10

Brookdale Library  
6125 Shingle Creek Pkwy.  
Brooklyn Center, MN 55430

1:00-1:15 pm – Social Time  
1:15-1:45 pm – Business Meeting  
1:45-2:00 pm – Break  
2:00-3:30 pm – Presentation  
4:00 pm – Dinner Location to be determined

# President's Column

By Alyssa Ehni

In 2006, sociologists at the University of Minnesota released their findings from a study conducted on American's attitudes towards various religious groups. They found that atheists were the most disliked group in the United States. Nearly 40% of respondents indicated that atheists did not share their vision of America and that they would disapprove of their child marrying an atheist. The study was recently repeated and the findings regarding atheists did not change much. (Dislike of Muslims and conservative Christians has increased.)

I do not find this surprising, based upon my lived experience as an atheist in the United States. Unless I am conversing with other atheists, I hear myself and other non-believers referred to as immoral, angry, and unAmerican. I find it bothersome that many people believe America is a Christian nation and our laws were based upon Judeo Christian values. So much so that monuments of the 10 Commandments are placed in courthouses in various parts of the country. And clearly since atheists are against principles our country was founded on, we are against all things American. 'Murica.

Many Americans think that their morals stem from their religion. This may or may not actually be the case. People who believe their morals come from their religion have a difficult time understanding how someone without religion can have morals. There have been many instances where a religious person has indicated that without the threat of eternal damnation, they would do whatever they want without considering the consequences of their actions. They would steal, rape, murder, etc. Interestingly, I cannot fathom how someone could have so little empathy that this could actually be the case. Whilst, if we look at prison studies, atheists make up the smallest number in the convict population.

I, like many of us, have had my own experiences with my morals being questioned due to my being an atheist. I am fortunate, however, in that my family and my friends have accepted my lack of belief without much controversy. I've watched my parents views evolve as they've come to terms with the fact that I am an atheist. When I first told them, my father's response was that I could not be an atheist because I was not angry and obnoxious. I did not "yell" at people about how stupid religion is on online message boards. My mother always hoped that I'd marry a nice Christian man and come back to the church. She was only disappointed until she met my partner who happens to be the most wonderful man on earth. Unfortunately, I cannot discuss religion or atheism with my mother as each time we have, she was so upset internally about the future of my soul that she became physically ill.

The only request my family has made of me is that I not tell my grandparents. Their concern is that knowing I am an atheist could quite literally kill my grandparents. Since my grandparents take issue with other aspects of how I live my life, I have not told them I identify as an atheist. I don't take measures to hide it from them either. I sometimes wonder how my grandparents would react to my atheism and what mental gymnastics they might put themselves through to come to terms with it or if they would even try. I am confident that had they been a part of the University of Minnesota study, they would be in the 40% mentioned earlier.

I would like to think that, as our culture keeps on shifting away from the "mythical America" that older generations cling to, a more diverse America will not only be accepted, but embraced. I know this type of change takes time.

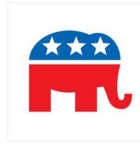
## Cryptogram By George Francis Kane

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Pab. N cgrxzzm sxwway ftaic yvxy Lxyxw nl x dnsynaw.  
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awc ad yvclc vmfayvclcl nl katc ftahxhzc yvxw xwm  
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# News and Notes

By George Francis Kane



The public never pays much attention to the platforms of the political parties, for understandable reasons. If questioning becomes unpleasant, a candidate can disavow any section of it without fear of repercussions from the party. Nevertheless, it is the public identity that the party creates for itself. Even if the document does not mention atheists or secular government or separation of church and state, it is useful to learn where a party stands on issues of importance to atheists. The party platform reveals to what constituency the party is trying to appeal. It does not take long to see that the Republican Party is making no attempt to gain the support of atheists.

The Republican platform emphasizes that their conception of government is inseparable from religious belief:

*We are the party of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The Declaration sets forth the fundamental precepts of American government: That God bestows certain inalienable rights on every individual, thus producing human equality; that government exists first and foremost to protect those inalienable rights; that man-made law must be consistent with God-given, natural rights; and that if God-given, natural, inalienable rights come in conflict with government, court, or human-granted rights, God-given, natural, inalienable rights always prevail; that there is a moral law recognized as "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God"; and that American government is to operate with the consent of the governed*

Republicans view "religious liberty" as privileging the religious to impose their dogmas upon all others – see the Minnesota Atheists Public Policies section on Religious Privilege.

