

Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter

December 1999

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December 12 Meeting

The December speaker will be Dave Flanders, president of Atheists and Other Freethinkers. He will speak on the Humanist Manifesto 2000--a call for a new planetary humanism. Dave will discuss salient points from the document, including the good news of humanism--a welcome alternative to the Xmas message.

TO ALL WHO SUPPORTED, READ ABOUT, HEARD ABOUT OUR MINNESOTA ATHEISTS "MAD AS HELL AND WON'T TAKE IT ANY MORE" AD PROJECT:

This has been the most astounding and gratifying experience I have ever had in my entire life! The Community of Reason MUST learn from this! Print this out and use it for activist reference. Let's exchange ideas on how we can maximize our effectiveness.

On October 8, Minnesota Atheists placed a quarter-page, very bold-headlined ad in the Minneapolis Star Tribune (the state's dominant newspaper) that took on religious bigotry against atheists in no-holds-barred fashion. We did this in utter frustration that, across the country, the media were attacking Gov. Jesse Ventura for his "Religion is a sham and a crutch" statement in Playboy. They ALWAYS left out the rest of his statement, which showed clearly that he was

talking about the religious right, which he hates for its intolerance. They ALWAYS promoted the inherent goodness of religion and how despicable it is to criticize it. We sent letters, news releases and commentary articles statewide and nationwide giving a more rational and accurate assessment. NOTHING got printed, although I did get a few seconds twice on local TV where the sound bites selected were the most innocuous from the half-hour interviews.

The last straw was a half-page ad by local Christian groups demanding that Jesse apologize, calling him an intolerant bigot and quoting Founding Fathers out of context to show this is a Christian nation with a government unsuitable for "irreligious people."

We had to fight back against this relentless propaganda. The only way was to buy an ad ourselves -- one that said it was RELIGIONISTS who were intolerant and bigoted and they had better apologize to US! We did not know what the response would be, there being no precedent for such outspoken, well-targeted atheism.

Friends, it was tremendous! The ad cost us \$3,449.25. So far we have received over \$5,800 in donations! Some from Christians! Individual donations ranged from \$300 to \$1 (from one impoverished person who praised our efforts and wanted to be counted among our supporters). We heard from many people unknown to us, and from all over the country. People who have never donated to us before came through generously. People who had donated before gave even more generously. The written and verbal responses were ecstatic. Clearly, the fact that an organization was speaking up very publicly and very boldly on behalf of unbelievers was energizing. There were over 100 individual donors. We will print the names in our next Minnesota Atheists newsletter along with a full report.

We are analyzing what went on here so we can tap into that energy to advance our cause. What seems most obvious is this:

1. We were forceful in sticking up for ourselves. Too often unbelievers adopt a kind of "Please sir, don't hit me" attitude in dealing with religion and just take the slurs and slander and attacks on our democratic freedoms lying down. It appears that taking on the attitude the gay-lesbian community adopted after "Stonewall" works better: "We're mad as hell and won't take it anymore." This gets respect. It deserves respect.
2. We were timely. The issue was being widely discussed so we jumped in quickly before it became old news.
3. We directed our anger at the religious right. The lack of outrage from religionists (other than a couple of incoherent phone calls and letters) says something. The liberal religionists hate the religious right as much as we do but they seldom if ever take them on publicly. They don't even allow prochoice and proscience organizations, in which they are members, to take them on! Perhaps they fear that if one religion can be questioned, all can, and all are vulnerable. They cannot, therefore, point fingers at each other. We, as atheists, can point fingers at the religious right while the liberals cheer us on silently and in safety. If we can crack the taboo against criticizing religion by focusing on the religious fascists, we open the door to publicly expressed doubts about all religion.
4. By running a very large ad in the state's largest newspaper, we sent a message that we are a credible, established organization and people can support us in confidence. A small ad in an

alternative newspaper might have sent a far different message -- that we are a small, fly-by-night, fringe organization. We have run such ads, and they do get members, but they lack the emotional impact of an aggressive we-mean-business approach, so they don't fire people up.

5. We thanked the Christian supporters publicly to reinforce them and put a nice neighborly glow on the atheist image. I had the following letter printed in the Star Tribune on Oct. 25, headlined "Cultural cancers in remission?"

