

# NEW YORK CITY ATHEISTS

<http://foody.org/atheist.html>    [atheist@foody.org](mailto:atheist@foody.org)

Meeting the last Sunday of each month, at Third and 31st at three o'clock

January 2002

## Election for New Director, Other Officers, in Same Space

New York City Atheists begins 2002 with changes that I, Josh Karpf, could not predict in 2001. We're still in our diner meeting place, and I must resign as director. I ask members to assume the organizational work that I've done as director, and I call for the election this month of a new director and any other necessary additional officers. It's a small amount of work that can be spread among several cooperative people.

I wanted to begin 2002 in rented, more flexible space, where I could encourage creation of committees for whatever members wanted. But I'm being laid off from my five-year job as editor of a science Webzine, *HMS Beagle*. This change in my professional life means changes in my activist life.

Firstly, it means new costs for New York City Atheists. I'll no longer have an office from which to print a 12-page newsletter, for which Kinko's would charge \$60-\$200 per issue. Even a shorter newsletter will be a new expense for us, unless another member can privately print it. I believe that a newsletter is a more justifiable expense than rented meeting space, so I have postponed the latter. If our membership decides that we can afford both a newsletter and rented meeting space, we still have all the necessary rental information.

Secondly, my layoff has made my life much less enjoyable. In December I did little for New York City Atheists. I apologize for that. I've decided to limit all my activism in favor of more self-indulgent projects.

As director, I have monopolized tasks that easily could be shared by a few officers: arranging meeting space; planning events; publishing a print newsletter and sending e-mail

### **New organizers/volunteers needed!**

Sunday, January 27, 2002, 3 P.M.  
Moonstruck East diner (upstairs room),  
449 3rd Ave. (corner of 31 St.), Manhattan

#### **Agenda: Election of new officers**

For more information, contact Josh Karpf via e-mail at [atheist@foody.org](mailto:atheist@foody.org), or Joe Zarnetzki at [ajoz@ny.rr.com](mailto:ajoz@ny.rr.com) or at the American Atheist Center, (908) 276-7300.

### *Also of atheist interest:*

#### **Celebrating Thomas Paine**

Tuesday, January 29, 2002, 6:30 P.M.

A presentation by Thomas Riggins about Paine. At the regular meeting of the Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York (the Corliss Lamont Chapter of the American Humanist Association).

Location: Moonstruck East diner (upstairs room), 449 3rd Ave. (corner of 31 St.) Manhattan. For more information contact HSMNY by e-mail at [info@humanistcorliss-lamont.org](mailto:info@humanistcorliss-lamont.org) or by phone at (914) 522-5264, or check its Web site at [www.corliss-lamont.org/hsmny](http://www.corliss-lamont.org/hsmny).

#### **Darwin Day**

Sunday, February 17, 2002, 2:00 P.M.

A celebration of Charles Darwin (born Feb. 12, 1809), sponsored by Long Island Secular Humanists. Presentations on Darwin and on science standards in schools will be followed by a potluck luncheon/dinner (bring food), plus musicians. To cover costs, there may be a nominal charge to attend.

Location: Ethical Humanist Society of Long Island, 38 Old Country Rd., Garden City, Nassau County. For further details, contact Gerry Duntone of LISI at (516) 742-1662 or [lisihum@aol.com](mailto:lisihum@aol.com).

updates; maintaining a Web site; requesting and disbursing funds; keeping abreast of issues; writing letters to the editor; speaking to media; liaising with other freethought groups. I'm sure others can do a better job than me. If future officers of our organization want my advice, I'll happily offer it.

We've done much more than just socialize monthly. We've demonstrated near St. Patrick's Cathedral against President Bush's proposed public funding for religious charities (July), cheered World Trade Center workers and

mourned September 11's victims (both December), and written letters to the editor, including two published in the *New York Times* and *New York* magazine. We've worked with other freethought groups, national and local.

But more people need to come to meetings, come up with ideas, and get involved. If we are to thrive as an organization, now is the time. At past meetings, the group has decided that its aims were to: promote total church-state separation; promote awareness of atheism, and for its legitimacy; educate about organized religion's historical oppression of peoples; hold social activities, including excursions; and to promote atheist community.

Those are general goals. Specific problems with local religiosity have been reported in this newsletter since August. Prayer-obsessed institutions and politicians monopolized our recovery from the horrors of September 11. Pandering to Christian and Jewish religious interests influenced the mayoral election (though no one bothered pandering to Muslims). The city nearly got a decency commission (Mayor Mike Bloomberg will, happily, abandon it). The city monitors Passover food prices. Religious groups are trying to block a school sex-abuse law. There is crime and corruption among local clergy, who often light sentences after conviction, if convicted at all. Kosher businesses compromise health and safety, yet are seen by a misled public as more healthful. Religious groups grow more conservative as their followers grow more secular. The "under God" of the pledge of allegiance and "God Bless America" are being inflicted on schoolchildren. Hasidic school-board members want a moment of silence to begin their district's school days.