*The Bill of Rights lists religious liberty, with its rights of conscience, as the first freedom to be protected. Religious freedom in the Bill of Rights protects the right of the people to practice their faith in their everyday lives. As George Washington taught, "religion and morality are indispensable supports" to a free society. Similarly, Thomas Jefferson declared that "No provision in our Constitution ought to be dearer to man than that which protects the rights of conscience against the enterprises of the civil authority." Ongoing attempts to compel individuals, businesses, and institutions of faith to transgress their beliefs are part of a misguided effort to undermine religion and drive it from the public square. As a result, many charitable religious institutions that have demonstrated great success in helping the needy have been barred from receiving government grants and contracts. Government officials threaten religious colleges and universities with massive fines and seek*

*to control their personnel decisions. Places of worship for the first time in our history have reason to fear the loss of tax-exempt status merely for espousing and practicing traditional religious beliefs that have been held across the world for thousands of years, and for almost four centuries in America. We value the right of America's religious leaders to preach, and Americans to speak freely, according to their faith. Republicans believe the federal government, specifically the IRS, is constitutionally prohibited from policing or censoring speech based on religious convictions or beliefs, and therefore we urge the repeal of the Johnson Amendment.*

*We pledge to defend the religious beliefs and rights of conscience of all Americans and to safeguard religious institutions against government control. We endorse the First Amendment Defense Act, Republican legislation in the House and Senate which will bar government discrimination against individuals and businesses for acting on the belief that marriage is the union of one man and one woman. This Act would protect the non-profit tax status of faith-based adoption agencies, the accreditation of religious educational institutions, the grants and contracts of faith-based charities and small businesses, and the licensing of religious professions — all of which are under assault by elements of the Democratic Party. We encourage every state to pass similar legislation. We likewise endorse the efforts of Republican state legislators and governors who have defied intimidation from corporations and the media in defending religious liberty. We support laws to confirm the longstanding American tradition that religious individuals and institutions can educate young people, receive government benefits, and participate in public debates without having to check their religious beliefs at the door.*

*Our First Amendment rights are not given to us by the government but are rights we inherently possess. The government cannot use subsequent amendments to limit First Amendment rights. The Free Exercise Clause is both an individual and a collective liberty protecting a right to worship God according to the dictates of conscience. Therefore, we strongly support the freedom of Americans to act in accordance with their religious beliefs, not only in their houses of worship, but also in their everyday lives.*

(continued on page 4)

# News and Notes (continued from page 3)

By George Francis Kane

*We support the right of the people to conduct their businesses in accordance with their religious beliefs and condemn public officials who have proposed boycotts against businesses that support traditional marriage. We pledge to protect those business owners who have been subjected to hate campaigns, threats of violence, and other attempts to deny their civil rights.*

*We support the public display of the Ten Commandments as a reflection of our history and our country's Judeo-Christian heritage and further affirm the rights of religious students to engage in voluntary prayer at public school events and to have equal access to school facilities. We assert the First Amendment right of freedom of association for religious, private, service, and youth organizations to set their own membership standards.*

Republicans specifically justify their public policy positions – the ones they consider most important – on the basis of religious dogma. This is specifically the reason that Minnesota Atheists opposes these positions.

### Same-sex marriage

*Traditional marriage and family, based on marriage between one man and one woman, is the foundation for a free society and has for millennia been entrusted with rearing children and instilling cultural values. We condemn the Supreme Court's ruling in United States v. Windsor, which wrongly removed the ability of Congress to define marriage policy in federal law. We also condemn the Supreme Court's lawless ruling in Obergefell v. Hodges, which in the words of the late Justice Antonin Scalia, was a "judicial Putsch" — full of "silly extravagances" — that reduced "the disciplined legal reasoning of John Marshall and Joseph Storey to the mystical aphorisms of a fortune cookie." In Obergefell, five unelected lawyers robbed 320 million Americans of their legitimate constitutional authority to define marriage as the union of one man and one woman. The Court twisted the meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment beyond recognition. To echo Scalia, we dissent. We, therefore, support the appointment of justices and judges who respect the constitutional limits on their power and respect the authority of the states to decide such fundamental social questions.*

### Reproductive Choice

The only possible argument against a woman's right to choose an abortion is a religious one – that god has "ensouled" the zygote or fetus. The Republican Platform makes no attempt to disguise the religious dogma that dictates its position on reproductive rights.

*The Constitution's guarantee that no one can "be deprived of life, liberty or property" deliberately echoes the Declaration of Independence's proclamation that "all" are "endowed by their*

*Creator" with the inalienable right to life. Accordingly, we assert the sanctity of human life and affirm that the unborn child has a fundamental right to life which cannot be infringed. We support a human life amendment to the Constitution and legislation to make clear that the Fourteenth Amendment's protections apply to children before birth.*

I have written several times in this column how the opinions of Justice Antonin Scalia were so enormously divergent from most of the court's rulings on Establishment Clause issues. Scalia opposed all tests that the court had established to determine if a government action violates the Establishment Clause – neutrality, endorsement and the three-pronged Lemon Test – as impermissible if there were historical examples of the practice approved by the law. The only test Scalia would apply is if government imposed religious orthodoxy with the imposition of imprisonment or fine. Scalia was the most determined opponent of secular government in the history of the Court; but the Republican Platform lionizes him.

