

IN THIS ISSUE

- 2 What Humanism Is to Me
- 3 Announcements
Discussion Groups
Events
- 4 Camp Quest News
- 5 Needed: A New
Definition of Religion
- 6 Letter to Star Trib
- 7 Meeting Summary

**10:00 a.m.– Noon
 Saturday
 December 19, 2009**

**Monthly
 Chapter Meeting**

**Nokomis Recreation
 Center
 2401 E. Minnehaha Pkwy.
 Minneapolis**

HUMANISM:

*A better life for all through
 education, democracy, free
 speech, reason and science,
 without reliance on arbitrary
 dogmas, revelations and
 faith.*

Humanists of Minnesota Chapter Meeting

“Becoming Human”

Dr. Greg Laden

Saturday, December 19

Greg Laden is an independent scholar, writer and blogger. “I have a very fancy PhD from Harvard (written in Latin and everything) in Archeology and Biological Anthropology, as well as a Master’s Degree in the same subjects (also from Harvard),” he writes. “I was awarded a Medical Doctorate, but that turned out to be a clerical error and it was quickly revoked, much to the annoyance of my patients....”

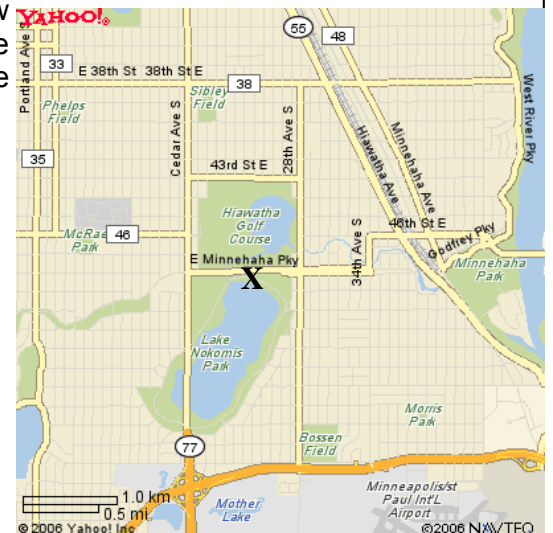
Laden has done many years of fieldwork in Africa, mainly in the Congo and South Africa. He has divided his field research interests between working with the Efe (Pygmy) Hunter-Gatherers of the Ituri Rain Forest and working on specific questions of the transition from a chimpanzee-like ancestor to modern humans. He is currently working on a study of rodent diet and morphology as a means of understanding shifts in early human ancestral diets.

Laden blogs at Scienceblogs.com and QuicheMoraine.com, and guest blogs on various other sites. He writes about science (especially evolution, human evolution and general biology), the evolution-creationism “debate,” and politics (especially the politics of religion and atheism).

Laden was born in upstate New York and lived in Boston, Milwaukee and the Congo prior to moving to the Twin Cities about 10 years ago. ■



Chapter meeting location: Here is a map to the Nokomis Recreation Center. Easiest access is north on 77 (Cedar Ave.) from Hwy. 62.





What Humanism Is to Me

By Matt LeBo

I formally became a humanist a few years ago, shortly after moving to Minnesota. It was the part of a long journey that began sometime no doubt while attending Catholic grade school. Then, working in an aluminum foundry for almost 20 years led me to question a sociopolitical system that allowed good, hardworking, smart and clever people to be treated like dumb animals or cogs in a machine. I can't remember exactly what led to a more intensive and critical examination of theism, but, like many humanists I soon was imbued with a loathing of theism and its absurdities and destructiveness. I read with great pleasure popular atheists such as Harris and Dawkins. Finally, someone was saying out loud, and with eloquence, what I had been thinking.

However, given my previous experience and study, my thirst was not quenched. Atheism did not address the sociopolitical, other than the separation-of-church-and-state issues. I eventually stumbled onto Lamont, Kurtz and the Humanist Manifestos I, II and III, and thus humanism. Here, I thought, I had found a philosophy that addressed the metaphysical and

the sociopolitical. I fear, however, that I may have discovered humanism just in time to see it subsumed as a wing or a version of atheism, of which I will talk more about later. But I was thrilled to learn that the Humanist Manifestos addressed and affirmed not only the metaphysical and scientific naturalism (which includes atheism) but also the sociopolitical:

"The humanists are firmly convinced that existing acquisitive and profit-motivated society has shown itself to be inadequate and that a radical change in methods, controls, and motives must be instituted. A socialized and cooperative economic order must be established to the end that the equitable distribution of the means of life be possible. The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. Humanists demand a shared life in a shared world." (Humanist Manifesto I, 1933, Fourteenth Affirmation.)

