

March 2018
Volume 28
Number 3

March Public Meeting

Science is Racist?

Guest Speaker: Stephanie Zvan

When someone says that science is racist, many of us take it as an affront to our worldview. Science can't be racist! It's how we come to an objective understanding of the world. Unfortunately, when we're affronted, we stop listening. We never find out why people call science racist, never evaluate whether they may be right, never find out what change they're asking for. We simply stay upset that anyone's saying this at all.

The problem, of course, is that science is still a human endeavor. With that comes all the biases that plague humanity. While we may eventually manage to purge those biases, it's a long process, and there are forces working against it.

So what do people mean when they say science is racist? Come find out. Take a tour of science's racist past, learn how it's improving, and find out where some of the major challenges still lie.

Stephanie Zvan is the associate president of Minnesota Atheists, on the board of Secular Woman, and one of the organizers of Secular Women Work conferences and workshops. She writes at Almost Diamonds on The Orbit network, and she's not afraid to tackle the occasional taboo.



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Sunday, March 18, 2018

1:00–1:15 p.m.: Social
1:15–1:45 p.m.: Business Meeting
1:45–2:00 p.m.: Break
2:00–3:30 p.m.: Program

4:00 p.m.: Dinner

Brookdale Library
6125 Shingle Creek Pkwy
Brooklyn Center, MN 55430

Dinner details will be announced at the meeting.



President’s Column Droll Nun Proselytizing

By *Alyssa Ehni*

I attended my first opera this February. A friend of mine had tickets but couldn’t go. I went to check it out. There were many aspects of the performance I enjoyed; the performers were wonderful and the use of the set was amazing. I did, however, find the story frustrating. The opera was adapted from a movie, which had been adapted from a book, all of which were titled “Dead Man Walking.” I have not seen the movie nor have I read the book. I knew the story dealt with a death row inmate, but that was about it.

Religious motivations are often seen as benevolent justification for any action in today’s society.

The program for the opera referred to it as a story of redemption. “Dead Man Walking” is based on a true story and the original book was written by the protagonist, a nun, Sister Prejean. The story follows her interactions with a convicted rapist and murderer on death row in Louisiana, Joseph De Rocher, as his execution approaches. Prejean frames these interactions as being about De Rocher’s redemption and salvation. Spoiler Alert: De Rocher does nothing to atone for his crimes. In fact, I did not think that the performance tried to follow De Rocher’s story. It seemed to follow Prejean’s story and her drive to get De Rocher to admit what he had done.

I have to wonder if I would have found the story moving if I had watched this when I wasn’t an atheist. (I did find it moving, but the feeling was horror.) As an atheist I saw a story about a nun whose life intersected with an inmate in

Continued on page 7

Cryptogram

By *George Francis Kane*

K efqh skllsh yvpckthpyh kp fpi hplhjojkzh vj
wbzkphzz vj kpqhzlxhpl lefl ojvxkzhz tkqkthptz
vpsi fclhj leh thfle vc leh zlvymevsthjz.

— Jvwhjl Rjhhp Kprhjzvss, F Nvvthp Rvt



News & Notes

When “Lack of” Becomes “Contempt for”

By George Francis Kane

A bill has been introduced in the Egyptian parliament that will make not believing in God a crime. “Contempt for religion” is already a crime, punishable by imprisonment for up to five years. The new bill, from the parliament’s Committee on Religion, would classify atheism as a form of contempt for religion.

The head of the committee, Amr Hamrousch, explained that “Atheism rates are on the rise in Egypt. It is a dangerous trend that needs to be curtailed as it threatens the very fabric of our society.” This is decidedly overblown, as atheism is not set to sweep aside religion in Egypt. According to the International Humanist Ethical Union (IHEU), a non-governmental organization recognizable by UNESCO, a questionable poll in 2014 concluded that there were only 866 atheists in the nation, or 0.001% of the population. According to the national Family Court, in 2015 6500 women filed for divorce because their husbands were atheists.

The committee on Religion has proposed other legislation to combat atheism, such as shutting down web sites found to promote atheism. A war on atheism appears already to be national policy, however. Police have been raiding internet cafés suspected of being meeting places for atheists. Ibrahim Khalil, 29, was arrested for a Facebook page called “Atheism,” while a 21-year-old student, Karim Ashrak al-Banna, was sentenced to three years in prison for announcing on Facebook that he is an atheist.

As previously reported here, in 2014 Saudi Arabia outlawed “the promotion of atheism in any form,” deeming it terrorism. The latest IHEU Freedom of Thought Report states that 73 countries have laws prohibiting blasphemy, apostasy or both, in some cases calling for the death penalty.

