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**10:00 a.m.– Noon  
 Saturday  
 February 20, 2010**

**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***

***“The Evolution of Land Plants: How Fungi Shaped the World as We Know It!”***

*By Rebecca D. Curland, MSc*

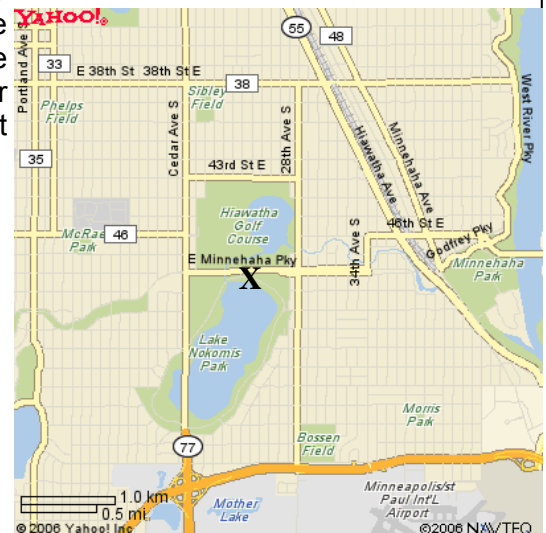
***Saturday, February 20, 2010***

Last month, we had an introduction to Darwin’s Theory of Natural Selection from Dr. Robert Hazen. This month, in honor of Darwin’s birthday Rebecca Curland M.S. will be presenting a lecture on evolution. This talk will specifically focus on the evolution of plants (a favorite focus for Darwin!) and examine the crucial evolutionary transition of plants from the aquatic to terrestrial environment. There is evidence that a symbiosis between early plants and ancient fungi provided the adaptive strength for plants to colonize the previously uninhabited land environment. Join us on Saturday February 20th to explore the fascinating evolution of the land plants, the organisms that paved the way for the progression of life as we know it.



Rebecca Curland holds a B.S. in Environmental Science and a M.S. in Biology with a focus on Mycology and Plant Biology from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. She has been an active member in amateur and professional mycological communities, participating in a wide variety of forays and conferences. She is an avid botanist and naturalist, in her free time you may find her roaming the prairies with a field guide or wandering the forest with a basket full of edible wild mushrooms.

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





## *The Beginning of Skepticism*

By Ron Scribner

In one of the discussion groups, after the main presentation at last month's chapter meeting, a person questioned why religion still persists even among those who are highly educated. We are all aware about the adage of prostitution being described as the oldest profession. I have a different profession as being the oldest and that involves the head or leader of a religious group or organization.

Religion is an important part of the lives of millions of people worldwide; many would say it is the most important part. Many anthropologists would say the evidence is clear that humans possessed religion in prehistory, the religion first developed when humans roamed in tiny bands foraging for subsistence much like wild animals. If religion did indeed exist when human societies constituted bands ranging from a few to many members, and when their technology consisted of little more than sticks and sharpened stones, then the fundamental aspects of religion must be very basic human needs and activities.

We know that every day in every part of the this planet, people meet to pray, chant, meditate, read, make offerings, worship, take communion, receive and give counseling, teach and learn, all for the purpose of deepening their understanding and commit-

ment to their religion. I was sitting in a coffee shop a couple of months ago and at the table next to me were four men, I would guess in their early 20s, and they had their Bibles opened and were discussing the section that they were currently studying.

For the most part religion was taken for granted as an integral part of everyday life up until the 16th century, when diplomats, weary of the Wars of Religion that followed the Protestant Reformation, began to think and write about religion from a new perspective, one that looked in from the outside and asked troubling questions. This approach really started to gain strength during the Enlightenment, which was primarily the privilege of a relatively few educated people. If you had asked the local village person to give an opinion on the "enlightenment," you would have seen furrowed eyebrows and heard the question, "What are you talking about?"