There is much we can do. Recent suggestions have included tabling; developing a more meditative approach to atheism; promoting atheism in performance; restoring WBAI's weekly radio show about atheism. I'd like us to host speakers. Such ideas need members' energy if they're to be more than just plans.

New York City -- a world center of media, commerce, and culture -- is the perfect

place for atheist activism. Its large, diverse population, and that of its tri-state area neighbors, makes it politically powerful in both Albany and Washington, D.C. We are the only explicitly atheist group in New York State, and we are able to work closely with the New Jersey-based national group American Atheists, which promotes our meetings.

New York City Atheists can grow large and do great things. We have a 110-name mailing list, the recognition of national and state freethought groups, proposed bylaws, and lots of ideas. All we need is a little more effort from everyone so we can flourish.

In other organizational news:

A generous donation has kept this newsletter in print, despite the lack of a December meeting. This has brought the treasury to \$61.29 after this mailing.

The Spring 2002 *Secular Humanist Bulletin* will reprint our article "NYC Atheists Join Two September 11 Tributes."

The *New York Post* published, on December 25, columnist Bill O'Reilly's rant "Santa Is Appalled," in which he said, "Now, this might offend some atheists out there, but so what? The arrogance of a person who dismisses the thought of a higher power offends me. . . . The secularists who would destroy this joyous tradition are destructive fascists who seek to control the free flow of expression." Dennis Middlebrooks of Freethinking-Activist-Nonbelieving New Yorkers issued a call for freethinkers to respond, which we forwarded to several mailing lists and newsgroups. On December 28, the *Post* published Middlebrooks' letter to the editor:

As a nonbeliever, I am offended by right-wing blowhards like O'Reilly who persist in slandering the 30 million Americans who reject a belief in a deity.

It was not atheists who flew hijacked airliners into the Twin Towers and Pentagon, Mr. O'Reilly. It was a group of religious men whose belief in a higher power motivated them to carry out their dastardly deeds.

Dennis Middlebrooks  
Brooklyn

## New Atheist Support Network

By Chris Morton, New York State Director, American Atheists

Following the recent incidents involving Atheist students -- one with "God Bless America" and the other Boy Scouts recruitment in school time -- we have decided in New York to set up a network to support Atheist parents, students, and adults who are finding their nonbeliefs belittled, their values ignored, and worse.

Donna Cayot and Chris Morton are working to get volunteers, to collect data of cases and issues that have been or are being dealt with, and trying to provide advice, support, successful approaches that can be reused, etc.

I am calling for Atheist volunteers who might be able to help develop the network and also for those of you who have been derided, threatened, or ignored, or whose children have been derided, ignored or threatened so that we can work together to collect data which others can use.

We are also looking for attorneys who might help us, and we will be requesting advice from other organizations.

We have a Web site in its infancy at <http://www.virtually-real.net> which will be developing as we go along and which will form the holding system for all information. Sometime in the new year we will be forming a board, and the board will design procedures for the network. The whole idea has come from those who have had to "go it alone" and who want to help others like themselves. This, of course, a national issue.

Would you like to help? Contact Chris Morton, New York State director of American Atheists, at [cmorton@atheists.org](mailto:cmorton@atheists.org). (914) 244-0650 (voice), or (914) 244-0645 (fax).

### *Meeting directions for non-Manhattanites*

Taxis are faster than local buses or walking. Closest subway station: 6 (Lexington Local) to 33rd St. From Penn Station (NJ Transit, LIRR, Amtrak, subway): take the M34 bus approx. 7 blocks east to Third Ave. and walk 2 blocks south. From the Port Authority (buses, subway): take the M42 bus approx. 8 blocks east to Third Ave. and walk 10 blocks south (Third's buses run only uptown), or take that bus to Lexington Ave., transfer to any downtown bus, ride that 10 blocks south, and walk east 1 block. From Grand Central Terminal (Metro North, Amtrak, subway): take downtown 6 subway train to 33rd St. or walk or bus 11 blocks down Lexington Ave., then turn left and walk one block to Third Ave. **Driving from Queens:** Exit from 495 and drive south down Second Ave. **Driving from Brooklyn:** Drive north on the FDR till approaching 31st St. **Driving from NJ:** From 78 and the Holland Tunnel, drive north and east from 495 and the Lincoln Tunnel, drive south and east from the GWB, drive south down the FDR till approaching 31st St. **Driving from Staten Island:** From the Verrazano Bridge to the Gowanus to the Brooklyn Bridge to the FDR till approaching 31st St. **Driving from Bronx/Westchester/upstate:** I-95 to the FDR till approaching 31st St.

## Atheists Barred from Ground Zero

From Freethinking-Activist-Nonbelieving New Yorkers

Despite repeated efforts, local atheists and agnostics' attempts to hold a memorial at ground zero for "freethinkers" who died in the World Trade Center disaster on Sept. 11 have failed. The group, Freethinkers NY, believes an estimated 300 to 600 of so-called freethinkers -- including agnostics, atheists, humanists, secularists, and non-monotheists -- died in the Twin Towers disaster.

