

The Minnesota Atheist

Minnesota Atheists

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Positive Atheism in Action

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November-December 2002

Atheism is no more a religion than baldness is a hair color. Anon.

Rasmussen leads the way Atheism finds a place in world religion classes

By Sue O'Donnell

When Bob Rasmussen, the speaker at Minnesota Atheists October meeting, started teaching a high school World Religions class in 1974, it was about five major religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The purpose of the class was to teach a general knowledge of religions, develop open minds about religion, and develop respect and tolerance.

Even though it was an elective, his classes filled quickly with bright, curious students. At the beginning of each trimester, Rasmussen



Bob Rasmussen talks about introducing atheism into his classes on world religions

Photos by Vern Young

Jehovah's Witnesses, Jesus People, psychics, and Wiccans. He used debates, discussions, field trips (to cathedrals, synagogues, black churches and Eastern Orthodox churches), speakers (including deprogrammers along with church leaders), lectures and films.

Though his course was broadly based, Rasmussen was concerned that the non-religious viewpoint was not being presented. In 1985, he read in the *Star Tribune's* Mr. Fixit column that August Berkshire (then president of the local American Atheists chapter) could provide information

about atheism. From that time on, Berkshire, often accompanied by another atheist, gave talks to Rasmussen's classes.

"I have former students 12 or 14 years later who ask if that guy August still talks to my classes," Rasmussen said. "They remember his name."

Another thing they remember is that Berkshire was not what they

(Continued on page 2)



would hand out an anonymous questionnaire to find out the students' opinions. "Out of 35 kids, three or four would put down they were non-religious," he said.

Over the years, Rasmussen began to go beyond the original course curriculum to explore areas of current interest like Mormonism, cults, Christian Science, Scientology,



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

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

(Continued from page 1)

imagined an atheist to be. As he did with the various religions studied, Rasmussen asked his students what they thought an atheist would be like. Over the years, their stereotypes included: lack of ethics or morals, fatalistic, very liberal, satanic, dressed in black with dark features, negative, arrogant and science-centered.

The audience of Minnesota Atheists laughingly agreed with at least a couple of those perceptions. But fortunately, the false perceptions were dispelled when Berkshire talked to the students.

One surprise to Rasmussen was that over the years he never heard a complaint from a single parent. "Some even told me at conferences that this should be a required class."

For Rasmussen, teaching the class was like being a student himself because of all the people who spoke to his classes. His overriding message to students was: "Believe what you want as long as you respect other people and don't infringe on their rights."



Happy 20th, Jim

Jim Barri provided the cake and cookies for the October meeting. He was celebrating 20 years as an avowed atheist. Prior to that, he referred to himself as agnostic. Photo by Vern Young



Have a good debate, Bob

A group of atheists plus four Christians enjoy dinner and conversation with Dr. Robert M. Price the night before his debate with Greg Boyd. Price made full use of his time in Minnesota. See page 9 for more information about his visit.

Photo by Vern Young

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Minnesota Atheists,
P.O. Box 6261, Minneapolis MN 55406

www.mnatheists.org

- President** August Berkshire
august@mtn.org
612-338-4548
- Associate President** Steve Petersen
sp175@aol.com
651-484-9277
- Chair of Board** Tom Riddering
volkfolks@attbi.com
651-714-2617
- Associate Chair of Board** Sue O'Donnell
ssodonn@aol.com
952-937-0481
- Secretary** George Kane
nup@minn.net
651-488-8225
- Treasurer** Tim Lamb
timlamb55124@yahoo.com
952-997-2046
- Directors** Andy Flamm
andy@flamm.com
651-698-4652
- David Mallinder
dmallind@yahoo.com
651-639-8646
- Shirley Moll
smoll175@aol.com
651-484-9277
- Webmaster** Travis Calef
travis@calef.com
- Newsletter** Sue O'Donnell
Tom Riddering
Andy Flamm
- Book Sales** Rachel Wilson
rachel@mtn.org
612-338-4548
- Photographer** Vern Young
- Refreshment Committee** Marilyn Neinker
612-866-6200
- Meeting Planning** Lee Salisbury
651-430-1091

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Atheist Alliance International,
Council for Secular Humanism,
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Minnesota Atheists Membership Meeting
Sunday, November 17, 2002
1-4 p.m.

Roseville Library
2180 Hamline Avenue North (2 blocks south of Highway 36)

Meet Bobbie Kirkhart, President, Atheist Alliance International

**PLUS hear a panel discussion with Kirkhart and the Minnesota Atheists
 who went to two European atheist conferences in September**

Bobbie Kirkhart grew up a very religious child in a devout liberal Protestant family in Enid, Oklahoma. At the University of Oklahoma, she majored in journalism and taught a Sunday School class. During this time, her first nationally published article ("I Protest: A Santa Claus God") appeared in *Christianity Today*.

