

Manitoba Humanist



All parents should be aware that when they mock or curse gay people, they may be mocking or cursing their own child.

— Anna Quindlen

Published by and for the Humanists, Atheists and Agnostics of Manitoba

“We are beyond belief”

HAM²

www.mb.humanists.ca



THE ATHEIST EXPERIENCE – AT OUR MARCH MEETING

This month's meeting on **Saturday, March 9th**, is about coming out as an atheist and the importance of growing secular groups. After a short video presentation, we'll be joined, via Skype, by **Tracie Harris**, co-host of the Atheist Experience television show out of Austin, Texas.

Tracie comes from a Fundamentalist Bible believing background. On her long journey to figure out just what she believed, she examined many different religions and beliefs systems, finally coming to the conclusion in her adult life that she was an atheist. She's a member of one of the most dynamic secular organizations in North America. The Atheist Community of Austin, or ACA, works very hard promoting

the principles of positive atheism and the separation of church and state.

In addition to blood drives and street cleanups, they have “atheists helping the homeless”. The ACA has many other activities such as the podcast “godless bitches”, “The nonprophets” radio/podcast which can be heard on freethoughtradio.com. There is the ACA newsletter, Atheist Experience blog site on freethoughtblogs.com and a cartoon strip called “Atheist Eve”, authored by Tracie Harris herself.

ACA members also operate the wiki site “Iron Chariots”, an excellent website offering information on counter apologetics for atheists and other non-theists.

UPCOMING EVENTS

All of our upcoming events can be found on page 5 of this newsletter.



Tracie Harris, from the Atheist Community of Austin

Of course, there is also The Atheist Experience television show, which takes calls from believers and nonbelievers alike from all over the world. It is broadcast out of Austin, Texas on local cable and to the world via internet and ustream TV.

Yes, all that is accomplished by 163 members and a shoestring budget. I hope you'll join us for what should be a very good discussion.

Our meetings are free and open to the public. Check page 5 for complete details.

- Pat Morrow

SPECIAL GUEST ARTICLE

At this month's regular HA²M meeting we'll be talking about being out and active in our group. In the news lately we've seen the religious right attempt to neuter Bill 18, the anti-bullying bill. We have seen Prime Minister Stephen Harper open the new Office of Religious Freedom. These things should give us all the more reason to be out and active.

In keeping with that theme, I'd like you to meet Luke Favin. He is a director with the Society of Edmonton Atheists (SEA), a rapidly growing group in Alberta. He has taken an active role in the running battle with Alberta's religious school boards and has also appeared in front of church groups on their featured 'ask an atheist' night. I spoke to him for about an hour over the phone the other night and wouldn't be surprised in the least if some of those church members from that night are now members of the SEA!

On February 25 he appeared on City TV's Breakfast Television in Edmonton to talk about the Office of Religious Freedom. He then posted a summary of what he said on the SEA website (www.edmontonatheists.ca). I think he feels it's a bit of a rant but I found it pretty powerful and I wanted to reprint it here.

I think it more than makes the case for being out and active.

- Pat Morrow

Thoughts on opening of the Office for Religious Freedom

By Luke Fevin

Society of Edmonton Atheists

I think that before we go off around the World telling everybody else what to do, I think we have to take a look at ourselves first and ask ourselves "are we walking the walk?"

Given that the Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that ALL religions have equal rights, that seems at odds with the preferential treatment accord the Catholic religion both in Ontario & here in Alberta with our fully funded Catholic schools. In fact the United Nations Committee on Human Rights has censured Canada TWICE for these discriminatory & unfair systems. Yet we seem quite happy to ignore this.

A senior Canadian Court (Zylberberg v Sudbury Board of Education, 1988) also ruled that segregating children in our Public Schools into 'Christians' and "Everybody else" for the recitation of the Lord's Prayer denied minority religion and non-religious children their Charter Rights – it denied them the "Fundamental Freedom" of "Freedom FROM religion" – yet not only do we continue this practice every day in Albertan Public Schools, it's actually part of the latest Education Act.

So here we are knowingly discriminating against minority religions with tax payer money and denying our children their Charter Rights in our Public Schools. Yet we don't seem that worried about either. That hypocrisy doesn't seem like the best basis for us to go and tell other people what to do.

As far as the actual Office of Religious Freedoms is concerned, there are a number of worrying signs.

Firstly, John Baird (Foreign Affairs Minister) closed last year the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development after quarter of a century. A vehicle that seemed a far more appropriate way to go about tackling this issue.

Instead he has opened the Office of Religious

Freedoms and while he consulted with a number of religious groups, not one secular group was invited to participate. This is not perhaps surprising given his 2012 statement, "We know that freedom of religion does not mean freedom from religion." Our Minister for Foreign Affairs may be surprised to learn that the Supreme Court of Canada disagrees with him. (R. V Big M Drug Mart, 1985)

Further, another statement from him last year, "We don't see agnosticism or atheism as being in need of defense in the same way persecuted religious minorities are." would suggest that he is either unfamiliar or unconcerned with the reality for a large number of the two billion non-religious human beings in this World (more than a third of the World's population and growing).