In addition to governmental actions, religious groups and conservative media fan hatred against atheists that frequently results in violence. It is therefore distressing to find that liberal Western countries are raising obstacles to

atheists seeking asylum. In the United Kingdom, the application by Hamza bin Walayat of Pakistan was rejected because government officials decided that his knowledge of the intellectual history of Humanism is inadequate. The Home Office’s documentation described issues in Walayat’s interview they considered disqualifying:

You have claimed... that you were a Humanist when asked about your religion.... You stated that you are aware that Humanists refer to themselves as non-religious and that they therefore have no religion.... However, when you were asked why you were claiming that your religion was Humanist if Humanists have no religion, you replied: ‘because I believe in Humanity....’ It is considered that you have stated your religion as Humanist despite knowing that this is not a religion.

The IHEU’s Director of Communications, Bob Churchill, sent a letter protesting the rejection of asylum for Walayat and objecting to the line of questioning by the Home Office:

We note with dismay some of the points made in the previous rejection letter in Hamza’s case... The various semantic confusions as to how non-religious humanism should be talked about with respect to religion are commonplace:

- *should we answer “I’m humanist” in response to the question “What is your religion?” — some would do so, some would do so but recognize the strangeness, others would refuse to do so and specify “No, I’m not religious, I’m a humanist.”*
- *experts still discuss how best to fit humanist convictions under the right to ‘freedom of religion or belief’*
- *there are positive beliefs associated with humanism, but also non-belief in gods, so is it a belief, a religious belief?*

The point is that using the semantic difficulties around this to dismiss someone’s humanist convictions seems deeply uncharitable.

Press Release

Secular Women Work Conference

Minneapolis, MN — Secular Woman and Minnesota Atheists are bringing back their activist training conference, and they're using Kickstarter to make it possible. The Secular Women Work conference will be held in Minneapolis this August 24–26 and features accomplished activists Jessica Xiao, former program assistant at the American Humanist Association and current Prison Book Club Coordinator, and Greta Christina, writer and co-founder of Godless Perverts. Mandisa Thomas will be returning as well after another successful three years for Black Nonbelievers.

Come August, the conference will feature a full slate of exclusively women and genderqueer speakers. The original conference in 2015 highlighted the importance of “women’s work” in the secular movement. Secular Woman president Monette Richards explains, “The recent revelations that atheist figureheads and organizations knew and did nothing about Lawrence Krauss long before his recent #metoo reckoning demonstrate how far we still have to go as a movement in valuing the contributions of women. There’s no better time than now for another Secular Women Work.”

The conference has returned to Kickstarter to sell conference tickets and raise additional funding. The first Secular Women Work was the first atheist or skeptic conference to successfully crowdfund. “There’s a perception of waning interest in secular conferences. We think people are just looking for the right conference to take them to the next level in their activism. The Kickstarter lets us test our theory before committing resources,” said Minnesota Atheists incoming associate president Stephanie Zvan. The campaign launches today, and tickets will only be available through Kickstarter until it fully funds.

In addition to conference tickets, which will be transferable, the Kickstarter offers backer rewards such as t-shirts, custom SurlyRamics jewelry, and advertising space. Those who can’t attend but want to support the conference can buy and donate a scholarship to another activist. The campaign will end March 29.

The Secular Women Work conference will be heavy on skill-building and problem-solving workshops, with panels and speakers covering specialist topics. All workshop leaders, panelists, and speakers will be seasoned activists themselves. Additional speakers are expected to be announced during the Kickstarter campaign.

The conference will be held in the Humphrey School of Public Affairs on the University of Minnesota’s West Bank campus. Conference organizer Chelsea du Fresne explained that the venue was an important factor in making the first conference special. “Not only is the space wonderful for getting to know other activists, but being surrounded by so much political accomplishment is inspiring. Today, more than ever, those reminders that we can make a difference really matter.”

The conference is a joint project of the Minnesota Atheists and Secular Woman.

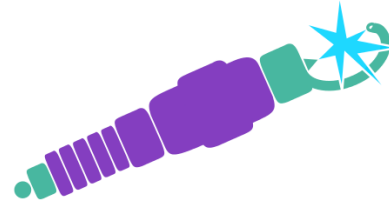
Media contact: monette@secularwoman.org

Conference website: <http://secularwomenwork.org/>

Kickstarter website:

<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1033564734/secular-women-work-returns>

Secular
Women Work
Minneapolis, August 24–26, 2018



A Decade of Atheists Talk



February Meeting Review Varieties of African American Atheism

By *Stephanie Zvan*

In observance of Black History Month, the speaker at Minnesota Atheists' February public meeting was Michael Lackey. Lackey is a professor of English at UMN Morris and the author of several books and papers on atheist thought, including *African American Atheists* and *Political Liberation: A Study of the Sociocultural Dynamics of Faith*. He spoke on varieties of African American atheism.