"On Oct. 8 we ran an ad in the Star Tribune suggesting that religious people who were calling the governor an intolerant bigot should examine their own practice of slandering atheists. We have had an overwhelmingly positive response. I am writing to express our thanks to the Christians who supported our views and sent donations to help cover the cost of the ad. While there were some mean-spirited responses, it is so heartening to know the possibility exists to build bridges of tolerance, acceptance and mutual respect among the diverse worldviews within our community. People of good will have so much in common as members of the human family. We look forward to the day when the commonalities eclipse the divisiveness of creedal differences, ethnic animosities, racial hatreds and all such cultural cancers with which we are presently afflicted. The favorable Christian responses to our ad offer hope that this day will come soon. Thank you, friends!"

6. The Community of Reason HAS THE MONEY TO BE EFFECTIVE! Even a small group of 30, each giving \$10 a month to their organization, provides \$3,600 a year in working capital. In areas where media costs are lower, this can allow a substantial outreach effort. Organizations that limp along on yearly dues of \$25 (more or less) can do nothing but send newsletters to themselves and maybe some letters to the editor, hoping one will occasionally get published. There are very few people who can't give at least \$10 a month. Almost everyone can give more.

I urge all of you, if you are organizational leaders, use Minnesota Atheists' experience to energize your groups. Plan a BOLD activity and tell your members to fund it. Generously! If you are an individual, start today to give your organization AT LEAST \$25 a month instead of \$25 a year.

We found that putting our money where our mouth is pays off IF WE HAVE A FORCEFUL MESSAGE, so let's stop talking to ourselves and start talking to the PUBLIC. Be BOLD and PROUD! Aim solely at the religious fascists because they are vulnerable and unpopular in many parts of the country. Even in areas where they are popular, challenge them! Don't just flail away at religion in general. Ignore liberal religions except to appreciate any support their adherents might give. Don't take any more of this right wing religious crap lying down. Call them to account! The religious fascists are out to destroy our democracy, take away our personal freedoms, dumb down our science classes with creationist crap, and force us all to give token obeisance to their imaginary god as well as financial support to their living-fossil institutions. Why should we hold still for it? Why should we NOT call them to account? We received NO responses that contradicted our ad. What could they say? That it's fine and dandy to slander atheists? That we should not have a society where all views can be discussed openly? Back the religious fascists into a corner so they cannot defend themselves without looking even more

bigoted and destructive of democracy than they are. Be mad as hell and don't take it any more!
THANKS!

----- For those who need to see it, here is the ad we ran. It measured 10 1/2 inches deep x 6 1/2 inches wide.

Americans United Response to the Family Research Council's "Hang Ten" Campaign

The Family Research Council, a Washington, D.C.-based Religious Right group, recently announced a new initiative it calls "Hang Ten." FRC's project encourages public school authorities and other government officials to post the Ten Commandments at public buildings. The movement has caught on in several Kentucky counties recently, and FRC is trying to make it a nationwide phenomenon.

According to Americans United for Separation of Church and State, government display of religious codes, whether at public schools, city halls, courtrooms or other government facilities, is a bad idea. Why? Here are ten good reasons:

1. The Constitution mandates the separation of church and state. This means government is forbidden to meddle in matters of religion. Promotion of religious ideals is the job of America's houses of worship. Thus government display of the Ten Commandments violates a fundamental tenet of American life, one that has given us more religious liberty than any people in world history.
2. The Supreme Court and lower courts have settled the issue. In 1980's *Stone v. Graham* decision, the high court struck down a Kentucky law that required public schools to post the Ten Commandments. Lower federal courts have struck down the display of the Decalogue at government buildings as well. Public schools or local governments that exhibit the Ten Commandments are inviting a lawsuit they are almost certain to lose. Government officials should not squander taxpayer dollars on futile litigation.
3. America is religiously diverse. The United States is home to nearly 2,000 different religions, traditions, denominations and sects. While many of these groups revere the Ten Commandments, many do not. If government officials put up the Decalogue, will they also post the Five Pillars of Islam, the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, the Wiccan Rede and the Affirmations of Humanism? Government should never play favorites when it comes to religion.
4. Religion doesn't need government's help to promote the Ten Commandments. For a few thousands years, the leaders of Judaism and Christianity have been doing a pretty good job of getting the word out about the Ten Commandments. Interjecting the state in the picture will only mess up a good thing.
5. There is no "standard version" of the Ten Commandments. Different religions and denominations list the commandments in different order and use different language. When government agencies and public schools post one version and not others, they are taking sides in a (sometimes contentious) theological debate. That simply is not government's job.