After college, Kirkhart became a social worker in South Central Los Angeles, serving mostly black and Latina single mothers. She saw that her god, if such existed, treated his most loyal servants with contempt. That observation eventually caused her to reevaluate her belief in an omnipotent, omni-benevolent god.

As she studied other god ideas, the only thing she found reflected the world as she saw it was atheism. She was not active, however, in freethought until many years later. In 1982, she joined the Los Angeles organization Atheists United and has been an energetic worker in that and other freethought causes since.

Kirkhart was co-president of Atheists United, the largest



Bobbie Kirkhart

local democratic atheist group in the country, for five years and is now president of Atheist Alliance International, an alliance of democratic atheist groups with members in nine countries, including 36 organizations in the U.S.

She is a member of several other freethought groups, including the Center for Inquiry and the Humanist Association of Los Angeles. She is proud to be listed in *Who's Who in Hell*, an index of prominent freethinkers edited by Warren Allen Smith.

Bobbie Kirkhart's Minnesota Schedule

- Saturday, Nov. 16, Kirkhart will speak to **Lake Superior Freethinkers**. Call Bill van Druten (218-724-4176) or Dale Hagen (218-728-3720) for more information.
- Sunday, Nov. 17, **Minnesota Atheists** Membership Meeting (see above).
- Monday, Nov. 18, **Free-thought Toastmasters**, 6 pm, Muffaletta Cafe, St. Paul.
- Tuesday, Nov. 19, dinner meeting with atheists in **St. Cloud**. Call Tom Stavros (320-529-0146) for more information.
- Wednesday, Nov. 20, **UMAH**, 6:30 p.m., 150 Ford Hall, University of Minnesota.
- In addition, Kirkhart will tape a **cable TV** program. She may give a speech at the **University of Minnesota campus**. To keep up with the latest changes to her schedule, check with AWE – Atheist Weekly E-mail. (To sign up for the weekly AWE mailing, send your name and e-mail address to George Kane, nup@min.net.)

Donations keep atheist message on cable TV

By Steve Petersen

Thanks to the dedicated support of our members, the "Atheists Talk" cable program fully met its funding needs for the year. Expenses in 2002 will be about \$4,400 and that is approximately the amount of donations received for the year.

The cable program is a team effort that includes crew members, hosts, cable distributors, sponsors in local communities, and financial supporters. We each have a role to play in bringing atheist television and atheist viewpoints into the living rooms of our many viewers.

State law mandates that Metro Cable Channel Six is on every cable system in the Twin Cities Metro area. It is a channel viewed by many cable subscribers because of its low channel number. It is also non-profit and low cost for the users.

By using cable, we

are bringing our viewpoint directly into homes. We then link cable with our Web site (www.mnatheists.org) and our phone number by promoting them throughout the program, further enabling viewers to understand atheists views and issues, and giving them a means to contact us.

If we present ourselves in an intelligent and professional manner,

we inform viewers as to who atheists are and what we represent. This helps educate the public and gain new members. The programs we tape for Channel 6 are duplicated and sent out to other "free play" channels throughout the state, giving us additional impact.

We are preparing for next year's cable budget. Our time slot on Channel Six is shared with the Humanists of Minnesota for a total cost of \$5,000. Our share is \$2,500 for the year starting January 1, 2003. Our total budget for the year will be about \$3,500. That includes other program fees, tapes, mailing costs, training and miscellaneous expenses.

Your donation for the 2003 cable fund will help keep the atheist message in front of the public.



"Atheists Talk" Cable Show Report

In the next few weeks, the "Atheists Talk" program will be on in the South Washington County cable area. If you would like to sponsor the program in your town, please contact Steve Petersen at 651-484-9277 or sp175@aol.com.

"Atheists Talk" schedule

Minneapolis: Ch. 17, Sat., 8:30 p.m.
Sponsor Art Anderson

Rochester: Charter Ch. 10. Schedule varies. Check rochath.tripod/tv.
Sponsor: The Cramers
Roseville, Shoreview, Arden Hills,

North Oaks, Little Canada, Falcon Heights, Lauderdale, Mounds View, New Brighton: Ch 15, Tues., Mid-night. Sponsor Art Anderson

St. Paul: Ch. 32, Wed., 10:30 p.m.
Sponsor: Steve Petersen

Stillwater: Ch. 16, Tues., 7:00 p.m. and Wed., 9:00 a.m. Sponsor: Lee Salisbury

White Bear Lake, Hugo, Lake Elmo, Mahtomedi, Maplewood, North St. Paul, Oakdale, Vadnais Heights: Ch. 15 various times: Sponsor Art Anderson

MCN Channel Six metro wide: Sundays 4:30 p.m. Atheists Talk 1st and 3rd Sundays, alternating with the Humanists of Minnesota on the 2nd and 4th Sundays.