A little too much of the talk was dedicated to establishing Lackey's credentials for giving the talk. While it is a politically sensitive thing to have a white scholar talk about black atheist history, I'd have preferred a simpler statement to the effect of "Work like mine is important in keeping this history in front of the academy and the public. While I'm not keeping an African American scholar from opportunities, I hope to continue to write about this topic."

Once into the main topic, however, the talk was quite good. Lackey's ability to put strains of atheist thought into the context of the social and political forces of their times was useful and refreshing. Black atheists

are a small enough population that they're often treated as a monolith when they're anything but.

For example, Lackey highlighted Langston Hughes' and Nella Larsen's challenges to African American religion and gods. He noted that they were writing in a period when blacks were rejecting the religion of the white majority but replacing that religion with another instead of learning that the whole enterprise is corrupt.

Particularly interesting was the argument made by James Baldwin and Martinique politician Aimé Césaire that the Christianity of Hitler and the Nazi Party were not in opposition to their actions but a necessary factor in their crimes against humanity. While many scholars of religion attempted to blame secularizing influences for the Holocaust in its wake, African American atheists laid the blame squarely on religion, with Baldwin saying white people "did not know that [Christians] could act that way. But I very much doubt whether black people were astounded."

Overall, Lackey's talk was thought-provoking, reminding us that our atheist thought is richer if we don't relegate these topics to one month a year. Even the Q&A stayed engaged with the main topic until just before the end of the meeting, with audience members contributing more questions than statements. Any speaker for an atheist group can be proud of that.



Opera continued from page 2

what was probably the worst point in his life. From the outset, Prejean tries to get De Rocher to admit his guilt all while helping with his final appeal to commute his sentence (it failed). Then, when all hope was lost, she continued to push De Rocher to confess. This was done to push her religious agenda, without considering what the victims' families wanted, and without considering what De Rocher's mother wanted.

Admittedly, I did find it interesting that when questioned about the morality of not seeking the ultimate penalty for the ultimate crime, Prejean said that she believes that she is supposed to believe that De Rocher does not deserve the death penalty. She made no comment on her actual beliefs.

Prejean's actions were held up as a social good because they were done in the name of religion. Religious motivations are often seen as benevolent justification for any action in today's society. Was this a story about a nun doing something altruistic for another person or is she preying on someone in a vulnerable position without considering those it impacts most?

I have no idea how much liberty the opera took with situation and I sincerely hope that situation on which it was based differed greatly. This opera was one more example of how Christianity remains the default position in our culture.

Contempt continued from page 3

Snopes.com labels as false an internet report that a "new law in Mississippi makes it legal for atheist doctors and nurses to refuse care to religious patients." I'm sure they are right, but I like the claim nevertheless. It refers to a new state law authorizing doctors and nurses to refuse medical treatment to some individuals because of "sincere religious beliefs." The law is intended to encourage the persecution of LGBTQ people and negate local laws that prohibit discrimination based on nonconformance with traditional sexual orientation and gender identity standards. But courts have ruled that atheism must be treated as a religion for first amendment protections, so why would the same law not permit atheists to refuse to treat fundamentalist Christians?

Treasury Report

January

By *Chris Matthews***Radio Fund**

\$50 Arthur Scarcy
 \$25 Jeff Koeppen
 \$10 August Berkshire
\$85 Total Radio Fund

General/Visibility Fund

\$100 Tim Anderson
 \$10 Mark Nelson
 \$17 cash / anonymous
\$127 Total General/Visibility Fund

Top Expenses

\$820 Radio Show
 \$333 Newsletter Printing

Total Income \$212**Current Building Fund** \$138,302**Get Famous (Sort of)**

You too can become published by simply submitting something to The Minnesota Atheist newsletter:

Have a blog? *Let us reprint it.*
 Have an opinion? *Let us hear it.*
 Want to review a movie/TV show/book etc.? *Give us your take.*
 Enjoyed a gathering or event? *Tell us about it.*
You can also send us a photo.
 Have a comment about something we printed? *Don't hold back.*

Just send your input to editor@mnatheists.org and we'll do the rest.

Life After Death So Hard to Believe

By Milo Grika

I was binge watching the HBO series *Six Feet Under*, which, if you aren't familiar, is about a family-run funeral home business. The first four seasons were awesome, with the last season really going head first into the grave — but this isn't a review of the show.