Their memorial was planned for September 14. However, the Mayor's office never responded to their requests for access to the site. Dennis Middlebrooks, from Brooklyn, and Warren Allen Smith, of Jane St. in the Village, planned an alternative event that was attended by 30 people.

Groups represented included the Tom Paine Foundation in Philadelphia, the Brooklyn and New York City Ethical Societies, the Corliss Lamont chapter of the American Humanist Association, the Long Island Free Inquiry Chapter, Staten Island Atheists, New York City Atheists, the Fourth Universalist Society, the Campus Freethought Association in Pennsylvania, and the Philadelphia Freethought Association.

Though they couldn't get into ground zero, after a group dinner at Fraunces Tavern, the widow of philosopher Corliss Lamont, Beth Lamont, who lives in Battery Park City, led them behind the scenes to talk with workers and observe the destruction from a spot near ground zero, ending up at Fox Hounds on South End Ave. According to an e-mail press release, freethinkers are "concerned that monotheists throughout the world, Jews, Christians, Muslims, are killing each other and are making Earth unsafe for human beings by fighting over which of their gods is the true one."

The group has questioned why representatives of theistic groups have been allowed to enter ground zero but that no group representing the estimated 10 percent to 20 percent of nontheists who died has been allowed to pay their respects to fellow nonbelievers who perished, because, the e-mail states, "one of the theistic gods reportedly directed Mohammed Atta to kill over 3,000 human beings."

Honorary members of Freethinkers NY include Sir Arthur C. Clarke, who wrote "2001" in the Hotel Chelsea but now lives in Sri Lanka; Paul Edwards, editor of "The Encyclopedia of Philosophy;" Albert Ellis, clinical psychologist; Taslima Nasrin, the Bangladesh gynecologist-poet for whom Osama bin Laden's network arranged a fatwa because of her anti-Muslim writings and who currently is hiding in Sweden (Nasrin has also been known to visit Jane St.); and novelist Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Deceased honorary members include painter Paul Cadmus, author Ring Lardner Jr., science-fiction writer Isaac Asimov, and sculptor Anita Wesehler.

# LOCAL INSANITY

New York City Area News of Religion and Irreligion

## Yet Even More Aftermath Religiosity

The Salvation Army raised more than \$60 million to help September 11's victims. But it was unable to fulfill its simple promise to pay affected families' household bills. Thousands of families discovered that their bills never got paid. "This is very embarrassing. We feel badly about it, and we're doing everything we can to get our system to work," said a Salvation Army representative.

Two Jewish Defense League activists, JDL chairman Irv Rubin and member Earl Krugel, were charged with plotting to blow up the California office of an Arab-American congressman and a Los Angeles mosque. Rubin and Krugel were charged with conspiracy to destroy a building by means of an explosive and possession of a destructive device related to a crime of violence, which carries a 30-year mandatory sentence.

Meir Kahane, an Orthodox rabbi, founded the JDL in Brooklyn in 1968. Kahane's followers, armed with baseball bats and ready to assault anyone threatening Jews, were called vigilantes. Many said that their actions against minorities inflamed black-Jewish relations. JDL members were convicted in bombings and attempted bombings of Soviet offices and performing artists. Kahane himself was never convicted of participating in a bombing. But soon after he moved to Israel, he often urged all American Jews to embrace violence.

Over 30 Orthodox Jewish synagogues and Jewish groups on the Upper West Side and Washington Heights have formed a Council of Orthodox Jewish Organizations of the West Side (COJO) to coordinate their own security. COJO received offers by the NYPD Crime Prevention Unit to freely assess their buildings' security needs. It also finds Jewish groups discount lease rates on security equipment, solicits local banks for low-interest loans, and lobbies federal lawmakers to grant businesses tax credits on purchases of security equipment.

The *New York Times* profiled "cultural Muslims" who enjoy the trappings of religion but are not observant and go to mosques only once a year. Such Muslims are upset about being associated with devout Muslims and terrorists. Unlike the new zealous generation of black and white Muslims, these less ardent Muslims are usually immigrants or immigrants' American-born children. Such Muslims say they value keeping church and state separate, and they believe in assimilating into American society and culture. They acknowledge that devout American Muslims pressure them to be more religious. "It's weird in our culture," one nonobservant Muslim said. "People have to act more religious than they really are." The report *The Mosque in America: A National Portrait* revealed that only a fraction of the Muslims in the United

States attend weekly prayers in one of the nation's 1,209 mosques. Of an estimated 4 to 6 million Muslims in the United States, the study found, only about 350,000 attend Friday midday prayers.

Gay Muslims and Latin Muslims also feel extra pressures, said the *Times*. Gay Muslims said they are reviled even by mainstream Muslims because of their sexual orientation. In most Islamic societies, gay behavior is a crime, punishable in some cases by death. Even in the United States, many Muslims say they cannot be openly gay for fear that they would be rejected by other Muslims or attacked by extremists. Some are resigned to the belief that their impulses are evil, and regard Ramadan as a redemption opportunity.