*Only a Republican president will appoint judges who respect the rule of law expressed within the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, including the inalienable right to life and the laws of nature and nature's God, as did the late Justice Antonin Scalia. We are facing a national crisis in our judiciary. We understand that only by electing a Republican president in 2016 will America have the opportunity for up to five new constitutionally-minded Supreme Court justices appointed to fill vacancies on the Court. Only such appointments will enable courts to begin to reverse the long line of activist decisions — including Roe, Obergefell.....*

Next month we will review the Democratic Platform.

## Secretary's Report - September

By Tim Berry

- A motion was made and seconded to pay Hector Avalos \$50.00 to speak at the October public meeting. Passed.
- It was also decided to move the October public meeting to the fourth Sunday in October.
- During the September public meeting it was moved and seconded to accept the proposed Constitution and Bylaws revisions that had been accepted by the Board. Passed unanimously.

Complete meeting minutes are available to dues paying members by contacting Tim at sec.mnatheists.org.

# Cable Report

By Steve Petersen and James Zimmerman



**Karen Shragg and James Zimmerman**

Host James Zimmerman interviewed activist, ecologist, and author Karen Shragg about her latest book, *Move Upstream: A Call to Solve Overpopulation*. Karen discussed her reasons for writing the book. She also discussed the specifics about overpopulation and the many obstacles in the way to curbing our species' exponential growth over the past century. Shragg noted that too many activists, even in the environmental movement, fail to make the final leap to the conclusion that overpopulation is at the core of our problems; or, if they've made that leap, they fail to advocate for solutions. She then drew the connection between religious belief and overpopulation, and talked about the need for a shift in public perception and education regarding birth control and the Earth's limited resources.

We are actively looking for people to host and produce programming. If you have ideas on programming or interest in hosting please get involved. Contact Steve Petersen at [address@mnatheists.org](mailto:address@mnatheists.org).

**Cable Crew:** George Kane, Brett Stembridge, Shirley Moll, Steve Petersen, Les Stordalen, Grant Hermanson and Art Anderson .

**Podcasts:** Programs are available on the MinnesotaAtheists.org website. Access via iTunes and YouTube has been made possible by Grant Hermanson. To date, our channel has had over 261,000 downloads.



## Cable Schedule

**Bloomington:** Ch. 16. Sunday 11:00 p.m. Sponsors: David Beardsley.

**Minneapolis:** Ch. 75. Monday 7:00 p.m. Sponsor: Steve Petersen.

**Northwest Community Television (NWCT) Brooklyn Center, Brooklyn Park, Crystal, Golden Valley, Maple Grove, New Hope, Osseo, Plymouth and Robbinsdale;** Ch. 20 check web page for date and times: <http://nwct.org/programming.aspx>  
Sponsor: Grant Hermanson.

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

**Roseville, Shoreview, Arden Hills, North Oaks, Little Canada, Falcon Heights, Lauderdale, Moundsview/New Brighton:** Ch. 14. Wednesday 10:30 p.m. Sponsor: Shirley Moll.

**St. Cloud:** Ch. 12 Thursday 8:30 to 9:00 p.m. Sponsor: Tom Stavros.

**St. Paul:** Ch. 15 Wednesdays 5:00 p.m. Sponsor: Jim Wright.

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

# September Meeting Review

By Nancy Hertz

This month Minnesota Atheists celebrated our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. There were around 40 people in attendance at the Rondo Library to indulge in cupcakes and to hear a panel of members discuss how Minnesota Atheists began, some of our past successes and struggles and what are our goals for the future. Panel members were August Berkshire, Shirley Moll, Steve Petersen, George Kane, Cynthia Egli Schunk, Jack Caravela, Georgia Tsoi and Hertzey Hertz.

Each panel member spoke about a piece of Minnesota Atheists' history.

August Berkshire discussed how we became a chapter of the American Atheists group. After an audit of the American Atheists it was discovered that some chapters did not keep accurate books and the American Atheist group disbanded the chapters. We then became the Minnesota Atheists. August discussed how in 1984 we were a shock to society. As time went on it became more accepted that we would voice our opinion on things.

Shirley Moll talked about her going to Texas for work and going to the American Atheists' office and meeting Madalyn Murray O'Hair. This was the beginning of the Minnesota Chapter of the American Atheists. Shirley ended her talk with a pronouncement that "We are not done yet!"

Steve Petersen discussed how the Minnesota Atheists wanted to be more vocal and wanted to keep the word Atheist in the name of the group. He explained the purpose statement at that time.