In one episode, a woman died and the husband and son visited the funeral home to make arrangements. The young son was understandably upset, but the husband was positively emotionless.

At first you feel that something is wrong with the husband, but then you learn that he really, *really* believes that his wife is in a happier place waiting for him and his son.

So, this got me thinking; shouldn't all religious folks think the same way? Shouldn't his reaction be the norm and everyone else's bitter sadness be the aberration?

Richard Dawkins, in *The God Delusion*, questions whether Christians truly believe in heaven since funerals should be absolute celebrations of the "passing." Instead, survivors grieve at the finality of death.

In *The Atheist Muslim: A Journey from Religion to Reason*, Ali A. Rizvi remarks that at Muslim funerals, the dead are referred to in the past tense. If the person is still existing, consciously in the afterlife, shouldn't you use the present tense?

There is a disconnect when someone feels the pain of finality of the loss yet talks of the person "looking down" from heaven. It is as if the heart knows the truth, and the mind is trying to convince the heart otherwise.

Christians, presumably reading the same guidebook written or at least inspired by the same author, can't even agree

Now I fully appreciate that death is scary. The fact is that none of us, *none*, have any concrete evidence of what happens when we die. The physicist Sean M. Carroll, in a talk at the American Humanist Association in June 2013 agreed that he is saddened by the fact that his life will end some day, but not only can't the soul

be found in the body, there is actually no place in the molecules of the body that can hold even our thoughts — there is nothing to transfer when the cells die. Going one step further, he contends, there isn't anything mysterious left to identify in the atoms themselves.

Furthermore, there are many belief systems currently and historically, that have very different ideas of what transpires: Do we go to heaven? Are we reincarnated to live again? Do we go, not to heaven, but to another place? Or some combination thereof?

Even among Christians, there are wildly differing opinions: Do we go to heaven immediately, or do we remain dead until the final judgment? Is heaven a place where all desires can be indulged or is the expectation that every moment will be spent singing the Lord's praises and nothing else? In fact, does everyone go to heaven or do most people have everlasting life here on earth?

If Christians, presumably reading the same guidebook written or at least inspired by the same divine author, can't even agree, how can anyone have any surety about what happens. And maybe this strikes at the heart of the issue.

There was a time when not only wasn't God questioned, but everything was attributed to God: God decided to give someone a disease, God decided when it would rain, God decided when crops would rot or be consumed by marauding insects. As science exposed the real mechanics behind natural events, humans have naturally come to accept that evidence-based explanations are stronger than "because God" explanations.

This may very well contribute to people losing their faith of the afterlife, that is, to questioning what happens after death. When you become accustomed to expecting tangible explanations for our world, you grow suspicious of explanations that don't stem from empirical observations.

We humans *want* to believe we live on. One problem with consciousness is that we are eminently aware of death; and we feel that this awareness must be proof that our consciousness goes on: How can the universe exist without me? Of course those believing that the consciousness *must* carry on, don't think about how well the universe carried on before their consciousness existed.

Atheists Talk

Radio Show

Podcasts can be listened to at www.mnatheists.org (scroll down to the podcast link), <https://www.patreon.com/AtheistTalk>. You can catch our show live, every Sunday morning at 9:00 a.m. Central on AM 950 KTNF or online at <http://www.am950radio.com/listen-live/> and <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/a-minnesota-transatheist/atheist-talk>. Contact us during the show with questions or comments at (952) 946-6205 or contact us anytime via radio@mnatheists.org or tweet us anytime at [@atheiststalk](https://twitter.com/atheiststalk)

Sponsors of the program are Q.Cumbers restaurant in Edina, American Atheists and the members and donors of Minnesota Atheists. To support the program, go to the MNA web page [donation/radio, giveMN/minnesotaatheists, https://www.patreon.com/AtheistTalk](http://www.patreon.com/AtheistTalk) or donate by mail to our PO Box. All donations are tax deductible.

Recent Programs

“Religious Disdain for the Earth “ Atheists Talk #440, February 11, 2018

Greg and Lynette discuss the religious right’s disdain for science in general, but with a particular emphasis on climate science. Lynette was actually a caller a few months ago, and her call led to her appearance on the show to discuss this topic. It pays to call in :)

“Zachrilege Cast” Atheists Talk #439, February 4, 2018

The host, producer, writer, and all around media mogul Zach joins us to discuss his show, laugh with us a lot, and of course we bring up his almost dying thing ... because we thoroughly enjoy asking the same questions that everyone else does.

Join us on Patreon for an extra 30 minutes of kittens, dark humor, and Zach’s favorite curse words.