Nevertheless, the emphasis that religion be studied from a scientific perspective, that it is a human cultural creation just as much as poetry, kinship or even dining, began to work its way down to the general public. This was especially the case when other cultures were revealed as having sets of beliefs that weren't the same as European religious beliefs. This does not mean that the majority of people ceased to believe, but it did mean that it became possible for more and more people not to believe.

One of the major events that led to a searching examination of the unguarded optimism of belief in a good and just God was the Lisbon earthquake of

*(Skepticism, Continued on page 6)*

### Humanists of Minnesota Officers

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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](mailto:president@humanistsofmn.org) or visit our web site: [www.humanistsofmn.org](http://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, wjkhahk@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.

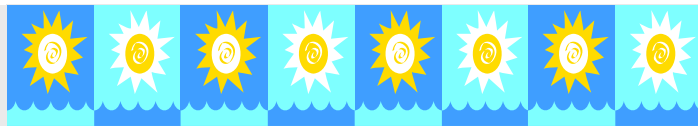
**4th Saturday, 10:00 a.m.-noon**, West Metro Critical Thinking Club, Ridge Point Apts. Bldg. meeting room, Minnetonka. Contact Mark Paquette at think-rsvp@markpaquette.com. (Contributions accepted.)

## 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.



## *Dates for Summer Freethought Picnics Set!*

*Sunday, June 13 - Hosted by CASH*

*Sunday, July 18 - Hosted by Humanists of Minnesota*

*Sunday, August 15 - Hosted by Minnesota Atheists*

*Columbia Park, Minneapolis*

*Noon—3:00 PM*

## *Nominations for Humanists of Minnesota Board of Directors Are Open*

Humanists of Minnesota elections are coming in April. All four officer positions and three at-large positions are open. We are actively seeking new talent to help guide our organization so please consider running. Nominees must have been members for at least one year.

If you are interested, please send a note to: [president@humanistsofmn.org](mailto:president@humanistsofmn.org)

## *Want to help but not ready for the Board?*

Humanists of Minnesota needs people to help with some of the organization's basic functions:

- Membership secretary
- Newsletter layout
- Asst. webmaster

If you would like to help in any of these areas please send a note to [editor@humanistsofmn.org](mailto:editor@humanistsofmn.org)

## *Maple Grove Discussion Group*

*Saturday, February 13, 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.: "Should Live Organ Donors be Paid?" by Josephine Marcotty, Medical Affairs writer, Minneapolis Star Tribune. Champps Americana, 13521 80th Circle No., Maple Grove. Breakfast \$16.50; coffee only \$5. Register at [landforsale@visi.com](mailto:landforsale@visi.com) or call Laurie at 763-420-4757.*

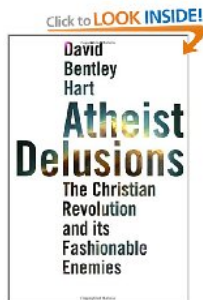


## Book Review:

### Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies

By David Bentley Hart

Reviewed by Scott Lohman



Ever since atheist books started selling really well there has been a backlash from various Christian writers who say the authors are wrong about some bit of history or some nuance of theology or are just plain using bad arguments. Into this fray jumps Christian academic

David Bentley Hart.

Hart uses overly academic prose to principally point out what he terms errors in how the atheist authors are interpreting Christianity in history. Though Hart acknowledges that there are a number of Christian sects that he treats with the same contempt as the atheists do, he wants us to note that not all of Christianity is that way. For example, he also spends over four pages acknowledging the problems with the Inquisition and its approach to enforcing dogma and doctrine. But then he downplays the control of religious doctrine and dogma during what is usually called the “Dark Ages.” Hart also tries to shift blame for the destruction of the library at Alexandria to Roman politics rather than religious fanaticism.

Whatever points Hart gains from having a deeper knowledge of history, he loses by saying that generic Christianity is a good thing. He fails to tell us which of the thousands of Christian sects and denominations practices this “perfect” form of Christianity, so we’re left to try and figure that out for ourselves. Also one would expect a decent definition of belief, delusion and even Christianity from someone trying to set the record straight. However, on that they would be mistaken. At no point does Hart even make an attempt to do so.