George Kane reviewed a time when conflict among the board members brought Minnesota Atheists to an existential crisis. He talked about how the situation was resolved.

Cynthia Egli Schunk stated that she joined the group in 1992. She was on the board for many years and worked hard to keep people working together.

Jack Caravela listed the reasons we have a group. He stated that we work for separation of state and church, to educate the public about atheism and to build a community of non-believers. Jack promoted those events that build community and encouraged members to attend those groups to continue to build community.

Georgia Tsoi explained her journey from being a member of the Mormon faith to an active atheist.

Hertzey Hertz expressed her desire to continue to work to build community. She stated, "We need community builders."

After the panel spoke there was time for questions and comments.

*Following are the prepared texts for some the panelists. Some of the scheduled panelists were unable to attend, and their places were filled by organization leaders who were recruited at the last minute. There will be a few more in the November/December issue of the newsletter.*

## Shirley Moll

As most of you probably know, I have always been an atheist and always wanted to be involved with other atheists.

Then, as an Assistant Corporate Secretary of Apache Corporation, I had to travel to Austin, TX for business purposes. After I was done with the work, I was able to go visit American Atheists.

As a result, I showed up at an MCLU function that included Madelyn Murray O'Hare. After the MCLU meeting, Madelyn moved to another room and hosted a meeting, which I attended, to start a chapter of American Atheists in Minnesota. For most of my life I thought I was a lonely atheist not knowing others outside of my family members. I did not consider myself a leader or much of an activist. However, when the O'Hare chance came along, I jumped at the opportunity.

I served as a secretary, newsletter editor, co-director and maintained membership information for the Twin Cities Chapter of American Atheists, which was a great success. Then, when American Atheists announced the closing of the chapters, we had a dedicated group and we just moved into forming a new group and that was Minnesota Atheists.

Setting Minnesota Atheists up was a lot of work, but, seeing how it has survived for 25 years and hopefully many more years to come, it has been worth the time, money and effort. During the early years I served as secretary, treasurer and board member, but currently I help maintain the membership information, am a member of the newsletter editorial board and also a cable program crew member.

One item I have thought about is doing more work to get donations so that we can also purchase a building.

And I just keep saying "We Are Not Done Yet."



### Jack Caravela

Hi, my name is Jack Caravela, and I've been a member of Minnesota Atheists for twelve years now, so on this panel I'm a relative newcomer.

I've heard people, including those who have no god beliefs, ask why atheists need to form groups at all. Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith*, has wondered why the word "atheist" even exists. After all, he says, there's no word for people who don't believe in astrology. Sam Harris is a very smart guy, and I've learned a lot from him.

But to that statement I'd say: I know of no astrologers who are working to change the laws of our government to reflect their beliefs. And I haven't heard of any polls in which respondents would not vote for an astrologer.

True, we don't share a belief system. But we atheists have common concerns. Minnesota Atheists has three reasons for being: to work for separation of state and church, to educate the public about what atheism really means, and to build a community of nonbelievers.

Of those three, the last one has resonated most with me. I've met people from the Twin Cities who told me they've never met another atheist and thought they were the only one. Many of us feel isolated and marginalized, and it's great to meet lots of other people who have seen through contemporary mythology and deeply held superstitious beliefs. Just to be able to say that in public and know that you all understand what I mean is a wonderful thing.

I've been on the board and done other things, but my main activity has been the Minnesota Atheist Meetup. I was the main organizer for a number of years and have seen it

grow from a hundred people to over two thousand four hundred as of this morning. Some of those live outside the metro, some out of state. But the fact that they sign up shows they're drawn to what we stand for and they want to declare their status as atheists.

Recently I've turned over my former role to Heather, and I'm pleased that she's bringing back Newbie Night, a Meetup for those who might feel awkward as the only stranger in the room. We need to attract more people in their 20s and 30s, which is one reason why Heather is a great choice to lead the Meetup. I also want to acknowledge those who continue to host Meetups on a regular basis. George, who's hosted Freethought Toastmasters even before there was a Meetup; Steve, who leads volunteers at the Food Group Warehouse; Liz and Dan, who keep our godless gamers Meetup going strong twice a week (Liz also hosts Freethinking Females); Nancy and Matthew Hertz, who host backyard movie night and are stalwart volunteers at the Family Place homeless shelter Meetup every month; Chuck, who's been hosting our Blasphemer's Brunch in Richfield for years now; Patricia, who's hosted the Little Canada book club even longer. I'm sorry to leave people out, but my time is limited.

It's important for us to meet and get to know each other, preferably in public. Please attend more events, help out with one, or start one. Heather would love to hear from you. When you're at an event, join a conversation with people you haven't met or introduce yourself to someone. The world needs to know there's a lot of us.