Cable Coordinator: Steve Petersen
Advisor: Jerry Rauser
Crew: Art Anderson, August Berkshire, Bill Burleson, George Kane, David Mallinder, Shirley Moll, Russ Samdahl and Brett Stembridge. New crew members are always welcome; contact Steve Petersen

Remembering Gordon Morris ...

It is sad to report the death of Gordon Morris, 73, of complications from leukemia. He died peacefully on October 19 with Pat, his wife and best friend for over 50 years, at his side. Gordon had two children and four grandchildren whose companionship he cherished. He spent every moment he could with them.

Gordon was a passionate supporter of many issues and causes and we remember him as a dedicated member of both Minnesota Atheists and Humanists of Minnesota. Gordon was an ardent promoter and served as a liaison between our organizations for joint projects. He was an active volunteer on both cable programs. Gordon served on the Humanist board for many years and he and Pat hosted a variety of functions at their condominium. Gordon was one of those dream volunteers: If he said he would do something, it would be completed. He was professional, reliable and efficient.

About a year ago, Gordon and Pat invited many of us to their home for an evening I will never forget. Gordon, his family and medical personnel had decided that there was no benefit in actively treating his leukemia. Gordon was an informed patient and he learned as much as he could about his disease and treatments. He knew the score, was not afraid of death, and most of us thought he probably had a few weeks or even less to live. Gordon started to talk, describing the nature

of his illness. We were all attentive. He started to cry and most of us did likewise. Then Gordon struggled and finally shouted: "I am going to LIVE!"



Gordon and Pat Morris with their grandchildren Derron and Andrea

We reacted in unison with tears and cheers. We all knew, as Gordon did, the remission would only last so long. But Gordon, through stubbornness and determination, bought one more year. And like always, Gordon would live every minute as he did his whole life -- passionate and involved.

When I think of Gordon, I will always remember him as a person who had an active and productive mind in a body that just wore out. – **Steve Petersen**

Thank you

The following donations were given in the third quarter.

Building Fund

Andy Flamm ... \$25
 Bob and Fern Wodtke ... \$300
 Charles Boltuck ... \$10
 David L. Nelson ... \$100
 David Mallinder ... \$100
 Dick Pearson ... \$50
 Erik Englebretson ... \$25
 Gene Kasmar ... \$25
 Laura Morrow ... \$20
 Larry Ronning ... \$25
 Robert Clapp ... \$25
 Tom Dooley ... \$5

Cable/General Fund

Alvin Shimek ... \$20
 Austin Hendrickson ... \$10
 Bob & Marilyn Nienkerk ... \$230
 Bob and Fern Wodtke ... \$100
 Charles Boltuck ... \$10
 David L. Nelson ... \$100
 Dick Pearson ... \$50
 Doug Gray ... \$30
 Gene M. Kasmar ... \$25
 George Erickson ... \$5
 Jim Selness ... \$25
 Larry Larson ... \$50
 Lee Salisbury ... \$50
 Shirley R. Moll ... \$30
 Stuart Tanquist ... \$20
 Timothy Cameron ... \$5
 Vern Young ... \$400
 Doug Cramer ... \$50
 William Haider ... \$50

Life memberships

George Kane ... \$600
 Morgan Smith ... \$600

Project visibility fund

Edward Rogalin ... \$25
 Charles Boltuck ... \$10
 David L. Nelson ... \$100
 Dick Pearson ... \$50

Friendly conversation goes to Carleton

By Andy Flamm

Rational thinking had its day again recently, this time in front of 150 intelligent and open-minded college students.

Minnesota Atheists president August Berkshire shared the lectern with Ronn Johnson, pastor at Evangelical Free Church in Brooklyn Center, for their second "friendly conversation," this time at Carleton College in Northfield on October 17. Olin Hall was practically filled with eager students and a few adults, including some supporters from our organization. The event was sponsored by a student religious organization called the Areopagus Forum.

The debate lasted almost two hours, with Berkshire calmly and logically refuting the many irrational arguments of his sparring partner. Pastor Johnson began by listing 15 areas Berkshire would need to address in order to prevail, and if audience reaction was any guide, Berkshire did a fine job in his responses.

Furthermore, many of Berkshire's points were left unchallenged, as Pastor Johnson



Ronn Johnson and August Berkshire agreed to shake hands but not on much else.

Photo by Andy Flamm

resorted to illogical statements that served only to promote religion, not provide answers. Johnson made the mistake of putting forth an anti-intellectual argument on a campus that claims the highest percentage of National Merit Scholars.

There were many thoughtful questions asked by the audience after the formal presentation

ended, and it was clear that atheism was being taken seriously, even by those with strong religious convictions.

Perhaps no one was saved or changed their minds during the evening, but the cause of atheism certainly gained respect as a result of Berkshire's convincing -- and sometimes humorous -- performance.