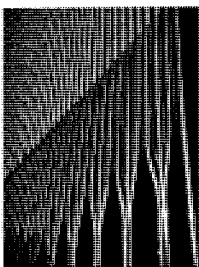
Latin Muslims who do not speak Arabic, the language of the Koran, or do not adhere to certain religious practices, are called inauthentic by Muslims who have immigrated from the Arab world or Asia. At the same time, Latin Muslims are open to Latin Catholics' charge of abandoning Hispanic culture. Nationwide, Latin Muslims number in the low tens of thousands.

State Assemblyman Dov Hikind (D-Brooklyn) complained to Scholastic that its Web site for teachers said that the Zealots, a first-century Jewish extremist group that fought against Roman occupiers, were terrorists. Hikind's appeal worked. The Web site's reference to the Zealots' "terrorism and assassination" has been removed, and this history of terrorism now begins with a 12th-century Shiite Muslim group. But Walter Laqueur, who wrote the 1987 book *The Age of Terrorism*, called the removal of the reference ridiculous. "[The Zealots] were not the very first, but there's no doubt that they did exist and they used terrorism," he said. "I devote about half a page to them." Laqueur added that Hikind "should stick to his business. And he should leave history to the historians."

The *New Jersey Record* reported that some family members of World Trade Center victims have been consulting "spiritual mediums" -- people "who profess to see and speak with the dead." Two New Jersey mediums claim extra business September 11, including families of World Trade Center victims who want "to get a final message to or from their loved ones, discover how they died, and gain some peace of mind." The article uncritically quotes mediums describing their practices. A representative of the state Division of Consumer Affairs said the agency doesn't concern itself with spiritualism's validity. There are religious undertones, she said. But she did urge people to be cautious. Communing with the dead "is not an exact science," she said. "It can lend itself to deception and false claims." Private one-hour sessions usually cost \$150 or more. Long Island medium John Edward, host of the syndicated television show *Crossing*

Over, charges \$300/hour, and was prepared to dedicate an episode claiming contact with the dead victims until he was accused of exploiting victims' families.

In "The Mosque to Commerce: Bin Laden's Special Complaint with the World Trade Center," Slate explored a surprising minor hypothesis for the twin towers' choice as a target. "The World Trade Center's architect, Minoru Yamasaki, was a favorite designer of the bin Laden family's patrons -- the Saudi royal family -- and a leading practitioner of an architectural style that merged modernism with Islamic influences," said the article. It said that Yamasaki not only called the complex a "mecca," but actually recreated Mecca's courtyard by isolating the World Trade complex from the surrounding Wall Street area with low, colonnaded structures. With sculpture and a fountain, Yamasaki also imitated Mecca's central Qa'ba cube and spring. At the base of the twin towers' were pointed arches that are an originally Islamic style (imported by Gothic Europe in the Middle Ages), and the shimmering exoskeletal truss surrounding the towers' simple geometry followed "the Islamic tradition of wrapping a powerful geometric form in a dense filigree. . . . The shimmering filigree is the mark of the holy."



"Having rejected modernism and the Saudi royal family, it's no surprise that Bin Laden would turn against Yamasaki's work in particular," concludes Slate. "He must have seen how Yamasaki had clothed the World Trade Center, a monument of Western capitalism, in the raiment of Islamic spirituality. Such mixing of the sacred and the profane is old hat to us. . . . But to someone who wants to purify Islam from commercialism, Yamasaki's implicit Mosque to Commerce would be anathema. To Bin Laden, the World Trade Center was probably not only an international landmark but also a false idol."

Sources: "Charity Overwhelmed in Bid to Meet Attack Victims' Bills," *New York Times*, 1/5/02; "Jews Nabbed Over Bomb Plot against U.S. Muslims," *New York Post*, 12/13/01; "Nab Jewish Militants In Bomb Plot: L.A. Mosque, Pol Targeted," *Daily News*, 12/13/01; "Group Born on Streets of Brooklyn," *Daily News*, 12/13/01; "On The Safe Side," *Jewish Week*, 12/21/01; "Gay Muslims Face a Growing Challenge," *New York Times*, 1/13/02; "Stereotyping Rankles Silent, Secular Majority of American Muslims," *New York Times*, 12/23/01; "Ranks of Latinos Turning to Islam Are Increasing," *New York Times*, 1/2/02; "The Mosque to Commerce: Bin Laden's Special Complaint with the World Trade Center," Slate, 12/28/01; "Kin of Sept. 11 Victims Look to Mediums For Help," *The Record*, 12/13/01; "Pol Has Web Site Ax Ancient Jewish Terror Item," *Daily News*, 1/8/02.

## Keep on Pledgin'

New York State Assembly member Steve Levy (D-Holbrook, Suffolk County) said he would introduce legislation to penalize school districts if their schools don't lead students in reciting the pledge of allegiance

daily. State law requires that the pledge is recited in public schools, said a speaker for state Attorney General Eliot Spitzer. But the state Education Department said the law mandates only that the state education commissioner establish a program for schools reciting the pledge -- but does not require that schools actually participate.