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### Steve Petersen

When I attended the 1988 American Atheists (AA) convention I knew I had found a group I liked. AA reflected O'Hara's personality, aggressive and confrontational. At the TCAA we followed that formula, in our cable program and public protests.

When the chapters closed we had a sizable group of activists who wanted to keep going. We also had a desire to move atheists out of the "angry" atheist box into active positive participants in the public dialog. As atheists, we knew, as individuals we led ethical lives and contributed to the betterment of society. As individual atheists, however, our voice was easily ignored and forgotten. We were defined by religious text and religious people that pissed many of us off and we wanted to change that narrative. We wanted to control our own destiny. Being atheists we understood our niche was to play up our non belief and so had to have "atheists" in the title. Some claimed using "atheists" so openly would turn off those in society who were well connected to politicians and business. Well, it is our goal to change that narrative and to do that we need to be comfortable with ourselves in a public way. We are from Minnesota and so "Minnesota Atheists" was agreed upon.

Collectively we agreed on a purpose statement and incorporated it in our bylaws. "Minnesota Atheists is organized by atheists as a public educational corporation to promote the atheist viewpoint as a valid contribution to public discourse, to

strive to maintain the First Amendment guarantee of separation of state and church, and to work in coalition with freethought and civil rights/civil liberties organizations where joint action is needed to achieve these goals."

We set up a democratic board and when that elected board could not find common ground we enabled the membership to settle the question. Indeed, ten years later a conflict over how and who should be representing Minnesota Atheists arose and was settled in a contested election.

As founders, the majority wanted to enable atheists who agree with our purpose to participate and be a voice for organized atheism. A majority of founders desired for MNA to outgrow and outlive us and as such we are open and encouraged new voices to step up and facilitate us forward into new methods and styles of communication with ourselves and the public. New voices have established policies that further promoted the atheist's viewpoint. We should all be proud of the many atheist personalities that are highlighted on our cable and podcast program, our public speaking events, our radio program, as well as social participants and members. It would also be remiss to not acknowledge the foundation that was built and new voices that created the opportunity of the Saint Paul Saint to ask us to sponsor Atheists night for the Mr. Paul Aints. When MNA was founded, social media

(continued on page 8)

(Continued from page 7)

and email were only in sc-fi stories, not reality. We are thankful to those who have come after the founders and who have led the way into 21st century communications.

One goal not yet met is a Minnesota Atheists Center. Think about it; there are churches everywhere but no atheist center. It is the view of some of us that one is not part of a community until you have a bricks and mortar commitment. After all we are not vagabonds, we are not village atheists. We are a community of atheists.



### August Berkshire

In 1984, the leaders of American Atheists, Madalyn Murray O’Hair and Jon Murray, came to Minnesota, after which Shirley Moll and I and several other people started the Twin Cities Chapter of American Atheists. This was the third time they had tried to start a chapter and this time it worked, because we had a great group of people. In fact, we won the 1984 and 1985 American Atheists’ Chapter of the Year awards.

In 1991, American Atheists disbanded all their chapters. This was because the chapters were under the umbrella of the national organization, using their 501(c)3 tax exemption. Legally, we were like committees of the national organization.

The IRS would routinely audit the national American Atheists organization – even though they never found anything wrong. One year the IRS decided to audit the chapters as well. Although there was no hint that any chapter was collecting or spending money in an inappropriate way, a lot of them did have poor bookkeeping, either through laziness, inattention, or because they simply did not handle enough money to bother. This lack of proper bookkeeping on the part of some of the chapters could have potentially shut down the entire American Atheists organization. And that’s why they shut down the chapter system in 1991.

Some chapters folded, but others, like the Twin Cities Chapter, reincorporated as an independent organization – Minnesota Atheists – with our own 501(c)3 tax exemption. Steve Petersen and Shirley Moll were two of the leaders who helped make this happen.

American Atheists later adopted a system of local affiliates, with no legal connection to the national organization. And so Minnesota Atheists became an affiliate of American Atheists, as well as an affiliate of the American Humanist Association, the Center for Inquiry, Atheist Alliance of America, Atheist Alliance International, and the International Humanist and Ethical Union. The Freedom From Religion Foundation only has an exclusive chapter system, not a loose affiliate system, and so we have no formal connection to them, though we do have a close friendship.

So what has changed over the years? In 1984, we were a shock to the community. Our letters to the editor and other media appearances drew bewildered, worried, and outraged responses from people who just couldn’t believe we existed. A year later, that had changed. Instead of “Oh my God it’s the atheists!” it became, “Oh, right; it’s the atheists again” – as if our voice was now expected, even if not yet accepted. The acceptance began with the rise of the so-called New Atheist movement about ten years ago and didn’t really sink in until we started doing the Mr. Paul Aints games five years ago.