News and notes...

'Just war' debate

When the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* researched an article about various religious groups' reaction to the proposed war with Iraq, writer Martha Sawyer Allen called August Berkshire for an atheist perspective. The following appeared in the Saturday, Oct. 26, Faith & Values section:

August Berkshire, of the Minnesota Atheists, said, "Much of

atheist ethics and actions are based on examining evidence and predicting consequences. The following questions should be asked by all Americans:

"Can our objectives be accomplished peacefully instead? Will a first strike dangerously destabilize the Middle East? Should we get a U.N. resolution first? Are there political motives for a war at this time? Is this an economic war

being disguised as a defensive or holy war? How much of the Middle East conflict is the result of the clash among Judaism, Christianity and Islam?"

Rational essay

The American Rationalist magazine published Lee Salisbury's essay, "Any Ole God Will Do," in the September/October 2002 issue. The essay originally appeared in the April 2002 issue of *The Minnesota Atheist*.



Atheists sat up front (that's Steve Petersen center front) in a standing room only crowd. Photos by August Berkshire

Radio debate challenged evangelist

Does God exist? The short answer is "no," but David Mallinder, Minnesota Atheists director, and Ray Comfort, evangelist, spent two hours debating the question on Saturday, Oct. 19.

An estimated crowd of 200, most of them fundamentalist Christians, gathered at the Northwestern Bookstore, Har Mar Mall, Roseville, to hear the debate. While Comfort relied almost entirely on the Bible to prove his contention that God exists and that the Bible is absolutely true, Mallinder cited biblical, historical, archeological and scientific references to show there is no proof of any god's existence.

Many in the audience were clearly distressed to hear such assertions in person, but listened and applauded politely. When Mallinder tried to explain natural selection by



David Mallinder, atheist

using an analogy of a monkey typing the King James' version of the Bible, there were audible gasps around the room.

When one audience member asked if we all came from some sort of primordial ooze, Mallinder answered with one word: "Yes."

Comfort offered Mallinder a free copy of his book, *The Evidence*



Ray Comfort, Christian

Bible, which he accepted. An audience member offered to buy five copies of the book if any atheists present would accept them. All the books were accepted by atheists in the audience.

The debate was broadcast live on AM980 KKMS. -- Sue O'Donnell

News and notes continued...

Intelligent Design?

At the Humanists of Minnesota banquet Oct. 26, Massimo Pigliucci, professor of ecology and evolution at the University of Tennessee, spoke on the topic "Design? Yes. Intelligent? No." For an outline of his presentation, visit his Web site at www.rationallyspeaking.org.

Humanist Center

The Humanist Center of Minnesota has a series of first Sunday lectures at the First Unitarian Society, 900 Mt. Curve, Minneapolis. The Dec. 1 lecture is "What Happened to Humanism?" by Sarah Oelberg, minister, Hanska and Mankato Unitarian and Universalist Churches.

Social time is 6:30 p.m., program at 7, questions at 8 and social time at 8:30.

For more information about the series, call Matt Stark, 612-377-2211.

Letters from the in-box...

Life memberships

We made the decision to become life members because, for the first time in the 11 years of this organization, we now have confidence the path into the future has been secured by the membership.

In the election earlier this year, the membership took control of Minnesota Atheists (MA) and decided to move away from the domination of one personality to the broad-based leadership of a team. It was a defining moment for MA. Democracy is rarely a pretty or fun event, but it is vital and necessary. Each individual vote represented a choice for the future; each individual vote controlled the destiny of MA; and each vote, for whatever candidate, was a vital and important statement on atheist representation.

Marie Castle deserves credit in helping build this organization, but like many founding leaders, she merged the organization with her personality. In the end, the membership had to make a choice between

the voice of one or the voices of many atheists united as one. It was a choice only the members could make and as painful as some of the events were that have unfolded in the past year, it was the overwhelming decision for the long-term future of MA. In many ways it was a natural evolution of political events experienced by other atheist groups attempting to break out of the founders' molds. Most atheist groups fail and quietly go away. In our last election, the membership declared that if internal differences cannot be resolved in the boardroom, they will be resolved by ballot.

This democratic power exercised by the membership is a founding and central principle of Minnesota Atheists.

**Shirley Moll and
Steve Petersen**

Radio debate

Feedback: I just attended the debate at Northwest bookstore between Dave Mallinder and Ray

Comfort. It was my first time observing a live debate about the existence of "God" and I must say that I was extremely impressed by Dave's ability to present his arguments. Dave is a great speaker and very cordial with a good sense of humor. Keep up the good work.

Del Brom

Meeting speaker

I enjoyed very much talking to your group today [see page 1]. The questions caused me to think and reflect. It was a very enjoyable group to meet with and certainly was not what I expected. Thanks for the invitation.