The *Village Voice's* atheist columnist Nat Hentoff compared to McCarthyism the *Daily News* and *New York Post* attacks of Community School District 3's refusal to force the pledge of allegiance. Larry Sauer, a school-board member, had said, "Requiring students to blindly repeat the pledge is no different than the Taliban requiring children to memorize the Koran and repeat it by rote, without understanding why or what they are saying." Hentoff said that *West Virginia State v. Barnette*, the 1943 U.S. Supreme Court decision permitting refusal to say the pledge, "emphasized the corollary rights of freedom of conscience and belief for all Americans, religious or not." He quoted from the decision: "We think the action of the local authorities in compelling the flag salute and pledge transcends constitutional limitations on their power and invades the sphere of intellect and spirit which it is the purpose of the First Amendment to our Constitution to reserve from all official control."

Sources: "New Push on Saying the Pledge," *Newsday*, 12/14/01; "The Patriotism Enforcers," *Village Voice*, 1/2/02.

## Church Steps versus City Shelters

Church is battling state over the welfare of homeless people. The Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church on Fifth Avenue and 55th Street allows 10 people to sleep in its shelter and 30 to 40 people to sleep on its steps and sidewalk, many in cardboard boxes. In early December, police, having warned the church in November that it could not host homeless people outdoors, began removing them from the church exterior, asking them to leave or go to a city shelter -- or arresting them.

The church, backed by the New York Civil Liberties Union, said the city was limiting the church's religious rights, and that the city's crackdown was not because of the homeless' welfare but for the sensibilities of a wealthy neighborhood of designer boutiques and upscale hotels. City lawyers said that the church was operating an illegal shelter by allowing people to sleep outside in the cold and rain. One said that "the city's shelter system is not at capacity. There are beds with clean sheets available." He added, "We can do better. It's not rounding up these people for arrest. It's providing meaningful social services." Another argued that it was a public nuisance for homeless people to sleep close to church building or on its steps. The church was operating "the world's worst" homeless program, he said, while the city had ample beds available in shelters with heat, food, and toilets, which the church does not provide. . . . "It's a cruel thing to do, to have people laying on the street," then mayor Rudolph Giuliani said. "It's a much kinder, more generous, much more mature and much more

responsible thing to go take them, try to help them, and put them in facilities where they can get help."

Judge Lawrence McKenna of Federal District Court in Manhattan first temporarily barred the NYPD from rousting homeless people or threatening them with arrest, ruling that the city was interfering with the church's Christian ministry and violating its First Amendment right to free exercise of religion. He then extended that injunction, and then finally ruled that the homeless could sleep on the church steps but not on the sidewalk next to its walls. Mayor Michael Bloomberg personally telephoned the church's senior pastor to deliver the news.

Sources: "Church Says Homeless Can Stay; City Says No Way," Associated Press, 12/18/01; "Church Takes City to Federal Court," WABC, 12/19/01; "Church Lawsuit Tries to Stop Police From Ejecting Homeless," *New York Times*, 12/18/01; "Despite Suit Filed by Church, Police Rouse Homeless Squatters," *New York Times*, 12/19/01; "Judge Rules: Homeless May Keep Sleeping on Fifth Ave. Church Steps for Now," WABC, 12/19/01; "Judge Rules Homeless Can Sleep Outside Church," *Daily News*, 12/20/01; "Judge Orders End to Rousting of Homeless Near Church," *New York Times*, 12/20/01; "Judge Extends Order Blocking Police from Arresting Homeless at Church," *Newsday*, 12/28/01; "Judge Says Homeless Can Stay, but Only on Church's Steps," *New York Times*, 1/5/02.

## Preying on Students

Some religious groups are targeting foreign students on campuses, "combining practical assistance . . . like rides to shopping malls with Christian proselytizing," reports the *New York Times*. "If you are targeting people for conversion, international students are often lonely, alienated and depressed, and thus relatively easy to win over," said a professor of sociology of religion.

Said one originally nonreligious Chinese student who chose within a year to be baptized in a Protestant church, "My American Christian friends are such nice and genuine people. I cannot imagine that such sincere people would lie to me. I cannot imagine that they would lie to me about Jesus or God." Almost 550,000 foreigners, 11% of them Chinese, are registered at American schools. Proselytizers are attracting many Chinese, most of whom are atheists or do not consider themselves religious. One expert said, "It's easier for Christians to convert nonreligious people than to convert people who are already Hindus or Buddhists." The article also says that such programs are just useful for learning English or joining the cultural American mainstream.

Source: "Campus Evangelists Seek Out Foreign Students," *New York Times*, 1/9/02.

## Church Squirms over Its Racist History

Uncomfortable with its history of racism, the congregation of the First Church of Christ Congregational in New Haven, Connecticut, has rebelled against its ministers' attempt to address the issue. The ministers had commissioned an art project, "Silence," by two Brooklyn artists to illustrate a wish denied to black parishioners

about 150 years ago, when they tried to leave their balcony and join whites on the main floor. The new exhibit comprised photographs of black people mounted on sticks attached to the pews. The effect was an illusion of 19 parishioners seated among their fellow worshipers.

