

February 2010 Newsletter of the Lake Superior Freethinkers
Facilitators: Maxine Caserta - 525-8427, 348-4113 & Bill Guse - 834-4583, 343-4806
First Sunday - Radisson Hotel – 9:00 AM Social – 10:00 Brunch
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Program:

The Rev. William C. Graham, Ph.D. Director, Braegelman Program of Catholic Studies, The College of St. Scholastica will speak on: "The Shared and Preposterous Faith of Atheists and Catholics, Together as Wayfarers of the Absolute".

Israeli Women Face 6 Months in Jail for Carrying a Torah
By Patrick Moser, in Jerusalem for AFP

In this Holy City, where the focus of differing opinions is more often on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, these religious Jews say they face discrimination because of their gender.

Their adversaries, including the rabbi of the wall, say that the women have no business wearing such religious garments as yarmulkes and prayer shawls, or carrying the Torah, the Jewish holy book. Such things, the ultra-Orthodox Jews say, are reserved for men.

The women have also come under fire for singing, with some rabbis complaining that this could provoke feelings of lust among the men praying on the other side of the partition.

On a recent Friday, about 200 members of the Women at the Wall (WoW) showed up to pray at the main Jewish pilgrimage site despite pouring rain and insults hurled from across the partition that separates the men's section from the far smaller one reserved for women.

Men sporting the black coats and wheel-shaped fur hats that identify ultra-Orthodox Jews shouted at the women, calling them "Nazis," and telling them to "go to church".

The scene is similar every first day of the month on the Jewish lunar calendar. It is then that women pray at the Wall - also known as the Wailing Wall. The wall is revered by Jews as the remnant of their second temple, which the Romans destroyed in 70 AD.

In November Nofrat Frankel, a member of WoW and a Conservative Jew, was briefly detained by police for wearing a talit - or prayer shawl - and carrying a Torah.

The offense can carry a maximum sentence of six months jail and a fine of about \$3,000 (£1,880).

Shmuel Rabinovich, the rabbi of the western wall, called the women's behaviour "an unbearable provocation".

Anat Hoffman, WoW's leader, meanwhile insists that the Jewish holy books do not support the kind of discrimination she says women are subjected to.

"There is nothing in Judaism about this. **This is fundamentalism**; it is a desecration of this place," she said at a recent Hanukah candle-lighting ceremony satged by the women and their supporters in the kotel square, behind the segregated praying areas.

In 2003, the Israeli supreme court ruled that the Women of the Wall could not hold vocal prayers at the wall as this presented a threat to law and order.

Hoffman said the police commander for the wall recently told her the women could be arrested for wearing fringed black and white prayer shawls like those used by the men. "He did say something flowery would be okay," said Hoffman.

She wore a paper crown with the inscription: "The Kotel is for all," and smiled as she joined the crowd in singing traditional Hanukah songs. The women's voices startled an elderly ultra-Orthodox man who scurried away.

The ultra-Orthodox call themselves Haredi, Hebrew for "those who fear God". Over the years, they have gained control of the kotel, imposing their ways with little regard for other strains of Judaism, says Hoffman.

"The western wall is now seen as the disco of the ultra-Orthodox," she said, pointing to the

prayer section where most of the faithful were clad in the black outfits that identify Haredi men and where a loudspeaker blared religious songs - sung by men.

Rabinovich insists he does his best to accommodate all the visitors to the wall. "But the type of prayers of this group is not part of the Jewish traditions," he said.

"I wonder what this type of prayer will achieve when they hurt the feelings of other people who are praying."

Peretz Rodman, a more moderate rabbi, compared the recent detention of Frankel to religious persecution in the former Soviet Union.

"An Orthodox rabbinic colleague commented to me on the day of the arrest: 'That's what it was like 40 years ago in Moscow: wearing a talit and carrying a Torah in public could get you arrested,'" Rodman

wrote in a YNet News opinion column.

"But that was the Soviet Union, a repressive totalitarian state; this is Israel in the 21st century'," said Rodman, a former president of the rabbinical assembly of Israel.

"The religious persecution of the ages has been done under what was claimed to be the command of God. I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do to their fellows, because it always coincides with their own desires." - Susan B. Anthony

What's God got to do with it?

From the Washington Post. Herb Silverman, the author, and I served on the AHA board at the same time. He's a really good guy. George Erickson

Q: What was the most important religion story of 2009?

The important story for me was the omni-absence of a personal God in so many stories about religion. God may not exactly be dead, but perhaps he, she, or it should be denied health insurance because of a strongly suspected pre-existing condition of nonexistence.

