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Manitoba Humanist

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President: Barrie
Webster

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Upcoming events

Humanist Association of Manitoba

Monthly Meeting Saturday, October 13, 2007

Viscount Gort Hotel 1670 Portage Ave. at Route 90

Meet and Greet 5:30 p.m.

Dinner (may be ordered from coffee shop menu) 6:00 p.m.

Meeting 7:00 p.m.

Guest Speaker: Rev. Wendy Jerome
Discussion Title: "As persistent as green grass"

"The vital spring to life in nearly every world religious tradition is a basic humanist positivism. Scratch through the sand or snow and humanist belief springs up green. I'll share examples and also talk about why this is hard for some of us professed Humanists to trust."

Wendy Jerome, interim minister 2007-08 at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Winnipeg, is a member of the Humanist First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis. She has done graduate work in history of religions and psychology of religion in addition to her ministerial training.

Another "Don't Miss" Evening!

Next Monthly Meeting Nov 13, 2007

Viscount Gort Hotel 1670 Portage Ave. at Route 90

Guest Speaker: Prof. Arthur Schafer
Director, The Centre for Professional and Applied Ethics,
University of Manitoba

**Discussion Topic: Enhancing Evolution:
The Ethical Case for Making Better People**

September Discussion: Muslims in the West

On Saturday, September 15th, HAM members and guests heard a talk by Dr. Asad Khan. Dr. Khan is a retired physician as well as the President of the Islamic Education Foundation of Manitoba.

Dr. Khan prepared an address for us on the challenges that face Islamic immigrants in the West. This is a relevant topic that's often been in the news in recent months, considering such topics as the "code of conduct" for immigrants in the Quebec town of Herouxville, and women being allowed to remain veiled when voting.

Dr. Khan mentioned the contradictions that newer immigrants face – they are told to assimilate, but they are also urged to live as in their country of origin, by conservative elements. The situation can also be complicated by local religious leaders. To find trained Imams, many mosques find it necessary to hire relatively conservative, foreign-trained Imams, who are unfamiliar with local ideas and customs. However, the Muslim community does recognize this difficulty, and is trying to hire more Imams who are

taught here in Canada.

The different meanings of the word "jihad" were also mentioned. Often, we here in Canada hear "jihad" as the holy war waged by terrorists. Jihad also has a different meaning, referring to the internal struggle to improve and to perfect oneself.

We were also urged to learn more about Islam. By reaching out and talking to our Muslim neighbours and co-workers, we can gain a greater understanding of their beliefs, values and opinions.

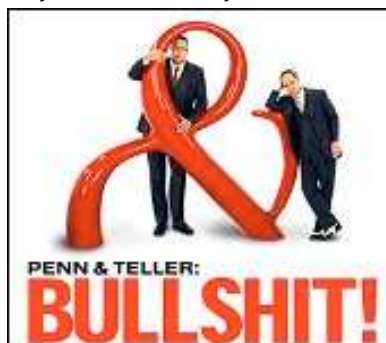
The evening was not without controversy, however. Dr. Khan disagreed that scientific advances had added new information to subjects such as sexual preference, stating that homosexuality is against Islam's "divine laws". He would not consider scientific research that suggests that sexual preference is not a choice, but is inherited.

Considering that Dr. Khan knew he would be addressing an audience whose beliefs differed substantially from his own, he showed great graciousness in accepting our invitation, and we greatly appreciate his visit.

Membership News

HAM member Jeff Olsson and his lovely wife Leslie recently hosted a small but lively group of 'HAMsters' at our first BullShit Party.

For those who aren't familiar with the TV show, it's a skeptical look at a variety of topics, hosted by popular Las Vegas magicians, Penn and Teller. It appears on the American cable network Showtime, but the DVDs of all four seasons are readily available locally.



Two episodes were screened: the first dealt with the Boy Scouts of America, and not only revealed the depths of their discriminatory stance against atheists and gay youth, but also revealed that the Boy Scouts are largely taxpayer funded. The second episode involved "Pet Lovers", those individuals who go somewhat overboard in their devotion to their furry companions.

The evening's program concluded with a showing of Penn and Teller's conversation with James Randi.

The shows were interesting, but the real treat was the lively and provocative discussion that followed.

Those in attendance had a thoroughly enjoyable evening, and HAM plans to repeat the event soon. Watch for a November date to be announced shortly.

New Local Atheist Organization

Our president was recently contacted by a student from the University of Manitoba. The student, Trevor Bekolay, had just organized a new student group of atheists and skeptics, and wanted Barrie to speak to this new group. We were delighted by the news that a group of like-minded individuals had spontaneously formed.

According to the new group's website: "The impetus to start the group came in September of 2007. We noticed that student groups at the U of M centered around academic departments, sports, fraternities/ sororities, and religious groups. Our goal is to bring together students across many disciplines united by our

unpopular view that we can live fulfilling, moral lives without the need for dogma or social crutches."