“Sarah Talk” Atheists Talk #438, January 21, 2018
Sarah Austin from Sarah Talk joins us to chat about her show, Florida Man, Flat Jesus and secular invocations. You can hear Sarah Talk wherever you listen to podcasts.



The photo was taken at Q.Cumbers Restaurant, long time sponsor of Atheists Talk. Photo credit August Berkshire.

From left to right: Steve Petersen, Hertzey Hertz, Mickey McCabe owner of Q.Cumbers, Stephanie Zvan and Scott Lohman.

Cryptogram Answer

I have little confidence in any enterprise or business or investment that promises dividends only after the death of the stockholders.

— Robert Green Ingersoll, *A Wooden God*

The “Nones” That You Know

John Irving

By Milo Grika

Novelist John Irving’s books include *The World According to Garp* (1978), and *The Cider House Rules* (1986), both of which were also successful movies. *The Cider House Rules* portrayed a sympathetic abortionist during the era when it was against the law.

While not an outspoken atheist, I’d certainly put Irving in the “nones” category:

“Now, if you push me to the wall, I’d say I’m not a believer. But it depends on the day you ask ... I’m not comfortable calling myself a believer, a Christian. But if somebody says, ‘are you an atheist?’ I’d back down from that question too.”

New MN Atheists Logo Contest Last Chance To Submit

As stated in the January issue, we are looking to you to help design the new Minnesota Atheists logo. Just keep the following in mind:

1. Any proposed logo should be clear and readable when it is being used for something like a sticker or a button.
2. The entry is original and does not infringe on any trademarks, copyright etc.
3. The proposed logo is positive and in the spirit of Minnesota Atheists.

You can submit your proposed logo to the board via email (board@mnatheists.org) by March 31, 2018. Once the board has the opportunity to review the submissions, we will present our members with an opportunity to vote on their favorite. When a winner has been determined, we will start using the new logo on our website, tee-shirts, pamphlets, etc.

Minnesota Atheists Membership and Donations

Membership Levels

- 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

Donation Funds

General Fund \$ _____

Building Fund \$ _____

Radio Fund \$ _____

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

Student memberships include a subscription to the PDF version of *The Minnesota Atheist* delivered by email. 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.

Please make checks payable to:

Minnesota Atheists.

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

Minnesota Atheists
PO Box 120304
New Brighton, MN 55112

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(Required for student memberships and email subscriptions)

Upcoming Events

Dakota County Library Series: Inter-belief Dialogue: Atheist, Baha'i and Unitarian Universalist Thursday, March 29, 6:00-8:00 PM, Robert Trail Library, 14395 S Robert Trail, Rosemount.

Day of Reason Celebration Thursday, May 3, 1:30-2:30 PM, Minnesota State Capitol Rotunda, 75 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

May Day Parade and Festival Sunday, May 6, 12:00-6:00 PM, Powderhorn Park, 3400 15th Ave S, Minneapolis.

Atheists Talk Community Brunch 1st Sunday of every month at 10:30 AM, Q. Cumbers, 7465 France Ave S, Edina.

Atheist/Agnostic Alcoholics Anonymous Every Sunday from 6:00-7:00 PM and Wednesday from 7:00-8:00 PM, 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 1st and 3rd Monday of every month from 6:30-8:00 PM, Larpenteur Estates Party Room, 1280 Larpenteur Ave W, St Paul. freethought.toastmastersclubs.org
Godless Gamers Every Thursday at 6:00 PM, Fantasy Flight Games Center, 1975 County Rd B2, Roseville.

Freethought Dinner Social 2nd and 4th Monday of every month from 5:00-7:00 PM, Davanni's, 8605 Lyndale Ave S, Bloomington.

Freethinking Females 2nd Monday of every month at 7:00 PM, Claddagh Irish Pub, 7890 Main St N, Maple Grove, and 4th Monday of every month at 7:30 PM, 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 2nd Thursday of every month at 1:00 PM, The Food Group, 8501 54th Ave N, New Hope.

Blasphemer's Brunch 2nd Saturday of every month at 10:30 AM, Pizza Lucé, 800 W 66th St, Richfield.

Minnesota Atheists Board Meeting 3rd Wednesday of every month at 6:30 PM, 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



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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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for America

Minnesota Atheists Membership

Regular members: 218

Life members: 43

Meetup members:

2,400

Minnesota Atheists Honorary Members

Hector Avalos, PhD

Dan Barker

Gerald Erickson, PhD

Annie Laurie Gaylor

Dick Hewetson

Robert M. Price, PhD

Minnesota Atheists Goals

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



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