6. The Ten Commandments are not a "secular" moral code that everyone can agree on. Indeed, four of the Ten Commandments are specifically religious in nature. People have fought and died because they disagreed over what constitutes a "false god" or over the meaning of the ban on worshipping a "graven image." Read any history of Europe if you want to see how bad things can get when government decides to take sides in debates like these.
7. The Ten Commandments are not a magic charm that can make all of society's problems vanish overnight. Some Religious Right groups and politicians treat the commandments as though they are a lucky rabbit's foot -- post them on the wall and all of society's ills will disappear! This is simplistic thinking -- and it distracts us from the hard work of solving thorny social problems.
8. The Ten Commandments are open to different interpretations. One commandment reads, "Thou shall not kill." Or is that "Thou shall not murder"? The language and meaning depends on what version of the Bible you read and your faith's understanding of it. If it's the former, does that really mean all killing, even in self-defense? Elsewhere we are admonished to keep holy the Sabbath -- but is that Friday, Saturday or Sunday? Religious leaders differ on these questions. They -- not government bureaucrats -- are best suited to interpret the commandments for their individual congregants.
9. Politicians and interest groups are exploiting the Ten Commandments for political gain. Let's face it, many politicians and special interest groups seem ready these days to use religious symbols and religious language to win elections. Do we really want sanctimonious, poll-obsessed politicians -- many of whom don't impose the Ten Commandments on themselves -- imposing them on us?
10. The Religious Right's use of the Ten Commandments borders on blasphemy. Religious Right groups like the Christian Coalition and the FRC use the Ten Commandments to advance their political agenda. They force action on symbolic resolutions and issues in the hope that politicians who oppose such displays can be defeated in the next election. People who believe the commandments are God's holy word should be appalled at this cynical manipulation of a religious document.

So, to any government official who is tempted to "Hang Ten" at the Family Research Council's urging, we advise a little research into basic American principles. And remember, Americans United has litigated several of these cases before -- and won them all.

This was passed on by Susan Mogull.

The web site for Americans United is: <http://www.au.org>

A Non-theistic Party

We have rented a hall & are inviting like-minded people to a MILLENNIUM CELEBRATION, New Year's Eve, December 31, 1999, 8PM to 1AM, Sierra Pines, Sun City, Roseville. Give a swat to the past, predict the future, eat, drink, dance, and make merry. Open mike for comments, observations, enlightenment and entertainment. BYOB & finger food. RSVP by December 24 so we can have an appropriate number of tables & chairs set up. Also bring pictures from your

"ancient" past that we can put on a bulletin board for the amusement, amazement, and delight of those in attendance. Don't label the photos, please. Guessing will be part of the fun. Also plan to share "old" music, radio shows (CDs or tapes) or tell us about your favorite non-theistic born-again moments. Give your insight into the future. Read your poetry, your verse, and do your stand-up comedy routines. And be as irreverent as your heart desires.

Contact Cleo or Hank Kocol E-MAIL: hkocol@hotmail.com for directions.

QUOTED

"But what, after all, is faith? It is a state of mind that leads people to believe something -- it doesn't matter what -- in the total absence of supporting evidence. If there were good supporting evidence then faith would be superfluous, for the evidence would compel us to believe it anyway. It is this that makes the often-parroted claim that 'evolution itself is a matter of faith' so silly. People believe in evolution not because they arbitrarily want to believe it but because of overwhelming, publicly available evidence."

Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 198.