Barrie Webster has agreed to speak to the group of "Manitoban Atheists, Skeptics and Humanists" near the end of the month. A report on this exciting event will be featured in an upcoming issue of this newsletter.

In the meantime, we wish our new "sister" organization every success. If you wish to read more, the Manitoban Atheists, Skeptics and Humanists can be found on the web at www.ummash.org.

Donations to HAM

Just a quick reminder that HAM incurs regular costs. For instance, we pay a monthly fee for our bank account. There are costs such as postage and photocopying for the newsletter you're reading. Plus costs for the books and other media in our library. Since we no longer pass the hat at every

monthly meeting, we urge all HAM members to consider an occasional donation to ensure that HAM is able to continue to provide its members with services. And please remember, donations are now tax-deductible. You can contact Treasurer Helen Friesen at heljohn@xplornet.com for more details.

"A man's most valuable trait is a judicious sense of what not to believe."
- Euripides

Book Review

Programming the Universe: A Quantum Computer Scientist Takes on the Cosmos

Reviewed by Neil Schipper

Programming the Universe: A Quantum Computer Scientist Takes on the Cosmos

By Seth Lloyd, Knopf, 216 pages

From time to time, all of us want to know where the universe came from and how it got to be what it is, and how our itty-bitsy planet, with all this life on it, came to be. So it is comforting that there are folks who grapple with these questions in an intellectually honest, evidence-based, and competitive manner.

One such investigator is American Seth Lloyd, a physicist, despite his title of professor of mechanical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Lloyd is, as the book's title suggests, a player in the world of quantum computers, devices that exploit the strange quantum mechanical behaviour of atomic scale devices. In *Programming the Universe*, Lloyd tries to gather together key results of theoretical and experimental investigations over the last several

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centuries that lead to what may be the emerging consensus in physics and cosmology.

This view consists of these components:

* There is a something called information, which is a sort of physical quantity. Its significance is perhaps on equal footing with the more familiar quantity, energy. Information, measured as a number of bits, is related to the not so well understood quantity, entropy.

* Elementary particles such as neutrons, electrons and photons, in accordance with the laws of quantum mechanics, carry information, and interactions among them cause the creation of new information.

* Interactions among elementary particles, again in accordance with the laws of quantum mechanics, can perform logical operations similar to those that occur in a conventional computer, but with strange additional characteristics, such as the ability to perform multiple computations simultaneously.

So-called "quantum computers" have been built and demonstrated in the lab, although to date they have very small capacities

* The universe, consisting of particles that carry information, and guided by processes that compute information, has the required characteristics that make it logically indistinguishable from a quantum computing machine.

* Although the early universe was a highly uniform soup of elementary particles, random events called quantum fluctuations led to variations in the density of matter. This clumping, driven further by gravitational forces, led to the formation of stable atoms, stars, galaxies and clusters of galaxies.

* Although the development of complexity, including self-reproducing life, seems highly improbable when viewed as the outcome of random arrangements of things, things are very different in the presence of computational machinery. When random events are considered as inputs to computers, much smaller sequences of events yield interesting and complex outputs.

Many of these ideas are not new, and Lloyd pays homage to their originators, from the Egyptian abacus makers and

Greek philosophers to the great classical physicists of the 19th century and the pioneers of modern physics in the 20th. The ideas are big, the book is short.

Something had to give, and it turns out quite a lot did. The book has an uneven quality to it, suggestive of a rush to meet a publishing deadline. It feels like a large number of topics had to be visited, often at the expense of clarity about the topic's significance to the overall theme.

At times Lloyd appears to be speaking to middle-school students: "A bit is the smallest unit of information. A coin toss yields one bit: heads or tails."

At other times, he seems to be addressing his specialist colleagues, as in an unforgivable section on quantum gravity, that includes, with almost no preparation, "The fact that a quantum computation doesn't care how it is embedded in spacetime means that the spacetime derived from the quantum computation obeys the laws of general relativity."

Say again? This is almost enough to make one pine for the science writing of Tom Oleson.

Lloyd also overuses that breezy, insouciant tone that one sometimes finds in popularized science. There are lots of short, snappy sentences like "The universe computes itself," and "Temperature is energy per bit." What is particularly frustrating is that there is a sense that a good deal of what is presented here is accepted by "the experts," a pretty brilliant crowd, Lloyd included. Great science writing is supposed to bridge the gap.

That just doesn't happen enough in this book. The ideas are important to a compelling non-supernatural explanation of reality. They deserve a more just treatment.

Winnipegger Neil Schipper received a bachelor's degree in physics approximately 14 billion years after the Big Bang.

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"Three key humanist virtues are courage, cognition, and caring -- not dependence, ignorance, or insensitivity to the needs of others."

- Paul Kurtz, from
What is Secular Humanism