When we began many years ago, there was very much a need for what we might call atheist apologetics – a scathing critique of religion, complemented by the wisdom of atheism. And this need continues, although the need is not as great due to the success the atheist movement has already made. Unlike religion, we are in the business of, in a way, trying to put ourselves out of business. We want to be so successful at critiquing religious dogma that it withers away and we no longer need to do it, just as there is no longer a need to counter belief in unicorns. And this is where our role as an organization will change, as indeed it has already begun to change.

As Nietzsche wrote, “God is dead, God remains dead, and we have killed him.” So where do we go from here? We continue to reach out into the community, with separation of state and church issues as well as human rights and science issues.

Young people today are becoming atheists at a fast pace, due to the internet. In the Twin Cities they don’t need a group like Minnesota Atheists for solidarity; they already have real life and Facebook friends who are atheists. They will join us for two reasons: first, for our social activism; and second, for something not often associated with atheist organizations: fun.

I will leave it to my colleagues, and to our members in the audience, to elaborate more on our future. But one final thing: one measure of success of any nonprofit organization is whether it outlasts its founding members. I’m pleased to report that we are well on our way.



## Cryptogram Answer

I do not pretend to be able to prove that there is no God. I equally cannot prove that Satan is a fiction. The Christian god may exist; so may the gods of Olympus, or of ancient Egypt, or of Babylon. But no one of these hypotheses is more probable than any other: they lie outside the region of even probable knowledge, and therefore there is no reason to consider any of them.

-Bertrand Russell

## Member Well-being Committee Announcement

The Well-being Committee was formed to address the ongoing needs of members who are experiencing short-term life challenges. This committee is requesting volunteers who are looking for opportunities to provide some support to members of Minnesota Atheists in need. If you are interested in volunteering, please call 612-868-2267 or email well-being@mna.org. More information to follow.

## Letter To The Editor

Dear Editor,

I attended the September meeting of Minnesota Atheists and found the history of the organization very enlightening. It came out during the meeting that, at one time, the Minnesota Atheists organization faced a crisis. As I am a relatively new member I do not have all the details, but it appears to have been a rift between two camps: one wanting a very angry and confrontational atheist core philosophy, and the other wanting an educational and socially supportive atheist core philosophy. While considering all this new information, I came to realize that I am an angry atheist who needs to belong to an educational and socially supportive atheist group.

Generally speaking, I think that atheists can be divided into two main groups: those who are atheist because they never really believed a god existed to begin with, and people like myself, for whom the realization that a god cannot exist came gradually over time. While I can only speak for myself, I think that my "atheist anger" stems from that process of

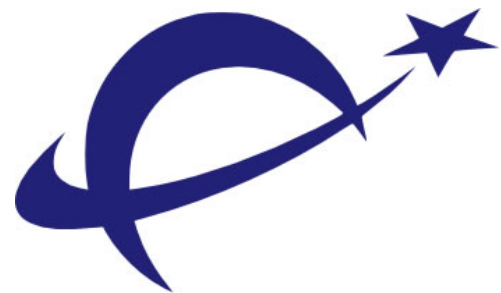
## Call for November/December Articles

We welcome contributions from all readers of The Minnesota Atheist. While we cannot guarantee that your submission will be accepted for publication, we will carefully consider anything that is related to atheism. We would especially like to receive contributions which provide profiles of individual atheists and which report atheist-related events in the wider community.

Because we are a 501(c)3 tax-exempt organization, we cannot print articles that support or oppose a specific candidate, but we can print articles that support or oppose specific causes. Article length should ideally be 500-1000 words and no more than 2000 words.

Please send submissions to the editor, Jenny Nolan at editor@mnatheists.org by 11:59 p.m. on October 22. All submissions may be edited for style and length.

We look forward to receiving your submissions. Without readers like you The Minnesota Atheist would be needlessly constrained in its breadth and depth.

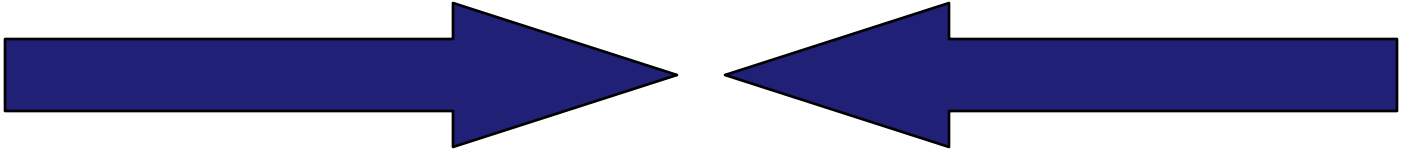


realization. Some would consider anger a normal response when one is lied to, manipulated and swindled; all the things that organized religion has done to me personally in the name of god. It was that anger which helped me to confront my beliefs, and to make the ethical and moral choice that is atheism. That same anger is also why I should not confront people of faith, as I sometimes have a tendency to transfer my personal anger at religious organizations on to their religious stoicism. A terrible thing to do.

