

Manitoba Humanist

Published by and for the Humanist Association of Manitoba
Barrie Webster, President (and guest editor for this issue) Dennis Ousey, Editor

Winter Solstice Party - December 17, 2005

Habitz (restaurant) in St. François Xavier
northwest of the White Horse on Highway 26 at Rosser Road

- 4:00 p.m. Meet, greet, and be merry and entertained
- 6:00 p.m. Dinner – three choices (one is vegan)
- 7:30 p.m. More entertainment and merry making
- 9:00 p.m. (or there abouts) wrap up

Special Note: HAM will be again accepting winter solstice donations for SERC

What Do You Say After You Say You're An Atheist?

by Catherine Ousey

Phil Veldhuis, philosopher and beekeeper, spoke at the HAM November membership meeting. The title of his speech was the same as the above headline.

Mr. Veldhuis began by suggesting that there were three types of responses from those of religious conviction. The first was the question: If you don't believe, how can you have any foundation for morality? The speaker used the example of Plato's dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro. Socrates asks: What if the gods changed their minds about murder being wrong? Euthyphro states that is impossible since murder is always repugnant. Socrates states that the idea that murder is wrong is not dependent on the attitude of the gods. Socrates concludes that we should study what is right and wrong, rather than what the gods dictate. Ethics is careful thinking about what is right and wrong. It is not dependent on religious faith.

The second common response to atheism is: If you

don't believe in God, what gives your life meaning? The speaker uses the example of Mother Teresa. Would her life still be meaningful even without God?

The third response is often: If you don't believe in God, how can you have a spiritual life? The speaker suggested one should ask about the meaning of the word, "spirit." The atheist rejects the idea of a supernatural soul. However, a human being can still experience joy and beauty.

Mr. Veldhuis concluded that accepting a faith does not allow one to accept the entire system without applying logic and a "careful study of right and wrong" to each belief.

A question period followed with lively dialogue between members and speaker. The members would like to thank Phil Veldhuis for his thought-provoking and educational talk.

HAM Members hold 2005 AGM

by Catherine Ousey

The Humanist Association of Manitoba held its 2005 Annual General Meeting on Saturday November 12 at 4:00 PM at the Viscount Gort Hotel in Winnipeg.

Helen Friesen reported that HAM now has 42 members. She also reminded the members that the Humanist Association of Canada is offering cash prizes to the affiliated organizations that recruit the most new members and the highest percentage of new members. Members are requested to encourage new members to sign up as soon as possible.

Stefan Bourrier reported on the activities of the Outreach Committee. The Committee is creating a new website for HAM. He revealed plans for a new logo and coffee mugs etc with the HAM logo on them. A table will once again be set up at the University of Manitoba to inform young people of our organization and to seek new members.

Miep van Raalte gave the news from HAC. The national conference for 2006 will be held in Vancouver B. C. June 15 – 18. HAC will have a telephone listing in the Winnipeg yellow pages directory as well as in other cities across Canada.

HAC will then be able to refer people to HAM.

Catherine Ousey reported that the library has 82 books and the circulation is about 4 books a month.

Dennis Ousey reported that there have been over 3000 hits on the blogsite in 2005 and 9 issues of the HAM Newsletter have been published. He requests that members send letters to the editor and articles they would like to have published so that all members have a chance to be heard.

Helen Friesen submitted a Financial Report that shows an increase in revenue and a substantial reduction in expenses with a healthy bank balance.

The President's Report from Barrie Webster included information about the February workshop, an increase in the number of younger members, several speakers and video showings at meetings.

Members adopted amended By-Laws and a new Policy Statement.

The Past President, Helen Friesen, presented the Slate of Candidates for the HAM Executive. The slate was elected by acclamation.

Here is the Executive for 2006.

President: Barrie Webster

Vice-President: Barry Hammond

Treasurer: Helen Friesen (second year of a two year term)

Secretary: Catherine Ousey (second year of a two year term)

Members-at-Large: Dennis Ousey, Robert Muir, and Stefan Bourrier.

Miep van Raalte continues to be a member of the Executive as a member of the HAC board.

Joke?

(with thanks to the Victoria Secular Humanists)

Donald Rumsfeld is giving President George W. Bush his daily briefing. He concludes by saying, "Yesterday, three Brazilian soldiers were killed."