But the exhibit lasted only two and a half weeks. When the ministers were absent, church members removed the figures, which some claimed obstructed views of the pulpit and might damage the pews. The ministers learned of the removal when they returned. Ironically, the figures were removed to the balcony.

In response to the removal of their work, the artists shrouded the memorial plaques on the balcony and shuttered the windows. Subsequent news articles ignited negative publicity, including a column and editorial, which criticized the church for removing the exhibit.

Source: "Congregation Thinks Twice About a Depiction of a Segregated Past," *New York Times*, 12/3/01.

## Religion Going to the Dogs

The *Daily News'* weekly religion column profiled Joanna Seere, "a spiritual healer of animals." "Animals live in a state connected to the spiritual," said Seere, "but it is not necessarily a religious state." Most of her work is done by telephone -- "there are fewer distractions, just energy" -- and costs from \$75 to \$90 an hour. Seere says she talks with the animal -- her business card reads "Animal Communication & Healing" -- and meditates with them "if necessary." Seere also deals with behavioral problems, especially stress. "They understand," she says. "They respond to healing energy."

The article discussed the debate among the religious over whether animals have souls, a belief at odds with most religious beliefs elevating humans above "lower" animals. A November ABCNews/Beliefnet poll showed that 43 percent of Americans believe pets go to heaven.

Source: "City Healer Has Animal Magnetism," *Daily News*, 8/25/01.

## Go West, Racist Church

The World Church of the Creator said "Merry Christmas" by dropping racist hate literature on the doorsteps of Old Lyme, Connecticut on that day. It was the second time in 10 days the pamphlets, which are signed by the Illinois-based white supremacist organization, appeared on driveways in the area. The fliers accuse Jews of launching a conspiracy against humanity and claim white people are more intelligent than black people. Matt Hale, the organization's leader, has spoken twice in Wallingford, Connecticut. He attracted about 70 supporters and 200 protesters during a speech in April.

Source: "White Supremacist Pamphlets Dropped at Old Lyme Homes Again," *Newsday*, 12/25/01.

## Church-State Battle over Jersey Eruv



An eruv erected by Orthodox Jews in Tenafly, New Jersey can remain in place while supporters appeal a U.S. District Court decision allowing Tenafly to dismantle it, the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals has ruled. This reverses a ruling by district judge William G. Bassler of Newark, who had said that the eruv was wrongly placed on public property.

An eruv is an unbroken religious enclosure marked by attaching cords or plastic strips, often to utility poles, to extend the Talmudic definition of a Jewish "private domain" in which observant Jews may carry items on the sabbath and other holidays. Without an eruv, such Jews may refuse to carry keys, push baby strollers, or perform other everyday activities outside their homes. Eruvs are in place in neighborhoods around the country, including one encompassing the White House and Capitol Hill.

But to create and maintain such a border demands municipal support, entangling church and state, since it is a religious use of public property. The Tenafly city council had restricted access to utility poles, and Judge Bassler had ruled on August 9 that neither the utility poles, nor the right-of-way on which they sit, are public forums, adding that "public property should not be permanently allocated to a religious purpose."

Part of the Tenafly Eruv Association's appeal will ask why Christian church signs planted on the sides of Tenafly roads — signs bearing crosses and hours of church services — are permitted by Tenafly officials while the eruv is prohibited. Tenafly officials had asked the churches to remove the religious symbols or remove the signs, but had not persisted when the churches ignored them. One church's priest said, "These signs are allowed all over the United States, so why should we take them down if they are allowed elsewhere? . . . We will not take the cross off the sign because that is the symbol of being a Christian person."

Although the local Orthodox and national Orthodox organizations support the eruv, it is opposed by some local Jews. Some national liberal Jewish groups (which the Jewish newspaper *Forward* calls "secular") — the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and Hadassah — have filed briefs supporting the eruv. The Orthodox have called the eruv critics, even Jewish ones, anti-Semitic and anti-Orthodox. One Tenafly resident complained that Orthodox Jews "start to insist that shops close on Saturday. If they start to try to think of the neighborhood as their sole possession the attitudes of the community change."

In Howard Beach, Queens, the Rockwood Park Jewish Center has erected an eruv after three years of negotiations with the local community board and utilities.

The eruv was created not to serve a growing Jewish population — Rockwood Park's membership fell from 1,000 in the early 1970s to 300 today — but to try to attract more Orthodox families to the neighborhood. The center's rabbi has also added a barrier to formally divide men and women attending Rockwood Park, and he also plans to start a preschool yeshiva and a mikvah.

Sources: "A Clash of Symbols in Eruv Suit," *The Record*, 8/28/01; "Liberals Said to Cross Line in Support of Jersey Orthodox," *Forward*, 11/16/01; "Court Allows Ritual Jewish Boundary to Remain Up During Appeal," *Newsday*, 11/9/01; "Carrying It Off," *Jewish Week*, 8/22/01.