As more and more books on atheism and humanism rise on the bestseller lists, we’ll see more attempts to ‘correct’ us on our ‘delusions’, just don’t expect anyone to define them! ■



## January Chapter Meeting

### Darwin and The Theory of Natural Selection

Summarized by Nathan Curland

The January chapter meeting served as a prelude to Darwin month (February) by highlighting his Theory of Natural Selection via a DVD presentation by the Robert Hazen, PhD, the Clarence Robinson Professor of Earth Science at George Mason University and author of many popular books on science. Before the start of the presentation, HofM member Doug Hadden touched the assemblage with a reading on aging that was sentimental and light-hearted (thank you, Doug!).

Dr. Hazen started his discussion of the Theory of Natural Selection (Darwin never used the word “evolution”) that basically states that life has changed over millions of years through a series of gradual small changes. The evidence for this is overwhelming through many means: comparative anatomy, vestigial organs, geographic distributions etc. Darwin got the original idea from the Theory of Gradual Geologism, at the time currently in favor in the geological sciences, which postulated that small changes accumulate over millions of years to cause major changes in land masses and features. He noted the same kind of gradualism can occur in organisms. This challenged the orthodoxy at the time that ‘life is unchangeable’ and also contributed to his life long concerns about the relationship between religion and science. In particular, he was troubled by the amorality that he saw apparent in the natural world. This concern inhibited his publishing his work and conclusions until a letter from Alfred Russell Wallace indicated that he better publish or he will be ‘scooped’.

The Theory of Natural Selection rests on four key observations:

- All species produce more offspring that can possibly survive
- Individuals of a species display variations in physical characteristics
- An individual’s traits usually represent traits of its parents
- Some traits provide an individual with an advantage to produce more offspring or have more of its offspring survive

Darwin used artificial selection via domestication as a model for how natural selection operates. Dr.

(Meeting, Continued on page 7)

## *The Origins of Western Religions: From the Combat Myth to Judaism and Christianity (Part II)*

*By Dr. Mark Welter*

### **The Babylonian Captivity**

How did Persian ideals come to dominate the Western World? The major vehicle of transformation was the Jewish "Babylonian Captivity." In 586 BCE, the Babylonian leader Nebuchadnezzar II conquered Palestine and took 40,000 captive Jews to the city of Babylon, where they remained until 539. Following this period of exile, three central beliefs gradually became standard Jewish theology: the existence of a single supreme god; the expectation of a Final Judgment Day; and an acknowledgment that the "Devil" was part of everyday life.

The most obvious explanation for the changes was exposure to the reassuring teachings of Zoroaster. The Jewish deportees did not turn away from their own religion but instead adapted their beliefs to those of their captors. Before the Exile, for example, there had been no exclusive supreme god in the Jewish world. Yahweh was a primary god, but the Jews also recognized the deities of other cities and peoples. After the Babylonian Captivity, a singular monotheism began to appear in the First (Old) Testament. Doubtless, the precedent for the change was Ahura Mazda, the Zoroastrian Lord of Light

The evolution toward monotheism can be seen most clearly in two Old Testament books, Ezekiel and Second Isaiah, both of which were composed after the Exile.

Ezekiel was a Jewish priest who was deported to Babylon as a young man. He devoted the remainder of his life to the spiritual care of his fellow exiles. He assured them that their captive situation was not hopeless; indeed, there was good reason for their status. The Jews' defeat by the Babylonians and the destruction of their Temple was "Yahweh's just retribution" for worshiping "false gods." Success and eventual retribution lay in complete devotion to Yahweh alone.

The unprecedented call for full monotheism is repeated in Second Isaiah. The central message lies in chapters 40-55: Yahweh's true faithful were the subjugated Jews in Babylon, and they are now assured a future reward. Second Isaiah even predicts the conquest of Babylon by the Persian king Cyrus the

Great; "Yahweh has given him the power to defeat the Babylonians." When Cyrus won this victory in 539 BCE and released the captive Israelites, they were convinced that they were "God's chosen people." (Riley, 142-3)

In addition to exclusive monotheism, apocalyptic revelations begin to appear after the Babylonian Captivity. The new concept is convincingly presented in the book of Daniel. Daniel tells of an apparition that came to him on the banks of the Tigris. An angel appeared and said, "I have come to explain what will happen to your people. I have a vision of those days." (The mention of the Iraqi river is significant, for it confirms the foreign influence of Daniel's report.)