The Golden Rule

Religions claim to be the source of our values and morals. These may often be false claims, because the values are older than the religions, because many religions claim the same ideas, and because several studies provide no evidence that religious people are more caring, loving, generous, or helpful than non-religious people (Kohn, 1989). (Kohn cites evidence that religious folks are, on average, more intolerant of minorities.) Perhaps the rewards of religions--salvation, nirvana, reincarnation--are their big attractions, not their demanding guidelines for being good. Yet, being reminded of what is good, hopefully will nudge us in the right direction.

"The golden rule," so called because it is the highest rule of life, is an important part of most religions. It is expressed in slightly different ways:

- General wording: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."
 - Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." (Matthew 7:12)
 - Judaism: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." (Leviticus 19:18)
 - Islam: "No one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself."
- Note: Traditions interpret the Golden Rule in different ways, however. The above statements say DO SOMETHING! About 1000 to 3000 years before Jesus and Muhammad, there were both positive and negative (DON'T DO) versions of the golden rule:

- Confucianism: "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others." (Analects 15:23)
- Buddhism: "Hurt not others with that which pains yourself." (Udanavarga 5:18)
- Hinduism: "Good people proceed while considering that what is best for others is best for themselves." (Hitopadesa) Note: Somewhat related values are expressed by secular groups:
- Humanists: "Every person has dignity and worth, and, therefore, should command the respect of every other person." (This is in contrast to medieval scholars who taught that life on earth was to be despised and that humans were sinful creatures who should be devoting their lives to getting into heaven.)

Submitted by Pat Kelley, information from the Mental Health Net

Dear Dan Barker...

Dan Barker of FFRF received the note below via email. AOF vice president Paul Storey offers his response.

Dear Mr. Barker,

I am currently doing a research paper for my philosophy class on the contrast of dating vs. courtship, when dating and courtship began and how they have develop through the years to present day. So far I have only been able to find Christian point of views on this subject. I was hoping that maybe you, going from preacher to atheist can help me in any way. Either by your point of view or any non-christian websites. Any kind of direction would help me greatly on this subject.

Thank you, Gregory

Greg,

I don't think there is essentially a lot of difference in the dating between Christians and atheists. The predominant difference is the attitude toward sex. In the end line, most Christians ignore their religion's rules about sex just like they ignore the weird parts of the bible.

Atheists look upon sex as a natural desire for us to reproduce, like any other animal. Still these desires must be kept in check, like in virtually every society, Christian or not, to prevent disease and illegitimate kids.

Christians interject god into all their awe and wonder. They look at themselves as inferior beings to a higher power. So they put god in the middle of sex, just like they put god in the middle of morality and justice, which do not depend on a god at all.

I grew up in Catholic schools and it was hammered into me for eight years of grade school taught by nuns who had taken vows of chastity. Then on to Jesuit high school where any kind of sexual excitement outside of marriage was a mortal sin, that would put you in hell for all eternity if you died before you went to confession and had a priest forgive your sins.

The Catholics of course are against birth control. Their rules say: make more little baby Catholics, even if it is driving the earth into overpopulation and poverty. This is a philosophy straight out of the dark ages. The solution to the Pope's teachings on contraceptives would be to let all the refugees of the world go to Vatican City. The Pope would have to wake up in a hurry.

My conclusion is that religion is driving us over a cliff. It steals reverence from our world and our evolution and gives it to a false god. It interjects guilt into natural feelings between men and women. It hijacks morality as if it comes from something other than our good common sense on how to treat one another. It fills people with false hope of perfection in the future rather than enjoyment of the present. Worst of all, it espouses a perverted sense of egotism in humans to think they are infinitely better than all the other animals, thereby legitimizing mankind's exploitation of the world.

The greatest tragedy of religion is the escapism from reality that it fosters. By focusing on fantasyland, it allows people to ignore the destruction of our world. Some parts of religion even see the destruction of our environment as proof that we are unable to save ourselves without their gods help. Some parts of religion even see destruction of our environment as validation of their vague, indecipherable prophecies. These are dangerous doctrines which we must challenge as to their proper place in our modern world. Science is a much better source of guidance to the critical decisions that face us today than religion can ever be.

Paul Storey

Shirley Temple Black

"I stopped believing in Santa Claus when I was six. Mother took me to see him in a department store and he asked for my autograph."

Shirley Temple Black