If he was to familiarize himself with the report produced last year; 'Freedom of Thought 2012: A Global Report on Discrimination Against Humanists, Atheists and the Nonreligious' he would be aware that discrimination and persecution against the non-religious goes on in at least 60 countries around the World.

I can be executed by the state in 7 countries for simply not believing in a god. It is illegal for me to be an atheist in dozens of others, including some where I can lose my citizenship from the country of my birth for being an atheist.

The non-religious are routinely jailed in many countries, sometimes for blasphemy – such as the case with Alexander Aan in Indonesia who made the mistake of posting "There is no god" on Facebook. He was attacked by an angry mob. Sentenced to two and a half years for blasphemy. And then severely beaten by the other inmates in prison for the same crime. Just last week in Bangladesh tens of thousands of angry protesters rioted (resulting in 4 dead), demanding the death sentence for 4 atheist bloggers. In a number of countries I can be denied health care, education, the right to drive, the right to adopt children, the right to marry.

The right to freedom of expression, equality and security of the person should and do supersede the right to religion-based practices. The Human

rights & wellbeing of women, of gays and of children must come before 'Religious Freedoms'. "Religious Freedoms" are recognized as being superseded by fundamental Human Rights by both International Law & the Supreme Court of Canada. Yet these laws and rights are routinely ignored and violated for religious privilege.

But it isn't just happening in the countries you might consider the most likely suspects. We see Religious Privilege put ahead of fundamental human rights in Western Countries too. Even here in Canada we have laws against 'the promotion of hatred', yet there are special exemptions in that legislation which permit the expression of opinions on religious subjects and opinions based on religious texts which would otherwise be prohibited.

Last year in the UK a man was threatened with arrest under the Public Order Act if he did not take a sign down from his window saying "religions are fairy stories for adults". Now balance that against the thousands of churches, billboards, advertisements & literature that often make all manner of positive assertions regarding religion.

In Poland a musician was fined \$1,450 for 'offending religious feelings' when she said in a 2012 interview that the Bible is full of "unbelievable tales". In the US, 7 states ban atheists from public office and one even prevents atheists from giving evidence in court.

Persecution & discrimination against the non-religious is rampant in the World, yet this office and the minister responsible for it seems to either not know or not care.

The sad irony of the whole situation is that this Office should really be called "The Office of protecting religious people from the religious oppression of religious people that think they are exercising their religious rights."

I'm interested to see how the "Office of Religious Freedoms" handles the issue of 'blasphemy'. Will it clearly side with Canadian & International Law saying that criminalizing & punishing people

(or threatening to do so) is totally unacceptable – or will it be wishy-washy on the subject to try and placate the religious?

The same with 'apostasy' - death for leaving the religion of your family. Will it tackle the problem of millions & millions of humans being bullied into a denial of their most basic rights; "Freedom of expression", "Equality" & "Personal Security of the person"?

And what about basic 'judgment' & ostracization. It's a real problem & not just 'over there'. It happens here, the US, Europe. Wives shut up. Sons kotow. And children that disagree are cast out. So given our government has an office to protect the religious, who's looking out for the non-religious in all this?

Don't think it's real? I walked into the studios this morning and the security guard said, "Thank You. I'm an atheist. Thank you for speaking up about this." I'm in the Green Room and the 'helper' tells me the story of her Islamic friend here in Edmonton. She renounced Islam and was kicked onto the streets by her family at 13.

- Luke Fevin

BULLIES & BIGOTRY

Last December, the provincial government introduced Bill 18, legislation intended to provide schools with guidelines to combat bullying. The proposed bill defines what constitutes bullying, names some specific groups that may be particularly vulnerable to bullying, and ensures that the students have the right to form anti-bullying support groups. It specifically names Gay Straight Alliances as a title that may be used by these groups. The minister of Education, Nancy Allen has been quite clear in her intent that faith-based schools that receive public funding will not be allowed to opt out of the legislation. She was quoted in the Winnipeg Free Press as saying, "At the end of the day, I'm not going to let faith based schools opt out of providing a safe and caring environment for their students." From my reading of the proposed bill, I have a hard time seeing what anyone could

find objectionable about it. We know bullying is a problem for many groups, and that some, including the GLBT community are particularly affected by it. It is not a new problem, although with the recent developments of technology, and the anonymity of the internet, in many cases it has reached new heights regarding the harm that it causes. We hear of children driven to kill themselves, all too frequently, after being victimized in this way. There is also no doubt that GLBT children are more at risk for bullying and suicide than many other groups.