"Oh! No!" the President exclaims. "That's terrible!"

His staff sits stunned at this display of emotion, nervously watching as the President sits, head in hands.

Finally the President looks up and asks, "How many is a brazillion?"

Book Reviews

Glenn M. Hardie, "The Essence of Humanism – free thought versus religious belief," 2004 229 pp. soft cover ISBN 1-4134-5113-6

Hardie states up front that his book is "a kind of primer in humanistic thought for the benefit of others, who, like [himself], are not profound scholars of philosophy or religion." This is a major strength of the book. It is an engaging, no-nonsense, matter-of-fact look at humanism. Hardie makes a clear case for humanism, contrasting it with atheism, agnosticism, and skepticism. He proceeds with a clear consideration of the humanistic path through vital considerations of life and death; controversial issues such as abortion, sexuality, and morality; then science, reason, and belief; and finally spirituality, evolution, ceremony, politics, education, gender issues, and, "fun and games." In each case, he documents his treatise with sources for additional reading, describing briefly the many people who have written about humanism over the centuries. His chapter on sin

and morality discusses them in both religious and secular contexts. After having given the reader a detailed list of famous apostates (prominent people who have renounced religious belief), Hardie looks concisely at a variety of the world's theistic and non-theistic religious and mystic systems, comparing them with humanism. The book is written to allow humanists to identify with a common mindset and relates that mindset to secular reason and the scientific method for addressing "the problems which confront us in everyday life." At the same time, he treats the mythology associated with the world's religions in such a way that the humanist reader comes away without needing to slam religious fellow humans in order to feel worthwhile and validated.

Barrie Webster

Maude Barlow, "Too Close for Comfort – Canada's Future within Fortress America" McClelland and Stewart (2005) 288 pp. soft cover ISBN 0-7710-1088-5

"Too Close for Comfort" refers to the current status of "deep integration" of Canada with the USA. In advocating and promoting this deep integration, the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (CCCE) are aligned closely with the government of George W. Bush, the largest corporations of the USA, and the fundamentalist Christian right in both the USA and Canada. Barlow's book carefully documents the events that have led to the current situation and points out that Canadian opinion (the opinion of the Canadian population) is at odds with the objectives of the CCCE. She also shows that water, as well as energy, is indeed on the negotiating table and that the trend in official government circles to follow the script written by the CCCE (led by Tom d'Aquino since the time it was called the Business Council on National Issues) is being financed in both the USA and Canada at the expense of those who can least afford it. The coming alliance with, and then subsuming of Canada within the USA to create Fortress North America will irreparably

change Canada's international character from that of being a middle power conciliator. If this course is continued, Canada will contribute to and by default support the unilateral, aggressive, international stance now being taken by the USA. Barlow suggests that trusting big business to do the right thing (guided by the legal requirement to serve the interests of the shareholders first) is a grave error and one that is 180 degrees from the wishes and best judgment of most Canadians.

Maude Barlow is the volunteer chairperson of the Council of Canadians and a tireless defender of Canadian best interests nationally and internationally. This book is highly relevant to the current political scene in Canada and is important resource material for anyone voting in the upcoming Canadian federal election.

Barrie Webster

HAM Input Stimulates Discussion in U of W course

by Barrie Webster

On Monday, November 21, Barry Hammond and Barrie Webster (The Two Barries - "y" becomes "ie" in the plural, doesn't it?) spent two hours with Karen Toole's Continuing Education class, "Religious Diversity, Threat or Promise, History or Hope" at the U of W. The class has 86 registrants, a real tribute to Karen, but also a real opportunity for HAM to meet an voluntarily interested public. Barrie and Barry each spoke about Humanism for about 20 minutes followed by an extensive discussion period. As you will probably remember, Karen was our guest speaker at our 2004 AGM.

Feedback from Karen and her students has been favourable, and some members of the class have expressed interest in HAM itself. Karen has also suggested that we ought to look into offering a continuing education course on Humanism (and its place in society). She thought that it might have good appeal. She says that her experience with her courses (this is her third year) has been very satisfying. Something for us to look at seriously.

There are two additional places in which Karen would like HAM to participate in the coming months.

She has responsibility for two different classes at the Health Sciences Centre concerning spiritual care for those in hospital. The first is a class on "Spiritual Diversity" at the Health for a class of 9 students. She is doing a unit with them in February is, and wants assistance from HAM on describing the atheist or agnostic view of spiritual care from a non-religious perspective.