"We are committed to an open and democratic society. We must extend participatory democracy in its true sense to the economy, the school, the family, the workplace, and voluntary associations. Decision-making must be decentralized to include widespread involvement of people at all levels - social, political, and economic. All persons should have a voice in developing the values and goals that determine their lives. Institutions should be responsive to

(Humanism, Continued on page 4)

Humanists of Minnesota Officers

President - Scott Lohman, (612) 521-4766, scottl2605@aol.com

Vice President - Nathan Curland, (952) 928-4933, editor@humanistsofmn.org

Treasurer - Ron Scribner, (952) 884-5755, rgscribner@comcast.net

Secretary - Matt LaBo: (651) 788-2258, matthewlabo@gmail.com

Members of the board of directors -

Brad Bolin: (952) 201-0590, bradbolin@hotmail.com

Juliet Branca: (651) 227-2957, smithbranca@gmail.com

Beverly Hanson: (763) 560-7334

Bob Schmitz: (651) 735-1468, allibobi@comcast.net

Gwen Scribner: (952) 884-5755, rgscribner@comcast.net

Humanists of Minnesota is a nonprofit educational corporation and has been granted a 501(c)(3) tax exemption as an educational, scientific and charitable organization. Donations to Humanists of Minnesota are tax deductible. HofM is a chapter of the American Humanist Association (AHA) and an affiliate of the Alliance of Secular Humanist Societies of the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH). Address inquiries to the Humanists of Minnesota, P.O. Box 582997, Minneapolis, MN 55458-2997, or call (651) 335-3800.

E-mail us at president@humanistsofmn.org or visit our web site: www.humanistsofmn.org

Announcements

DISCUSSION GROUPS

Mondays, 5:00-7:00 p.m., Richard Dick Memorial Happy Hours, Ol' Mexico Restaurant, 1754 Lexington Ave., Roseville (just north of Larpenteur). Tables on terrace level. Call Paul Craven, (763) 788-8918.

1st and 3rd Mondays, 6:00 p.m., Freethought Toastmasters Club, Larpenteur Estates Party Room, 1280 Larpenteur Ave. W., St. Paul. Call George Kane, (651) 488-8225.

1st Sunday, 9:00 a.m.-noon, Lake Superior Freethinkers monthly meeting. Radisson Hotel Duluth, Viking Room. For information contact Bill van Druten, (218) 724-4176).

2nd Sunday, 10:00 a.m.-noon, Critical Thinking Club St. Paul, Kelly Inn, Hwy. I-94. Contact George Kane, lhutt@comcast.net. (\$10 brunch, \$3 coffee/speaker only)

2nd & 4th Mondays, 5:00-7:00 p.m., Happy Hour South, Davanni's, 66th St. & Penn Ave. S., Richfield. Call Bob/Marilyn Nienkerk, (612) 866-6200.

2nd Thursday, evening, Rochester Area Freethinkers. Downtown Rochester Public Library, Meeting Room A. Contact Bill Kass, wjkhak@charter.net or (507) 259-4237.

3rd Wednesday, 11:30 a.m., Freethought Lunch, Dragon House, 3950 Central Avenue NE, Columbia Heights. Call Bill Volna, (612) 781-4273.

4th Saturday, 10:00 a.m.-noon, West Metro Critical Thinking Club, Ridge Point Apts. Bldg. meeting room, Minnetonka. Contact Mark Paquette at think-rsvp@markpaquette.com. (Contributions accepted.)

OTHER EVENTS

2nd Wednesday, 7:00 p.m., Board of Directors meeting. Open to all members. Contact Scott Lohman at scottl2605@aol.com.

Thursdays, 7:00 p.m., Campus Atheists, Skeptics and Humanists (CASH) general meeting. 3rd floor Coffman Memorial Union, 300 Washington Ave. SE, Minneapolis. Contact cash@cashumn.org.