The 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, released in March of 2009, showed that "Nones," those who don't belong to any particular religious group, is the fastest growing religious category in America. They are the only group to have grown in every state of the Union. Some are atheists, some are agnostics, some are spiritual, some believe in Karma or crystals, and some believe in a deity or deities. Most have simply rejected the religion in which they were raised. Generally, though, they are more accepting of those with different beliefs.

Atheist and agnostic "Nones," emboldened by the release of the ARIS survey that showed unexpected growth of the non-religious, have become more vocal. And along with opportunities to increase the visibility of, and respect for, the viewpoints of secular Americans, there come the inevitable strategic and philosophical divisions. Here is my gross oversimplification of the two basic camps.

Group A: Atheists who don't suffer fools gladly. They point out that religious belief should be treated as any other kind of belief, open to criticism, and that unquestioned faith is a vice with inherent dangers, not a virtue to be respected.

Group B: Atheists who prefer identifying as humanists, who would rather look for ways to make this world a better place than talk about gods in which they don't believe. They try to find common bonds between theists and nontheists, and seek issues on which to cooperate. Their focus is on being good without God.

Group A's take pride in being intellectually honest, while Group B's take pride in helping a movement grow. Quite a few, myself included, have a foot or toe in both groups.

Many people distrust atheists because atheists don't worry about rewards or punishments in an afterlife. The message that needs to get out is how many non-atheists live like atheists, for all practical purposes, without belief in a judging god involved in the workings of the world. This would include all deists, almost all Unitarians, and most liberal religionists of all stripes. I even think many politicians, not just the one acknowledged atheist, Rep. Pete Stark (D-Cal), would be willing to make known publicly that their actions and policies have nothing to do with belief in an afterlife. I expect this category of "functional atheists," those who believe that their actions in this life have nothing to do with how or whether they are treated in an afterlife, is larger than just about any religious denomination.

This brings me back to non-God religion stories, which I'll illustrate with two of this year's movies. The first is the blockbuster, *Avatar*. Russ Douhat, in the *New York Times*, wrote about its pantheism, a faith that equates God with Nature, where trees have "spiritual energy" and a network of energy is the sum total of every living thing. Douhat claims that Hollywood regularly returns to such themes because most people can't accept the literal-mindedness of monotheistic religions. It's a movie for my Group B people, since the good guys on this alien planet are spiritual progressives who prefer to be engaged in cooperating and making love, not war.

For Group A people, a more interesting and less viewed movie is *The Invention of Lying*. It's about a culture even more alien, one in which nobody can lie. There is not even a word for "lie" or for "truth." You can guess what this does to politics, advertising, and dating. Then one person develops the ability to lie. In a world where every word is assumed to be the absolute truth, a liar can become a king or a god. With the best of intentions, our liar-hero (Mark) tries to comfort his dying mother by telling her that she will be going to a wonderful afterlife. Of course she and others believe him. Soon everyone in the world is begging for information about this afterlife. Every word Mark makes up is taken as, well, gospel. In the biggest lie of all, he tells the world there is a Man in the Sky who is responsible for everything, and they will be happy up there with him after death. When asked if the Man in the Sky is also responsible for cancer, Mark quickly has to grapple with theodicy, the question no monotheistic religion has been able to answer: Why is there evil in a world created by an all-powerful and benevolent god? Incidentally, I think the 10 rules for the world that Mark writes on Pizza Hut boxes compare favorably to the 10 Commandments.

This movie helped me to imagine a world without lies. The movie's theme was that Man in the Sky religion is possible only in a world where it's possible to lie. (This reminds me that if there were an international anthem for atheists, it would be John Lennon's "Imagine"--no religion).

Atheists sometimes compare belief in the biblical God to belief in Santa Claus. One difference is that Santa is omniscient only in December and omnipotent only on Christmas Eve. In "Do as I say, not as I do" fashion, many parents this month explained to their children why lying is bad, and that "Santa will know if you've been bad or good." Whatever parents teach their children about God or Santa, I hope it will include a message to be good for goodness' sake, a message to live by in all seasons.

Voltaire - The truths of religion are best understood by those who have lost the power of reasoning.

Robert Green Ingersoll - An infinite God ought to be able to protect himself without going in partnership with State Legislatures. Certainly he ought not act in such a way that laws become necessary to keep him from being laughed at. No one thinks of protecting Shakespeare from ridicule by the threat of fine and imprisonment.