Just as the process of becoming an atheist was evolutionary for me, I also think the process of channeling my anger into a positive outcome as evolutionary. I do not see how that evolution could occur if I surrounded myself with other angry atheists.

Joe Smith

# Replies and Responses



To Stephanie Zvan

I just saw your letter re: "Castile shooting" in the newsletter. Great job as far as it goes. I suspect you'd like to see some changes.

Consider this: We whites are safer because the experience of police with whites is such that the police do not live in fear of us. As a former officer in St.Paul I can attest that many are not racist, but all have more than a healthy fear for their safety as young black men are often a threat and many stereotype officers as the enemy.

If whites were producing the young men that shoot randomly they would be as feared as the blacks and then us white folks would be in the same danger. For young white men to act respectful of the police in the hopes of a break does not demean them in the eyes of their peers. Obstreperousness by young black men re: police is a means to showing you are not afraid of the police and taken as threatening by police (or at least enhances any pre-existing fears).

This aspect of the issue takes someone with media cred to get the issue addressed and it appears that many do not care to tackle it. Tony Bouza is the only one I have ever heard mention the fear issue.

Reply:

Mr. Davis claims that "young black men are often a threat" and that black (communities? parents?) are "producing the young men that shoot randomly" as reasons police fear and shoot black people. These claims are both unfounded and insufficient to justify the extrajudicial killing of our black friends and neighbors.

First of all, according to FBI data, about 50 law enforcement officers are murdered on the job each year in the U.S. With approximately 675,000 officers, that amounts to a 0.007% chance for any given officer in any given year. That's low. It's nearly as low as the annual risk to the general population of dying in an assault. Being a police officer does increase your risk of death slightly, but the increase is tiny.

An officer faces an annual risk of approximately 0.0037% of dying at the hands of a white murderer. The risk is statistically identical for dying at the hands of a black murderer. While that does mean that blacks kill proportionately more officers than whites, *no* officer facing another human being has any real likelihood of dying from the encounter.

It happens, because unlikely things do happen sometimes, but there is no significant special danger. An officer

acting out of fear based on only these circumstances is acting irrationally, just as the officer who shot Philando Castile acted irrationally in killing someone based on the behavior (declaration of a concealed weapon) that Castile was required legally to do for the officer's protection.

As for telling me black Americans commit random shootings, this isn't even a misunderstanding of statistics. It's handwaving. "Random shooting" isn't a category of crime that has a distinct definition, much less a category for which data is collected. This is a raw assertion of Mr. Davis's beliefs about how the world works.

It's also very likely wrong. The type of crime most recently described in the media as "random shooting" involves mass shootings in a public place. A 2015 CNN analysis of data compiled on these shootings by *Mother Jones* showed that, at least for black and white perpetrators, race wasn't a factor. They committed these crimes in proportion to their presence in the general population.

So Mr. Davis has presented one statistical assertion that's false and another that's meaningless in this context. In a world without divine guidance to rely on, that's a problem. It would be a problem even if we weren't talking about the taking of lives. When we rely on data to guide our decisions, the accuracy and relevance of that data is important.

When we're using data to justify the taking of lives, we have a strong ethical imperative to get it right. All of it. If we don't know what we're talking about, if we're relying on hunches and feelings and something that came to us down the grapevine, it's unethical to pass information on as though it were fact. It isn't. It can't shine light on the problem. All it can do is muddy the waters long enough for more people to die.

When Officer Yanez shot Philando Castile, he acted out a pattern of irrational fear. That fear resulted in the death of a man who was doing everything right. It cost one person everything and gained the officer nothing. I don't condemn that because I don't understand it. I condemned it because there is no reasonable system of ethics that tells us an act like this is a good thing.

I didn't condemn that because I didn't know Yanez was afraid. I condemn the fear that led to his actions. If Mr. Davis wants his former fellow officers to be the ethical people he sees them to be, he'll stop supporting and spreading that irrational fear.

Stephanie Zvan



# Upcoming Events

**Apple Picking at Afton** Saturday, October 8<sup>th</sup> at 2:00 p.m., Afton Apple Orchard, 14421 90th St S, Hastings. General admission is \$4.00. We will meet at the front gates.