Bob Rasmussen

Morris tribute

Dear friends, Please find the enclosed check in the amount of \$100 as a tribute and memorial to our dear friend, Gordon Morris.

Rick Rohrer

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... boxer shorts ... tote bags ... and MORE

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www.cafepress.com/mnatheists

Or to place a phone order, call David Mallinder at (651) 639-8646

All products are high quality, reasonably priced with a 30-day, money-back guarantee. Profits will go right to work to improve Minnesota's oldest and largest atheist group.

Shop now and show your atheist pride!



Price: The myth is just another myth

When a youth group from Woodridge Church called Minnesota Atheists looking for someone to debate Greg Boyd, pastor of Woodland Hills Church and a professor at Bethel Seminary, August Berkshire called Dr. Robert M. Price, author of *Deconstructing Jesus*, fellow of the Jesus Seminar, professor of the Center of Inquiry Institute, editor of *The Journal of Higher Criticism*. The church paid Price's airfare and Berkshire invited Price to stay at his home.

With a Sunday evening, Oct. 6, audience of some 400 young Christians and a dozen atheists, Price suggested that the Jesus story was a myth like many other myths – something to satisfy a longing for answers.

In the case of Jesus, Boyd said, the myths had finally come true: in the words of C. S. Lewis, "Myth became reality." Price countered that a desire for an answer does not mean the answer is true. Price said, "Myth became legend."

Boyd contended that the strong beliefs of Jesus' followers were proof of the story. Price pointed out that Joseph Smith, the Mormons founder, and the Rev. Moon have equally devoted followers, but that certainly doesn't prove the truth of their religions.

The vivid detail of the Bible stories points to their truth, Boyd said. Price said vivid details, the reports of seemingly unimportant events, and talk of the slow-witted disciples finally catching on simply made for a more interesting story by heightening the controversy, building excitement.

Because the Bible mentions historical people who really did exist, Boyd said that means God really exists. Price pointed out the *Iliad* mentions real historical figures, but that

does not prove the existence of Zeus. He likened the Bible to historical fiction.

In the end, Boyd said that the story is true because, "We need Jesus." Price answered, "The myth itself is the satisfaction for our desire for meaning.... The myth is better than the reality."

Cable, Duluth and dinner

When Price arrived in



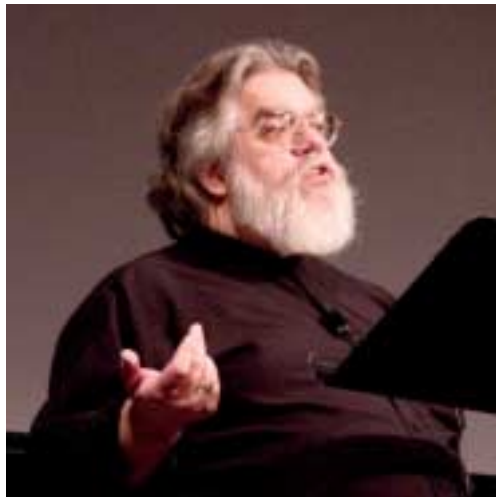
Greg Boyd, Christian

Minneapolis, he made full use of his time by visiting with fellow atheists. He taped two cable shows on Oct. 3 – one with David Mallinder as interviewer, the other with Lee Salisbury – and shared pizza with a group of atheists afterward.

On Saturday, Oct. 5, he had dinner with members of Minnesota Atheists and four Christians who asked if they could be included.

Sunday morning, Berkshire, Rachel Wilson and Price drove to Duluth to meet with the Lake Superior Freethinkers at their monthly brunch. It was a record crowd for the Duluth group – 85 people.

Price also fulfilled his passion for science fiction and comics by visiting a number of bookstores and even signing some books he had edited. – Sue O'Donnell



Robert Price, atheist



Bill van Druten, moderator, Lake Superior Freethinkers, and Robert Price celebrate a good meeting with atheist friends.

Photos by August Berkshire

An Atheist in Paris (and Frankfurt)

Editor's Note: Atheist Alliance International sponsored a trip to attend two European conferences. The largest U.S. contingent on the trip was from Minnesota Atheists. We asked member Angie O'Neill to serve as our European correspondent to tell us about the sites she visited and give us a flavor of the AAI meetings.

By Angie O'Neill

When I heard about Minnesota Atheists' trip to Europe, I was intrigued. Traveling with people that I liked, seeing historic areas of Germany and France, and learning more about the freethought movement sounded like a great combination.

Frankfurt am Main

First stop: Frankfurt, Germany, headquarters of the European Bank and one of the main economic and cultural centers of Europe, nicknamed "Mainhattan" because of its skyscrapers. Our hotel, the Linder Congress, is large, modern, and we are treated well.: Champagne in the evenings and excellent buffet breakfasts. The halls are decorated with pale prints of pastel drawings, showing yuppies intent on business -- talking on cell phones, carrying attache cases. Many hotel guests look like the drawings -- young, well dressed, serious, blond.