The second HSC opportunity is Karen's Thursday morning class of 10-12 Health Science Centre staff concerned with the delivery of spiritual care. This late morning class will likely involve HAM input on March 28.

Statistical information shows that there is a sizable proportion of Canadian society who are non-theistic in their approach to life. It is our view that HAM can make an important contribution as a centre of interest for Manitobans who are in this position. It is also expected that such teaching opportunities as the ones with Karen Toole's classes will help to begin making Humanism more mainstream in the mind of the public.

As an Atheist, You must Live an Ethical Life

by Scott G. Morris

(with thanks to the Victoria Secular Humanists)

As an atheist, you must live an ethical life. I am an atheist.

There, now that you have climbed back into your chair and your pulse rate is back to normal and your wife has explained that it is not an act of treason to be an atheist, let's discuss the obvious.

Understand that I am an atheist by conviction, not by choice. That is, observation and study have led me to what seems to be the inescapable conclusion that god and religion are artifacts, created by people, and, in fact, altered and recreated regularly as convenience requires.

Please don't bristle and take violent offense. This

is my honest conclusion, based, to begin with, on the realization that self-serving paradigms (i.e., white people are better than other people, men are better than women, god gave us the world to do with as we please, the religion into which I was born is the really true religion, etc.) are automatically suspect. It has taken a measure of courage to leave behind the comforting opinions of the majority, but what is true is true.

You will have a different opinion, and that is fine. I accept and respect your ability to form your own opinions, even if I find religions beliefs and their expression offensive. But then, no one has a right to go through life without being offended.

I, and other atheists I know (and, yes, there are lots of us, about 17% of the US population, 25% among those under 29, a greater percentage in Europe), would love to feel that Someone was guiding things, taking care of things, watching over us.

But wanting something to be so does not make it so. It is far better to accept the world as it is than to pretend it is as you wish it to be.

Please don't start trying to show me all the evidence that god exists. I've heard it all, over and over, and it just doesn't hold water.

But I'm not going to try to convince you, either. I'm not interested in converts. Frankly I don't care what other believe as far as god and religion are concerned.

I would, however, like to explain what it's like to be an atheist in this society, so that maybe, just maybe, you can realize that not believing in a god doesn't make you a bad person (and vice versa).

I have heard for years now that I would "make a good Mormon," apparently because I am devoted to my family, am known professionally and personally for integrity and honesty, work hard to take care of my home, care about what happens in my community.

I suppose that I am proof that a person doesn't have to belong to a particular religion to have "family values" (a phrase I hate).

And yet when someone learns that I am an atheist, the reaction is almost always something like, "Well, then, how do you know right from wrong?" or "So, you don't have any morals?" or even "But you're such a good person!"

Scott G. Morris is recently retires from the fire-alarm industry, where he was a manager, designer, and salesman. A lifelong resident of Utah, he presently holds the jobs of husband, father, and grandfather. www.Scotsman.com

Quotable Quote

by Edmond and Jules de Concourt, www.iheu.org .

If there is a God, atheism must strike him [sic] as less of an insult than religion.

I answer thusly: If you believe in a god, then whatever evil you do, there is a power that can fix it. Whatever harm your actions cause, there is someone or something that can make it right. And that's fine.

But if you are an atheist, then you alone are completely responsible for the results of your actions. If you commit an act of vandalism and ruin some beautiful and fragile piece of nature, there is no one to mitigate the damage. If you harm someone, even inadvertently, you can't take comfort in the fact that god will make it right for that person, in this life or the next.

As an atheist, you must live an ethical life. There is no other choice.

We are all familiar with examples of very religious people who are either very good people or very bad. In my experience (which includes a lifelong study of history), religion doesn't make people behave either for good or evil.

People may use religion as an excuse for their violence or prejudice, or as a guide and format for their service and sacrifice. But they would do exactly the same things with non religion at all, because that is how they are as individuals. And atheists are good people or bad people because of how they are, as people, regardless of any religious question.

So my point is this: Just because I don't share any of your religious convictions, don't relegate me and my fellow atheists and agnostics to an "outsider" status. I respect your right to believe and live as you see fit, and I expect the same in return.