**The Future of Humanism Conference: New Voices for the 21st Century** Saturday, October 15<sup>th</sup> 10:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m., First Unitarian Society, 900 Mount Curve Ave, Minneapolis

**Flying Spaghetti Monster Dinner** Sunday, October 30<sup>th</sup> at 6:30 p.m., Old Spaghetti Factory, 233 Park Ave S, Minneapolis

**Atheists Talk Community Brunch** 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of every month at 10:30 a.m., Q. Cumbers, 7465 France Ave S, Edina

**Godless Gamers** Every Sunday at 2:00 p.m. and Thursday at 6:00 p.m., Fantasy Flight Games Center, 1975 County Rd B2, Roseville

**Atheist/Agnostic Alcoholics Anonymous** Every Sunday from 6:00-7:00 p.m. and Wednesday from 7:00-8:00 p.m., Health Recovery Center building, lower floor, 3249 Hennepin Ave, Minneapolis. Based on A.A, minus beliefs in any form of a God.

**Freethought Toastmasters Meeting** 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Monday of every month from 6:30-8:00 p.m., Larpenteur Estates Party Room, 1280 Larpenteur Ave W, St Paul. [freethought.toastmastersclubs.org](http://freethought.toastmastersclubs.org)

**Freethought Dinner Social** 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Monday of every month from 5:00-7:00 p.m., Davanni's, 8605 Lyndale Ave S, Bloomington

**Freethinking Females** 2<sup>nd</sup> Monday of every month at 7:00 p.m., Claddagh Irish Pub, 7890 Main St N, Maple Grove, and 4<sup>th</sup> Monday of every month at 7:30 p.m., Sweeney's Saloon, 96 North Dale Street, St. Paul (Note, two different locations). Shattering the myth that Atheist groups are male dominated with a female's only event.

**Volunteer Food Packing** 2<sup>nd</sup> Thursday of every month at 1:00 p.m., The Food Group, 8501 54th Ave N, New Hope

**Blasphemer's Brunch** 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday of every month at 10:30 a.m., Pizza Lucé, 800 W 66th St, Richfield

**Minnesota Atheists Board Meeting** 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of every month at 6:30 p.m., Amherst H Wilder Foundation, 451 Lexington Pkwy N, St Paul. All Minnesota Atheists members are welcome.

**Bowling for Deities** Last Saturday of every month at Noon, Memory Lanes, 2520 26th Ave S, Minneapolis

For more events, visit [www.meetup.com/minnesota-atheists](http://www.meetup.com/minnesota-atheists)



## Minnesota Atheists Membership and Donations

- One-year student membership \$10
- One-year individual membership \$35
- Three-year individual membership \$90
- One-year household membership \$45
- Three-year household membership \$115
- One-year sustaining membership \$75
- Three-year sustaining membership \$200
- Life membership \$600

General Fund \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Building Fund \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Radio Fund \$ \_\_\_\_\_

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Student memberships include a subscription to the PDF version of *The Minnesota Atheist* delivered by email. All other memberships include a subscription to the printed version delivered by postal mail. If you would prefer the PDF version delivered by email, please check the box and provide your email address.

**Minnesota Atheists**  
**PO Box 120304**  
**New Brighton, MN 55112**

**Please make checks payable to Minnesota Atheists.**

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# Minnesota Atheists

## Positive Atheism in action since 1991

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

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board@mnatheists.org

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Alyssa Ehni  
pres@mnatheists.org

**Associate President**  
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apres@mnatheists.org

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chair@mnatheists.org

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Chris Matthews  
treas@mnatheists.org  
763.428.3424

**Directors-at-Large**  
August Berkshire  
dir1@mnatheists.org  
612.868.2267

Eric Jayne  
dir2@mnatheists.org

Hertzzy Hertz  
dir3@mnatheists.org

### The Minnesota Atheist Newsletter

**Editorial Board**  
editor@mnatheists.org

**Editorial Board**  
George Kane  
nup@minn.net  
651.488.8225

Heather Hegi  
chair@mnatheists.org

Shirley Moll  
srmoll@comcast.com

James Zimmerman  
zgoatee@gmail.com

**Editor**  
Jenny Nolan  
editor@mnatheists.org

**Chief Photographer**  
Richard Trombley

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

### Minnesota Atheists Media

**Public Relations Chair**  
Emily Matejcek  
pr@mnatheists.org

**Atheists Weekly Email (AWE)**  
Chris Matthews  
awe@mnatheists.org

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Steve Petersen  
cable@mnatheists.org

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Clint Buhs  
Grant Hermanson  
web@mnatheists.org

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podcasts@mnatheists.org

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

### Minnesota Atheists Affiliations

Minnesota Atheists is affiliated with the Atheist Alliance of America, Atheist Alliance International, American Atheists, The American Humanist Association, the Council for Secular Humanism, The International Humanist and Ethical Union, and the Secular Coalition for America.

### Minnesota Atheists Membership

Regular members: 218  
Life members: 43  
Meetup members: 2,400

### Minnesota Atheists Honorary Members

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info@mnatheists.org  
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