This hotel is on a picturesque old-Europe street of half-timbered, three-story, attached houses with shops on the main floor. Some shop windows display cell phones or computer software. There are many cars, bicycles, and pedestrians. At a sidewalk cafe, I order coffee and a croissant, and I get the coffee that I will be drinking during my entire European visit -- very strong, in a tiny cup, no free refills. After adding



Steve Petersen and Shirley Moll enjoy a view of the Rhine River.

heated milk and sugar, I find it a tasty, satisfying drink. The Euro is the currency used in both France and Germany and its value is near that of the dollar, so paying for things is simple.

We tour the Rhine Valley. Mountains slope to the river, with grape fields in valleys and on every grade that supports them. This river has been used and fought over since ancient times and there are many castle ruins and lovely old villages along the Rhine. We visit the 12th century castle Marksburg, the only castle not damaged by the many wars.

We take pictures of the Germania, an enormous memorial overlooking the Rhine that celebrates a German victory in the Franco-Prussian of 1870.

On our way to the IBKA conference at Speyer, we visit Heidelberg castle. Originally a supremely well-fortified Gothic castle, most buildings are now in ruins. The ruins are impressive.

Speyer

Speyer dates from the seventh century, and it was here, in 1529, that the Protestant states lodged a protest



AAI speakers at the IBKA convention in Speyer: René Hartmann (IBKA chairperson), Mynga Futrell, Bobbie Kirkhart (AAI president), August Berkshire (Minnesota Atheists president and AAI international liaison), Barbara Stocker, and Steve Petersen (Minnesota Atheists associate president and past AAI co-president)



Minnesota Atheists members (from left) August Berkshire, Shirley Moll, Steve Petersen, Rachel Wilson, George Kane, Angie O'Neill and Tim Lamb enjoy the art and architecture of Paris.

(hence the term "Protestant") against the decisions of the Catholic majority. The main tourist attraction is the huge Romanesque cathedral, built in 1025-61. My roommate, Liliana, and I spend our free day in the charming old city.

The IBKA Conference included representatives from Germany, France, Italy, India and the USA. Following are excerpts of some comments made during the discussion period.

If one is baptized in a German church, one is a member. If you are a church member, nine percent of your taxes go to the church. Your "tithe" is automatically deducted and your boss knows. Many people feel that if they leave the church, they will lose their job. Social services in Germany are organized mostly by churches. If you are a social worker in most parts of

Germany, you have to belong to a church.

A German woman in the audience asked a French panel member how a person left the French church. The answer, "You just stop going, stop giving money." She couldn't take it in. "No, I mean what do you need to do to leave the church?" "You stop going." "No, I mean how . . ."

Nonbelievers are a growing group, but they don't often join atheist groups. They say, "I left one group not to join another." Another comment was that we need to organize services that churches now provide -- philosophical discussions and social services for non-believers.

Mynga Futrell talked about the need for AAI in strengthening local groups, grassroots activity and community volunteerism. Quoting



Woody Allen, she said "Eighty percent of success in life is just showing up." So we should show up. In other words, atheists, be visible!"

Lorenzo Gallo spoke on the strong influence of the Catholic Church in Italy. Until recently, it was not possible to leave the Catholic Church, and it remains difficult. Crucifixes are ubiquitous in public buildings. All schools must provide religious education.

And now, the current government will go against the constitution and finance private schools. Since the Church is so powerful, Gallo said, "UUAR is bound to rely on political pressure from the other, more civilized European countries to get relief from clerical pressure."

At a social hour a German band played New Orleans Jazz. Following the music, Taslima Nasrin was presented with the Erwin Fischer Award by the International League of the Non-Religious and Atheists (IBKA). Ms. Nasrin, a Bangladeshi woman, has written boldly about violent excesses of Muslim fundamentalists. Her books are banned in her home country, but have been best sellers in India. Muslim clergy have pronounced fatwas on her, in which her death was demanded. She is now living in Sweden and cannot return to her own country.

Ms. Nasrin spoke movingly about her experiences. "Today, I want to talk with you about religion, because religion has affected me tragically. Religion is responsible for my having to leave my own country,

my home, my birthplace, my Brahmaputra river where the flowers dance with the waves and where I used to run against the wind and race with the rain and play with the sunshine."

Sunday, we witnessed a debaptism. Rudolf Ladwig of IBKA had received an invitation to the 25th reunion of his baptism. He wanted to do something to express his rejection of the concept of baptism. Barbara



August Berkshire and Rachel Wilson in the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles near Paris. Photo by Richard Thain

Stocker from AAI applied a towel to Rudolf's forehead and intoned, "I declare you debaptised."