## Clergy May Spill Secrets, Says Court

The New York State Court of Appeals unanimously dismissed a suit by a Long Island woman against two rabbis who had told her husband that she had discontinued some Orthodox Jewish practices, including ritual bathing, to avoid sex with him, and that she "was seeing another man in a social setting." The rabbis said they had had a religious obligation to violate her confidences, and that they "believed that the children were emotionally in danger" because their mother had stopped following Orthodox household law.

The court said that while the clergy-penitent privilege would make the information inadmissible in court, and while the woman "understandably resents the disclosure of intimate information," she could not seek damages under the state law establishing the privilege. The opinion also said that the First Amendment would prevent courts from making any rulings requiring an interpretation of religious law. "The prospect of conducting a trial to determine whether a cleric's disclosure is in accord with religious tenets has troubling constitutional implications," said the court.

"They made new law in New York," complained the woman's lawyer. "It's taking a step backward in protecting the citizenry from clergymen who are unscrupulous."

Sources: "Albany Court Rejects Suit Against Clergy," *New York Times*, 11/28/01; "Court Favors Blabby Rabbis," *New York Post*, 11/28/01.

## Fight Expected over Excess Nazi Genocide Reparations

Shortly before the conference "Holocaust Restitution: Reconciling Moral Imperatives with Legal Initiatives and Diplomacy," was held in Manhattan in November, the *Forward* reported new tensions between reparations negotiators and grassroots advocates for those Jewish survivors of genocide. The World Jewish Congress has launched a program called the Foundation for the Jewish People "to ensure that leftover money will go to frustrate Hitler's ultimate goal by ensuring the survival of Jews and Judaism." The foundation is also supported by the Israeli government and by the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Many expect that billions of dollars in payments from European states and companies could remain after all claimants and heirs have been paid. But survivor advocates insist the money is not the World Jewish Congress' to spend. One advocate urged that leftover money be used to fund home health-care plans, which he says survivors want. But the organization that will distribute funds to Jewish survivors and neighborhoods, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, says the leftover funds will be inadequate for such a plan. The reparations total is approximately \$8 billion, and individual payments are relatively small. Slave laborers in concentration camps get \$7,500; forced laborers in a German factory, \$2,500, and in agriculture, \$1,000. People subjected to medical experiments may get \$7,500. The parents of a child who died while lodged in a home for children of slave or forced laborers may receive the maximum amount of \$7,500.

Hundreds of thousands of non-Jewish victims of the Nazis are also eligible, but few such people have filed their claims.

An example of local Claims Conference spending is a \$90,000 grant divided three ways in Brooklyn: a program at the Shorefront YMHA of Brighton-Manhattan Beach for Holocaust survivors from the former USSR; a program that sends volunteers to the homes of survivor shut-ins; and Club 2600, a new monthly meeting held at a senior center in Sheepshead Bay.

Sources: "Clash Looming Over Uses of Shoah Funds," *Forward*, 11/9/01; "Where Everybody Knows Their Names," *Jewish Week*, 11/30/01; "Pittance for Nazi Survivors," *Daily News*, 12/13/01.

## Strains from Westchester Synagogue Growth

Young Israel, a 260-family Orthodox synagogue in New Rochelle, has attempted for almost a decade to expand onto a neighboring plot purchased in 1993. But the synagogue has repeatedly failed to obtain several variances from the local zoning board. It also faces challenges from a grassroots opposition group, the Neighbors of New Rochelle. Critics say that the synagogue should renovate its current site; the synagogue says the "current building is inadequate for our basic prayer needs," and accuses opponents of anti-Orthodox prejudice. An attorney for Neighbors of New Rochelle says the issue is one of appropriate land use. "Ask yourself, if this were not a religious institution, would you even consider granting a variance?" he said during a 30-minute presentation to the Zoning Board, adding that the First Amendment should not be used as a sword for those seeking preferential treatment. "The applicant is thumbing its nose at the regulations. They're basically saying that they know they don't have adequate



parking, but because they're a religious institution you have to grant a variance." If the variances are not granted, the synagogue will challenge the city's conduct in federal court.

The village of Croton-on-Hudson is feuding with a local synagogue, Temple Israel of Northern Westchester, over its septic systems, which the village says are undersized, contaminating groundwater, and threatening the ecosystem of a pond. The synagogue released its own study saying that the systems are legal and functioning properly. But Croton questioned the second study and will monitor the synagogue for future violations. Temple Israel plans to double its building's size, a proposal fiercely opposed by neighbors, who also say there are already traffic problems on narrow roads since the synagogue has tripled its membership in the last 10 years.

Sources: "The Struggle to Build," *Jewish Week*, 11/23/01; "Croton, Temple at Odds Over Septic Systems," *Journal News*, 11/19/01.