"Humanist Perspectives," a weekly program produced by the Council for Secular Humanism, airs at **8:30 p.m. Wednesdays** on MTN Channel 16.



Winter Solstice Celebration Featuring the Freethought Follies

Sunday, December 20

The most fun you'll have all year!



*See Flyer for Details or visit our
website at www.humanistsofmn.org*



'Humanist Views' Goes on the Net!

"Humanist Views," the TV interview program produced by Humanists of Minnesota, has converted to podcasts and videos available on our website: humanistsofmn.org. However, to maintain our production capability at MSN studios, it can still be seen in Minneapolis on Channel 17 at 9:30 p.m. Fridays.

December is the most common month for renewals!

Is Your Membership Up to Date?

If you are receiving a paper copy of this newsletter, check your address label for the expiration date on your subscription.

Please renew when due, using the form on the back. Or, if you prefer, go online at humanistsofmn.org to 'join' and renew via PayPal.

(Humanism, *Continued from page 2*)

expressed desires and needs.” (Humanist Manifesto II, 1973, Eighth Principle.)

And finally, “We seek to minimize the inequities of circumstance and ability, and we support a just distribution of nature's resources and the fruits of human effort so that as many as possible can enjoy a good life.” (Humanist Manifesto III.)

As you can see, by 2003 and Humanist Manifesto III, the affirmations and principles are becoming more general and less clear but nevertheless still contain the kernels of the rich history of humanism. The sociopolitical message seems to be getting weaker and weaker while the atheistic and naturalistic messages gain strength. This has meant that humanism's primary focus has been on the debate of whether god exists, the proper boundaries between church and state and the merits of scientific ideas such as Darwinian evolution versus creationism. While this may encourage some in the freethought community, primarily the atheists, as Barry Seidman writes: “Consequently, if humanism was just about metaphysics this particular ‘ism’ would better be referred to as naturalism or atheism; but as naturalism is primarily a way of looking at ourselves and the universe we are a part of, and atheism is about the non-belief in the existence of God (or theism), neither of these ‘isms’ entail a comprehensive and socio-politically active philosophy. Humanism, on the contrary, has a long history being just such.”

Unfortunately, there far are too many today who choose to focus on the atheistic and metaphysical aspects of humanism while downplaying or ignoring the sociopolitical and economic meanings. From the American Humanist Association billboards (“Millions are good without God”) to PZ Meyers selected as the Humanist of the Year (he is a University of Minnesota biology professor who specializes in evolutionary developmental biology), the emphasis has been on atheism and naturalism. I am sure that those who chose to emphasize this limited definition of humanism are well meaning and have the same goals that most of us have, to inform and proliferate the tenets of humanism and its usefulness in providing a guide for how humans are to live among other humans. But why would we want go to the job site with our toolbox and leave two thirds of our tools at home? I suspect that for some it is easier. Talking about what you are against is often easier than what you are for. Others may do so out of fear that they may alienate potential members and appear dogmatic. “Isn't it better to have as many members as possible? After

all, there are many who count themselves as humanists and who advocate for a sociopolitical system that denies democracy to the majority in every sphere of life except at the ballot box.”

All of these concerns are valid and deserve attention and debate. However, a humanism that is defined only by its naturalistic aspects is a weak and incomplete humanism. It ignores the rich history of humanism and it leaves humanism unable to provide guidance to many of the challenges that humanity faces. Without such tools as ethics that includes a belief in democracy and equity humanism becomes just a weak and less robust version of atheism. If humanism becomes a “me too” of atheism it is lost and surely will never realize its goal of “A better life for all through education, democracy, free speech, reason and science, without reliance on arbitrary dogmas, revelations and faith.” ■

Jeannette Watland Elected Chair of Camp Quest Minnesota

The Board of Directors for Camp Quest of Minnesota has elected Jeannette Watland to serve as our Chair for the 2009-2010 year. This is a post I have held since the organization was formed, so Jeannette is only our second Board Chair. I will remain on the Board and will support Jeannette as she takes on this responsibility.

As many of you know, I never intended to remain in the Chair position for more than a few years, and I have been seeking a good successor. I believe some turnover in leadership strengthens any organization because it brings in fresh ideas and fresh energy. That is certainly the case with Jeannette! She is full of ideas and energy, and she has the brains and drive to make things happen. I have complete confidence in Jeannette's ability to lead our organization and help it grow. I think you will really enjoy interacting with her.