In the following two days, many scholarly treatises, loaded with facts and details, were presented. We were given printed copies in English, and I will try to make these available if anyone requests them. (See Minnesota Atheists contact information, page 2.)

Paris

Statues and fountains. Ornate buildings. Cars, motorcycles, bikes. People! Our hotel is on the Left Bank, in the heart of old Paris. Liliana and I attend a Chopin concert at Eglise Saint Julien le Pauvre (oldest church in Paris, built in 12th century). Many ancient churches are now museums or have other non-religious uses. I spend hours wandering the narrow, winding lanes of the Latin Quarter. At the square in front of the Sorbonne, student musicians are playing and have an open guitar case for donations.

We visit the Loire Valley, a lovely agricultural area with numerous castles. We visit Notre Dame, the Eiffel Tower, Arch de Triomphe, the Louvre, and Versailles. They were beautiful, wonderful!

The Franco-American International Conference at the Sorbonne was on the theme, "Thomas Jefferson's Universal Legacy and Separation of Church and State Today."

Scientific

Director of the Conference, Olivier Fraysse, University of Paris Sorbonne, opened the meeting saying that discussion of state/church separation has gathered momentum and suggested the possible need for a university program on separation.

Babu Gogineni, the conference's honorary chairman, said that, with the 1947 Indian Constitution, India became a secular state. "God lost by eleven votes." However, for the secular state to work, India needs

**“What am I doing way up here?”
Gargoyle on Chateau d’Amboise in the Loire Valley, France.**



AAI group outside Chateau d’Amboise in the Loire Valley, France. This was the final residence of Leonardo daVinci. His body is in the chateau’s chapel.



a secular society.

Robert Alley, University of Virginia, gave a speech on Thomas Jefferson and the Constitution. We were given a photocopy of the letter Jefferson wrote to the Danbury Baptists. Jefferson made many notations and changes on this draft, leaving it open to varying interpretations of his intent. Alley then warned us that, "Using the Danbury letter, the Library of Congress is trying to establish the rights of God."

There were several other speakers, but they spoke French, and with one exception we received no printed translations. The volunteer

translators tried heroically, but were unable to keep up with the speakers. Following are of the few of the comments that I wrote down.

Gerard Hugues, University of Provence, quoted Chief Justice William Renquist as saying that Madison would never have prohibited prayer in public schools. Hugue's rebuttal was, "So Madison was an adversary of the bills he introduced in Congress."

Other speakers noted other efforts in the U.S. to abandon the wall of separation.

One person reminded the group that tolerance of other beliefs

must not include ignoring human rights.

Many good ideas presented at both conferences, followed by excellent comments. On some points, there was disagreement – especially on the wording of an atheist manifesto that would satisfy all AAI members.

There was no question, though, about the camaraderie among atheists from three continents represented. And all agreed that citizens everywhere must have absolute freedom in religious matters: to believe or not to believe.

From the president: Atheist friendships

Dear friends,

One of the most rewarding things about being an atheist is friendship. Locally, more people are becoming involved in Minnesota Atheists and by doing so are establishing an increased sense of community. Meetings, social events, and Freethought Toastmasters provide opportunities on a weekly basis for atheists to enjoy the company of other atheists.

The picnics and winter solstice parties we co-sponsor with the Humanists of Minnesota are a special source of camaraderie, enriched by the Freethought Band and the Freethought Follies.

We have strong friendships with other Minnesota freethought groups: University of Minnesota Atheists and Humanists (UMAH), Humanists of Minnesota, Friends Free of Theism, Central Minnesota Atheists, Red River Freethinkers, and Lake Superior Freethinkers.

Nationally ...

Nationally, one of our closest friendships is with the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) in neighboring Wisconsin. Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor have given generously of their time and talents to help Minnesota Atheists with banquet speeches and debates.

Another national friendship we have is with Dr. Robert M. Price, author of *Deconstructing Jesus*. Bob has come to Minnesota for debates, lectures, and appearances on our cable program, and always makes time to socialize with other atheists.

We are affiliated with Atheist Alliance International (AAI), American Atheists, Council for Secular Humanism, and the American Humanist Association to increase friendships and cooperation between Minnesota Atheists and these groups.

(FFRF does not have an affiliation program, but our ties to them are just as close.) At least 10 Minnesota Atheists members will participate in the Nov. 2 American Atheist-sponsored Godless Americans March on Washington, and we hope to renew and establish more national friendships there.

Internationally ...

Internationally, two years ago, several Minnesota Atheists attended a Humanist Association of Canada (HAC) conference in Winnipeg. Not only did we make friends with Canadian atheists and humanists, we also developed a special relationship with Earl Doherty, author of *The Jesus Puzzle* and *Challenging the Verdict*. Since then Earl has visited the Twin Cities and St. Cloud several times, giving lectures and appearing on our cable program.