The apocalyptic model is noticeably extended into the last six chapters of Daniel, which are permeated with Zoroastrian theology. An "empire of saints" would emerge, these chapters assert, following "a divine judgment." As described in Daniel 12, both the living and the dead would be judged: "Many who sleep in the dust of the earth will wake, some to everlasting life, and some to the reproach of eternal abhorrence."

Again, the assertion has no precedent in Jewish Scripture, and it marks a decisive break with the traditional view of death. The previous concept of finality is replaced by a new, hopeful prediction: On the Last Day, the dead will be resurrected, judged, and receive their due.

*(Origins, Continued on page 6)*

### ***Upcoming Critical Thinking Club Meetings***

**St. Paul Chapter.** Sunday, February 14, 10:00 a.m. to noon: "Argumentum ad logicam: The 'fallacy fallacy,'" by George Kane, Hwy. I-94, St. Paul. Breakfast \$10, lecture only \$3. RSVP [criticalthinkingclub@gmail.com](mailto:criticalthinkingclub@gmail.com)

**West Metro Chapter.** Saturday, February 27, 10:00 a.m. to noon: "A Critical Look at Charitable Giving," by Dr. Laura Hutt. Ridge Point Apts. Meeting Room, 12800 Marion Ln. W., Minnetonka. Contributions appreciated. RSVP [mark@mark-paquete.com](mailto:mark@mark-paquete.com).

*For additional information, visit [CriticalThinkingClub.org](http://CriticalThinkingClub.org).*

(Origins, Continued from page 5)

An especially powerful demonstration of the impact of the Jewish exile was the adoption of the Devil concept. For centuries, the word "satan" (meaning "adversary" in Hebrew) had been employed to describe enemies in war, politics and tribal disputes. After 539 BCE, the term was increasingly used in the context of Zoroastrian dualism: two near-equal deities (Ahura Mazda/Ahriman) fighting for control of human loyalty. Eventually, satan becomes Satan, or the Devil.

A convincing illustration of the Exilic impact can be seen by comparing a passage in the pre-Captivity book Second Samuel (24:1) to one in post-liberation First Chronicles (21:1). In the first passage, "The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David to count the people." In First Chronicles, "Satan stood up against Israel and incited David to count the people." Before the Babylonian Captivity, the Lord was the source of both good and evil; after the exile, the Devil alone was declared to be the origin of almost all evil.

After the exile, the Old Testament increasingly described God and the Devil competing for human loyalty. The Devil led people into sin and blasphemy to destroy their allegiance to God. The story of Job is a classic example. Competition for loyalty begins when the Adversary challenges Job's sincerity with the Lord. Responding, God delivers Job to the Evil One for testing. The remainder of the Biblical epic is well known.

As the centuries passed, the momentum of the Zoroastrian influence continued westward. The theology of the Qumran sect resonates with Persian eschatology. This apocalyptic Jewish sect was active between 200 and 100 BCE, its community centered at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. Members of the Qumran community believed that humans were free to choose between two near equal deities who would "be with them to the end of time." Their choice carried heavy consequences. Those who followed the Prince of Light would, after the day of reckoning, lead glorious lives, while people who were loyal to the Prince of Darkness would be punished.

Were such similarities to Zoroaster's theological tenets the result of coincidence or connection? Answers take on additional significance with an examination of the New Testament.

*(To be concluded next month)*

(Skepticism, Continued from page 2)

1755. (This example is especially relevant today because of the earthquake in Haiti.) The earthquake in Lisbon occurred near midday on November 1, All Saints Day, when the churches were crowded and many people were killed by the collapsing buildings. Almost 30,000 people died in a very short time and just the sheer magnitude and unexpectedness of that event was so shocking.