This transition gives me cause to look back over the last six years and reflect on what we have accomplished together. We have served over 100 young people and built connections with over 50 families in our region. More than 30 responsible adults gave a week of their time to serve as counselors and role models to these young people. Countless volunteers have led meaningful programs

(Continued on page 6)

Opinion

Needed: A New Definition of Religion

By Dr. Mark Welter

In the October issue of News and Views, editor Nathan Curland challenges religious claims that the natural wonders of our world are “divine.” He calls for a new term, “Sublime Nature.” This is a worthy replacement; but it does not, I submit, go far enough. The problem lies in the definition of “religion.”

“Sublime Nature” describes a spectacular part of earthly environment, something limited to our planet. But a plethora of scientific data bear witness to the fact that we are part of a much larger picture, the total cosmos. This measure is rarely used to define “religion.” But there are good reasons why it should be.

The characteristics of the universe – its breathtaking dynamics, its infinity of time and space, and its intimate links to human existence – qualify it as something extraordinary and out of the realm of normal perspectives. Karen Armstrong’s description of “God” as a “supernatural, superhuman, ubiquitous, unknowable, all powerful, everlasting force” correlates closely with known astro-physics.

All life is empirically traced to a single event, the Big Bang. That this frightening, unfathomable happening is the “Ultimate Source” of every thing is scientifically validated by three astronomical phenomena: red shift, cosmic microwave background and nuclear synthesis.

Viewed through telescopic lens, every heavenly body has a “red tail” (or shift) that verifies it is moving outward. Logically, something initiated the universal (and accelerating) motion, and this could only be what Stephen Hawkins terms a “Singular Sublimation,” the Big Bang.

Our lives and the periodic table are connected to the endless series of the explosions of dying stars, super nova. As stars disintegrate, they spew their contents across the heavens. Over millions of years, they gradually re-acerate and re-form as new stars. Simultaneously, nuclear fusion, inherent to this process, generates new and heavier elements in every cycle. Nearly 14 billion years of repetitions have created galaxies, planets and everything on earth, including the periodic table and mankind itself.

Human physiology affirms this. The same hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen and carbon elements which are universally dispersed across the skies are also found in every mortal. As Brian Swimme expresses it, “The sun, the moon and the stars are as much a part of us as our own heart, lungs and liver.”

Then there is cosmic microwave background. It is impossible to point a radio telescope into outer space and not hear a buzz. This is CMB, and it is no further away than your microwave, radio static, or TV “snow.” CMB is the residual from the supernatural burst of radioactivity generated at the Primordial Explosion. It is the echo of the Big Bang. No other source can account for its cosmic omnipresence.

Surely this combination of celestial wonders qualifies as Ultimate Sublime Naturalism. And, because this process transcends anything known to humans, it may logically be termed “religion.” Webster confirms: “religion” addresses the superhuman, the supernatural, the unknown, the all powerful. These ultimate mysteries of the universe, I contend, qualify for a new definition of religion, of “god.”

In place of the traditional “God,” I nominate the terms Ultimate Source. Corroboration is formidable. Because all scientific data attest to the Big Bang as the original birth of the universe; because our own DNA can be traced to the cosmos; and because all parts of the universe stem from what cosmologists call a “Singularity,” the premise has empirical merit.

Nor is the contention new. Early in the 13th century, the Muslim scholar-astronomer Ibn al-Arabi declared that “The universe is God’s own shadow.” More recently, Einstein, when asked if he were an atheist because he “was always studying the universe,” replied that “The Universe is God.”

Finally, the call for new definitions was eloquently condensed by astrophysicist Brian Swimme: “There’s nothing wrong with religion except that we’ve anthropomorphized it.” Were this observation adopted, the fallacy of traditional beliefs would be exposed as historic myths, and Humanists, “being informed by science,” might be more tempered in their pejorative references to “religion.” ■

Bibliography:

Armstrong, Karen. *A History of God*.

Hawkins, Stephen. *A Short History of Time*. In 1961, Hawkins did his doctoral dissertation contending there was a Singularity in earthly/universal origins. This was the academic beginning of the Big Bang thesis.

Rees, Hubert, et. al. *Origins*. A really excellent, pithy account.