In Winnipeg, we also developed a friendship with HAC entertainer Dan Mayo. Dan appeared at last year's Northland Atheist Conference, playing irreverent folk songs and conducting his Unindoctrination Ceremony.

Two months ago, seven Minnesota Atheists members attended a two-week AAI trip to Europe. We got a chance to renew and establish friendships with other AAI members from the U.S. and Canada. We also had a chance to renew friendships with French and German atheist groups that we had first established through AAI.

Atheists from la Libre Pensée (LLP) in France visited us almost three years ago in Minneapolis. They and other LLP members also attended the AAI convention in Atlanta in spring 2001. It was great to see them again in Paris, along with our other French friends.

In Germany, we met with

members of IBKA (International League of Nonreligious and Atheists). Two IBKA leaders are strongly considering a visit to Minnesota Atheists after the AAI convention in Tampa next spring.

A few months ago I left a brief greeting on the Atheist Foundation of Australia's Web site (a fellow member society of AAI). Invitations flowed both ways and they recently published our media responses to the Pledge ruling in their newsletter.

Our next members meeting, Nov. 17, will be a great opportunity to learn more about international atheism and the friendships that can result from it from Bobbie Kirkhart, president of Atheist Alliance International.

Atheist friendships can develop in unexpected ways. Most recently, Scott Forschler, Rachel Wilson, and I attended a talk by Dan Savage, author of the newly published *Skipping Toward Gomorrah: The Seven Deadly Sins and the Pursuit of Happiness in America*. Dan also writes the syndicated advice column "Savage Love" that appears in 100 publications including our local *City Pages*. During his talk, Dan made it clear he had no god beliefs.

When I thanked him for his remarks, he asked for my business card. He said he'd contact us for advice if he got any religious letters. Though he lives in Seattle, I wouldn't be surprised if he visited Minnesota Atheists one of these days.

Back home ...

And that brings me back to the foundation of all these friendships – Minnesota Atheists. It is the friendships within Minnesota Atheists that keep this organization vital and active. As I've said so many times, join the fun. Friends are so important to our success.

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

1st Sundays: **Reel and a Meal**
Times and locations vary, see AWE or call Michelle Losey, 952-736-1739

1st Sundays: 3-5 p.m. **Freethinking Families**. Potluck at members' homes. Rich Sinda, 952-380-0688.

2nd Sundays: 6 p.m. **Minnesota Atheists board meeting**. Location varies. All members welcome. George Kane 651-488-8225.

3rd Sundays: 1-3:30 p.m. **Minnesota Atheists Membership Meeting**. (See page 3 for program and address)

1st and 3rd Mondays: 6 p.m. **Freethought Toastmasters Club**. Muffaletta Cafe, 2280 Como Ave., St. Paul. Private room. George Kane, 651-488-8225.

2nd and 4th Mondays: 5-7 p.m. **Happy Hour North**. Free food. Ol' Mexico Restaurant, on Lexington, one block north of Larpenteur, Roseville. George Kane, 651-488-8225.

2nd and 4th Mondays: 5-7 p.m. **Happy Hour South**. Chi Chi's Mexican Restaurant, 7717 Nicollet Ave., Richfield, Bob/Marilyn Nienkerk, 612-866-6200.

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

3rd Wednesdays: 11:30 a.m. **Lunch Social**. Old Country Buffet, Holly Shopping Center, Hwy 47 and Mississippi St. NE, Fridley. Private room. Bill Volna, 612-781-4273.

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

3rd Saturdays: 1-3 p.m. **Religion-Free Families**. Galaxie Library, Apple Valley. Rhonda Arkley, 952-322-1003.

4th Saturdays: 8:30-11 a.m. **Breakfast Social**. Old Country Buffet, Holly Shopping Center, Hwy 47 and Mississippi St., Fridley. Private room. Fern Wodtke, 651-784-2307.

"Atheists Talk" TV Broadcast
First and third Sundays, 4:30 p.m., Metro Channel 6.

Get a free weekly list of atheist activities by subscribing to AWE (Atheist Weekly E-mail). Send request to George Kane at nup@minn.net

CHECK THE WAYS YOU WANT TO HELP ATHEISM GROW

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

JOIN OR RENEW MEMBERSHIP

- \$25 - Individual membership
- \$35 - Household membership
- \$50 - Sustaining Fund membership
- \$15 - Student (send copy of fee statement or high school ID)
- \$15 - Newsletter subscription only
- \$600 - LIFE MEMBERSHIP

DONATE TO SPECIAL FUNDS

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

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Mail to: Minnesota Atheists, P.O. Box 6261, Minneapolis MN 55406-0261

Sign up now for the Winter Solstice Banquet -
Freethought Band, Freethought Follies, Freethought friends!
Sunday, December 15, 2002

Give a man a fish, and you'll feed him for a
day. Give him a religion, and he'll starve
to death while praying for a fish.

Timothy Jones

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