When one of our Humanist members informed us that a group called Protect Our Schools had formed to protest this proposed legislation based on their belief that the definition of bullying was too broad and that it infringed on their right to Freedom of Religion, some of us were motivated to write letters to our MLAs to encourage them to go forward with this bill. The Protect Our Schools group had been working hard to oppose the bill, encouraging people to write their MLAs to oppose the bill. We also heard that a meeting was planned for last weekend at the Steinbach Christian High School for those interested in showing their concern. The meeting was advertised on the website as an information night and prayer forum. So a few of us decided to take a drive out to see what they had to say.

Pat Morrow had prepared a short statement explaining his reasons for supporting this bill. He was hoping that there would be an opportunity to present his piece, or at least that there would be some Q&A, with a chance to be heard. Driving out there, we did not know quite what to expect. I was certainly aware that we were heading into a very conservative Christian town, but I was still hopeful that there would be some people who came out to show their support for the bill. Well, this was not to be.

As we approached the school, we saw hundreds of parked cars and people pouring into the school. I felt quite demoralized seeing the huge numbers that they were able to rally. 1200+ people willing to show up to defend the indefensible position of their right to bully in the name of their faith. We have trouble getting 40 people to show up to our monthly HA²M

meetings and yet here were people coming out in droves to promote a position of hatred under the guidance of their “loving saviour”.

Pat approached someone to ask if it would be possible to say a few words and he was told there would be no Q&A, it was information and prayer only. Pat clarified by asking, “No dissenting opinions?” The person he spoke to replied that this was correct.

The meeting opened with a brief and sketchy information session, never clearly stating how this would infringe on their religious freedom, coupled with some prayer and praise god moments. They never clearly explained exactly how this was going to infringe on their religious freedom and were careful not to call out homosexual behaviour as sinful, instead focussing on their “values”. I guess in Steinbach, it's still “the love that dare not speak it's name”.

The meeting was led in part by the principal of the school and I noticed that he was careful to say that this was not political action, but spiritual action. Backward they may be in their moral development, but obviously legally astute, as I'm sure they don't want to say anything to risk having their funding in jeopardy. The information part of the meeting was unlike what I would expect of an info forum. No opportunity for any questions, ending with a list of people to contact and to pray for. No mention was made at this point to bother praying for the bullied kids, but they may have prayed for them later. We didn't stay to join any of the prayer circles.

As we got ready to leave, we decided to ask around if there was any media present and were fortunate to find the CBC reporter covering the story. He was quite interested to hear from us and interviewed Pat and myself. In the end, we only made it on for a five second clip, but the coverage of the event that has happened since will hopefully encourage more people to speak up in support of this bill. I can only imagine how it must feel to be a gay kid, sitting in that gym, silenced and suppressed by the very people who are supposed to care the most for you.

- *Diana Goods*

UPCOMING EVENTS

Saturday, March 9, 2013

Regular Monthly Meeting

Location: Canad Inn Polo Park,
1405 St. Matthews Avenue

Time: 5:30 pm

Speaker: Tracie Harris, The Atheist Experience
(via Skype)

Saturday, April 13, 2013

Regular Monthly Meeting

Location: Canad Inn Polo Park,
1405 St. Matthews Avenue

Time: 5:30 pm

Speaker/Topic: TBD

Saturday, May 11, 2013

Regular Monthly Meeting

Location: Canad Inn Polo Park,
1405 St. Matthews Avenue

Time: 5:30 pm

Speaker/Topic: TBD

Executive:

Donna Harris, President
Heather McDonell, Vice President
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Scott Burton
Cheri Frazer
Diana Goods – HAAM Librarian
Pat Morrow
Jeff Olsson
Jake Peters
Grant Rogerson

Newsletter Editor:

Donna Harris
ham_librarian@yahoo.ca

We're on the Web!

See us at:

mb.humanists.ca

HA²M



Yes, I would like to BECOME A MEMBER of the Humanists, Atheists & Agnostics of Manitoba

New Member Renewal

Membership Category:

- Individual Membership \$30.00
- Individual Limited Income \$10.00
- Household Membership* \$50.00
- Household Limited Income \$15.00

* After July 1st, just pay ½ the yearly fee for the rest of the year. After October 31st, pay full fee and get the entire next year.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ Province: _____

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Telephone#: _____ Cell #: _____

Email address: _____

*Household Memberships: Please give the names of all additional Humanists in your household 18 years or over:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

DONATION (Tax receipts issued for all donations of \$10 or more)

I would like to make a donation to HA²M of:

- \$10 \$20 \$30 \$50 \$100
- Other: _____

PAYMENT: Cheque Money Order
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Please complete the following if paying by credit card:

Account No. _____

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Please make cheque or money order payable to:
Humanist Association of Manitoba and mail to:
*Humanist Association of Manitoba, 7 Pinehurst Lane,
Mitchell, MB, R5G 2J3.*

Or bring your form and the fees to any HA²M meeting and give it to Helen Friesen, or any member of the executive.