Swimme, Brian. *The Universe Is a Green Dragon*. An outstanding synthesis of astro/ meta-physics. See also his *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos* (quoted above).



No State Money for Religious Schools!

by Bob Schmitz

Note: This piece was chosen as the Star Tribune "Letter of the Day" October 29, 2009

Tuesday's commentary "TiZA's success should not be punished" by two representatives of the Minnesota NAACP overlooks one salient fact: TiZA is a religious school collecting tax dollars in violation of the Minnesota Constitution.

In addition, it is in a position to cherry-pick a student population designed to bolster its test scores. Ask it to take in any child coming through the door from the neighborhood, and I am willing to wager that those test scores will drop. It is not a public school and should not be funded by the taxpayers.

I have been a member of NAACP for many years and will not renew my membership. The writers present a specious argument in defense of a school that is breaking the law. I applaud the Minnesota Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union for taking TiZA to task. The Minnesota Department of Education is also to be commended for finally exercising its authority over charter schools. The 30 or so religion-sponsored charters mentioned in the commentary should also be investigated. Article XIII, Section 2 of the Minnesota Constitution states: "In no case shall any public money or property be appropriated or used for support of schools wherein the distinctive doctrines, creeds or tenets of any particular Christian or other religious sect are promulgated or taught."

The charter school law was not intended to be a cover for religious institutions wanting to secure state funding. Charter schools, such as TiZA, that have violated the Constitution while receiving our tax dollars should be required to reimburse the state for all funds received to date.

Bob Schmitz, Oakdale

P.S. I had an additional sentence stating that I would be asking the state Department of Education to investigate all charter schools that might be in violation, but it was deleted by the paper. The commentary I responded to let the cat out of the bag and mentioned that there are 30 Christian-sponsored charter schools, which would make this action against TiZA appear discriminatory. We need to encourage the education

department to enforce the law with all charters. Write letters to the paper in support of the above. Startrib.com also takes comments relating to the commentary. Perhaps the Minnesota First Amendment Watchdogs could write a letter to the Commissioner of Education with a cc to Senator Kathy Saltzman. She authored legislation last session calling for tighter controls on sectarian sponsorship of charters. ☐

(Continued from page 4)

to foster critical thinking, art, music, sports and other constructive interactions with our campers. I was looking at a photo of us gathered around the camp fire during our first camping session in 2004. Half the campers who are in the photo remain active in Camp Quest. One of the volunteer counselors was so inspired she went on to establish a whole new affiliate of Camp Quest in California. I am excited by the prospect of the young people we have influenced maturing and taking on adult roles in our community. They're going to be dynamite! You should be proud of your work and the support you have given to make this happen.

In addition to Jeannette's ascension to Chair of the Board, we have added five new Directors from a variety of backgrounds. We have parents, business people, artists, technical experts, students and teachers on our Board. I think we have had some great successes as an organization, and I am very optimistic that our future holds even better successes. Please join me in congratulating Jeannette and supporting her as she leads us forward.

Rick Rohrer

Upcoming Critical Thinking Club Meetings

St. Paul Chapter. Sunday, December 13, 10:00 a.m. to noon: "Bah Humbug! A Critical Look at Charitable Giving," by Laura Hutt. Kelly Inn, Hwy. I-94, St. Paul. Breakfast \$10, lecture only \$3. RSVP criticalthinkingclub@gmail.com

Stillwater Chapter. Monday, December 14, 7:00 p.m.: "Justice for Victims of Clergy Sex Abuse," by Jeff Anderson, Atty. Family Means Bldg., 1875 Northwestern Ave, Stillwater.



November Chapter Meeting

The Problem of Evil

Summarized by Paul Heffron

At our November 21 meeting at Nokomis Community Center we had a room full of members and newcomers. After a social time with coffee, rolls and refreshments supplied by Matt Labo, Scott Lohman made announcements and introduced August Berkshire. August gave his talk on the many excuses he has heard religious people give for evil in the world, given their belief in an all-good and all-powerful god.

As most of you know, August has been a leader of Minnesota Atheists for many years and has served on our board. He has, over the years, addressed religious groups many times and has an extensive understanding of their beliefs. The talk he gave is available in a pamphlet entitled "The Problem of Evil: The Top 15 Excuses..." You can ask for a copy by contacting August at AugustBerkshire@gmail.com.