It raised the question of evil to which Voltaire was quick to respond by means of a poem, "The Lisbon Earthquake," subtitled "An Inquiry into the Maxim 'Whatever is, is Right.'" In the poem he raised questions about the moral justification of that event: Were the citizens of Lisbon more deserving of punishment than those of London or Paris? How can such an event be justified by saying that it is outweighed by greater good? And how could it be considered a rational part of the best of all possible worlds? Voltaire also asked if God could not have created general laws of the universe in which earthquakes and similar events did not have to happen.

It was both natural events and the writings of those educated few, such as Hume and Voltaire, that filtered down to the general public that allow skepticism and disbelief to take root in receptive minds. And although religion still retains its power over the majority of the world's population, it is becoming more possible to disbelieve openly than even before.

■

### *Changes to Humanists of Minnesota Board of Directors*

*Ron Scribner, Treasurer, and Gwen Scribner, at-large member, announced their resignations from the HofMn Board of Directors at our board meeting on January 13. Ron and Gwen have purchased a property in Florida this past year and have been spending much of their time there in anticipation of a permanent move in the future. The board would like to recognize their significant contribution to Humanists of Minnesota. Ron has been a longtime board member, serving as President, Vice President and Treasurer. Gwen has also served many terms as at-large member.*

*The position of Treasurer has been temporarily filled by board member Brad Bolin. Thank you, Brad!*

*Dale Handeen has been appointed to an at-large member position by the chair. Welcome, Dale!*

(Meeting, Continued from page 4)

Hazen then gave many examples of how the environment would influence the selection process. He also discussed the favorite argument of anti-evolutionists of “what is the use of half an eye,” pointing out that over many, many generations a simple sensitivity of a cell to sunlight can result in gradual and complex improvements that results in an eye. Scientists have estimated that eyes could have evolved independently at least 60 or 70 times during the course of natural history.

Hazen then went on to discuss some of the misuses of Darwin’s theory. The term “survival of the fittest” came not from Darwin but from Herbert Spencer to try and formulate a “Social Darwinism” that would relegate inferior humans to a lower ladder on the evolutionary ladder than their superiors. This was subsequently used by racists to justify their prejudices. But Darwin never thought of natural selection as “evolving” to a goal but as an undirected process that proceeded hither or dither depending on the environment.

Hazen also discussed the supposed “disagreement” between Gould and Dawkins about whether change was a result of Gradualism or Punctuated Equilibrium. The idea of Punctuated Equilibrium grew first out of the observations geologically of a number of mass extinctions that occurred over geological time but then led to the observation that smaller extinctions seem to occur also at a more frequent pace. He gave examples of both and noted that, in fact, both processes could be occurring depending on circumstance. He ended by noting that we appear to be in the midst of a great mass extinction of species right now, much caused by mankind.

The meeting was attended by 32 enthusiastic participants, many new to Humanists of Minnesota and the discussion phase, wherein we divided into three groups, was very lively and animated. ■

*“Is man one of God's blunders or is  
God one of man's?”*

*Friedrich Nietzsche(1844-1900)*

## *Note from The Bridge*

Thank you so much for choosing The Bridge to be the recipients of the items gathered at the winter solstice donation drive, which we received on 12/20/2009.

Your generosity will make an immediate difference in the lives of the runaway and homeless children at The Bridge for Youth this winter.

The winter is a hard time for kids at The Bridge, but because of your support they’re also full of hope – hope for reuniting with their families, hope for never having to spend another night on the street, hope for a better future.

So thank you for doing your part to bring shelter, safety and hope to hundreds of youth and families at The Bridge this winter.

Like last year I really enjoyed the dinner, the company and the program! Thank you for inviting me to be your guest. Please share our gratitude with The Humanists of Minnesota and the Minnesota Atheists.

Chelsea Miller  
Development Coordinator  
The Bridge for Youth

## 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](mailto: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.

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February 2010

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- (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.



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

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

Second Member at same address: \_\_\_\_\_