It is important to know about this topic, which is a subheading within theology, usually referred to as theodicy. It's important to know the reasons offered in defense of God, usually referred to as apologetics. It is even more important for us to know how the reasons or excuses fail, and August spelled that out in detail. He noted though that it's not enough to know how the "excuses" fail (the Freethought criticism) when debating believers. He said that even if you were to convince a true believer with your arguments against his excuses, that person would still almost always find a way to maintain faith in an all-powerful and all-good god because of the emotional factors at work. However, there are religious persons who have modified the concept of God, making him or it less than all powerful and in some cases regarding God not even as a being but rather some aspect of being or reality. With these people the topic of discussion

Maple Grove Discussion Group

Saturday, December 12, 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.: "The ACLU vs. the Muslim Charter School," by Charles Sameulson, president ACLU-MN. Champps Americana, 13521 80th Circle No., Maple Grove. Breakfast \$16.50; coffee only \$5. Register at landforsale@visi.com or call Laurie at 763-420-4757.

or debate is different and you can usually reason with them.

After August gave his talk, we broke into small groups for discussion. I think as a result of the discussions we improved our understanding of the topic and how to deal with it. To me it was apparent that it is especially important for us to understand our alternative to the theological solution to the problem of evil. We must deal with natural and human evil without recourse to a higher being or to some future metaphysical solution. We see natural evil as those natural realities that harm us. In and of themselves they are not morally evil (or good) but are construed as such in our judgment because of the harm they do to us. It's more difficult to understand human evil but again the touchstone is the humanistic norm of human well being (which includes the human environment or habitat). That which harms humans is evil and is not something to be excused or justified but met with all the strengths that humans can muster to achieve well being and progress. It's a never-ending struggle but one that we embrace as giving meaning to life.

After the meeting about a dozen of us enjoyed lunch and table talk at Carbone's. ■

HUMANIST NEWS & VIEWS

Editor, Nathan Curland

Editorial Committee - Brad Bolin, Gwen Scribner, Matt Labo, Suzanne Perry

Photographer - Richard Trombly

Articles, letters, event notices and other writings are welcome. Send to: editor@humanistsofmn.org with the word "newsletter" in the subject line, or to P.O. Box 582997, Minneapolis, MN 55458-2997. (E-mail submissions are preferred.) All submissions must include the writer's full name, postal address, telephone number and e-mail address. All submissions become the property of this newsletter and cannot be returned. Submission deadline is the 22nd of the prior month.

Humanist News & Views (ISSN 1054-9633) is published monthly by Humanists of Minnesota. All rights reserved. Opinions expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of this organization or the AHA or CSH. Reproduction of any part of this newsletter is hereby granted, provided the following language accompanies the reproduction: "This article originally appeared in the (month/year) issue of Humanist News & Views, a publication of the Humanists of Minnesota." Reproduction of any part of this issue for commercial purposes is prohibited.

HUMANISTS OF MINNESOTA
PO Box 582997
Minneapolis, MN 55458-2997
Phone (651) 335-3800

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED



Time-Sensitive Mail
Please Don't Delay

December 2009

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION OR RENEWAL

Your membership is vital to the growth of Humanism and the Humanist community. Married couples or domestic partners will be considered as one membership, if you so indicate. Our membership categories are:

- (B) Budget, \$20.00
- (R) Regular, \$35.00
- (S) Sustaining, \$50.00
- (P) Patron, \$100.00 or more
- (G) Gift Newsletter, \$20.00 (not counted as membership)
- (T) Trial subscription for 3 months, just ask

*Full time students at an accredited institution can receive a complimentary subscription

Please check the appropriate box, complete the information and mail with your check to Humanists of Minnesota, P.O. Box 582997, Minneapolis, MN 55458-2997.



Visit our website at:
www.humanistsofmn.org

For national or international membership write to:

American Humanist Association
1777 T Street NW
Washington, DC 20009-7125
www.humanist.net

Council for Secular Humanism
PO Box 664
Amherst, NY 14226
www.secularhumanism.org

Name: _____

Address: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

Phone number: _____

e-mail: _____

(for special announcements, blogs etc. Keeps you in touch!)

I would like my newsletter sent via email () (in color!)

Second Member at same address: _____