## Jersey Priest Charged with Sex Assault

After a seven-month investigation beginning with his arrest in March, Michael Fugee, the pastor of St. Elizabeth R.C. Church near Hackensack, New Jersey, has been indicted for allegedly sexually assaulting a teen-age boy. He is charged with sexual assault, endangering the welfare of a child, and criminal sexual contact. He has pleaded innocent to all charges and is free on \$10,000 bail. The Archdiocese of Newark has placed him on administrative leave and has had no pastoral duties since his arrest.

Source: "Wyckoff Priest Indicted in Sex-Assault Case," *Newsday*, 11/30/01.

## Bad Time for the Council of Churches

The relatively liberal National Council of Churches, located on Riverside Drive, is badly fragmented and may even disband. The coalition comprises 36 Protestant and Orthodox members, among them Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, the United Church of Christ, Presbyterians, three predominantly black Baptist bodies, and Greek Orthodox, representing about 53 million Americans. But it has repeatedly tried and failed to affiliate with the Roman Catholic Church and Southern Baptists, and its existing affiliates. Disputes over gay rights, the ordination of women, church government, biblical interpretation, the death penalty, and other issues cause conflict within the council. Some members, among them the Presbyterian Church (USA), which is bitterly split over the ordination of gays, are so distracted they cannot give the council the attention it needs. And a new budget of \$5.7 million trimmed projected spending for this year by more than \$1 million.

Source: "Council of Churches Struggling to Survive," *Daily News*, 11/24/01.



## Freethinking Spiritual Wonderment: Arnell Dowret

By John Arents

*(Editor's Note: This report of a presentation delivered to the Secular Humanist Society of New York on October 23, 2001, was published in the December 2001 issue of Pique, the SHSNY newsletter.)*

Before September 11, atheists had been the most hated group in the United States. One reason is that a majority of people assume that a non-faith-based approach leads to a life devoid of meaning and purpose. They imagine that without absolute rules dictated by a God, there is no morality, and without prayer, there is no path to self-improvement. They are wrong. An approach to life based on reason can offer a dynamic journey; a profound sense of purpose; and a blueprint for caring and cooperative behavior in a manner that a faith-based system never could.

Mr. Dowret proposed an exercise. He asked twelve questions, to which each person should answer "yes" or "no." For example: "Have you ever felt a sense of awe after learning a scientific fact?" "Have you ever been thrilled by a fall sunset?" "Have you ever had the 'Aha!' reaction at the moment of overcoming an obstacle?" "Have you ever had a sense of your own smallness relative to the universe?" If your answer is "yes," then you have had what he calls a "secular spiritual experience." It is a momentary interruption of our continuous internal dialogue. It is an expansion of our boundaries, a sense of connectedness with others and with the whole cosmos. Experiences with such characteristics form a distinct category of human experience and therefore, just like experiences that are intellectual, or emotional, or sexual, they need to be represented by a single recognizable word. Accordingly Mr. Dowret says that there is no better word for such experiences than "spiritual," even though it displeases many secularists.

When you peel away the metaphysical and the supernatural from the word "spiritual," what is left is a desire for connection, a challenge to our sense of separateness. Scientific theories point to interconnectedness: the universe originated in a singularity; all life is descended from a single successful beginning; evidence from mitochondrial DNA suggests that all human beings may have a common forebear; all matter seems to be made of the same few elementary particles. In the words of Carl Sagan, "For we are the local embodiment of a Cosmos grown to self-awareness."

Religious ethics is based on fixed law dictated by a higher power. Secular ethics comes from a vital sense of connection, even to strangers. Mr. Dowret refers to this as "an extended sense of self." Traditional religions assume that people are inherently sinful, greedy, indolent, and apathetic. They can be rescued from their misery and depravity only by following a revealed path to salvation or enlightenment. Many people who think they have turned away from religion are still imbued with this misanthropic view of human nature. They are called "cynics."

Yet, Mr. Dowret suggests, the destiny of humankind is outrageously exciting. So far most of human life has been occupied with much the same things that other animals do, and all hurtful human behaviors have animal analogs. There is no animal analog for our infinite curiosity. We practice cooperation on a level far beyond even the most social animal. We do not merely communicate; we compose great literature and invent the Internet. We do not merely explore; we go to Jupiter and Neptune. Furthermore, the human species is still in its infancy on the scale of geological time.

It is highly probable that in the future bioelectronic augmentation and genetic engineering will cause humans to continue their physical transformation. Yet, while the fierce and brutal competition for survival of the fittest may have made the advent of humankind possible, it is a mechanism which need not be a factor in future human development. The "survival of the fittest" evolutionary process, which began on a physical level with genes, will continue in the future but it will operate in the realm of ideas, "memes." Technological advances will one day offer unlimited supplies of energy and food, ending human deprivation. The challenge for humans will become a journey of discovery, including self discovery.

Human beings still tend to believe that human behavior is the result of magic. But the laws of nature, which apply to us as to everything else, clearly tell us there is no effect without a cause. Recognizing the determinants of who we are can help us to see ourselves. To facilitate a clear vision, we need to acknowledge the complexity of human behaviors and avoid thinking in the simplistic terms of good and evil.

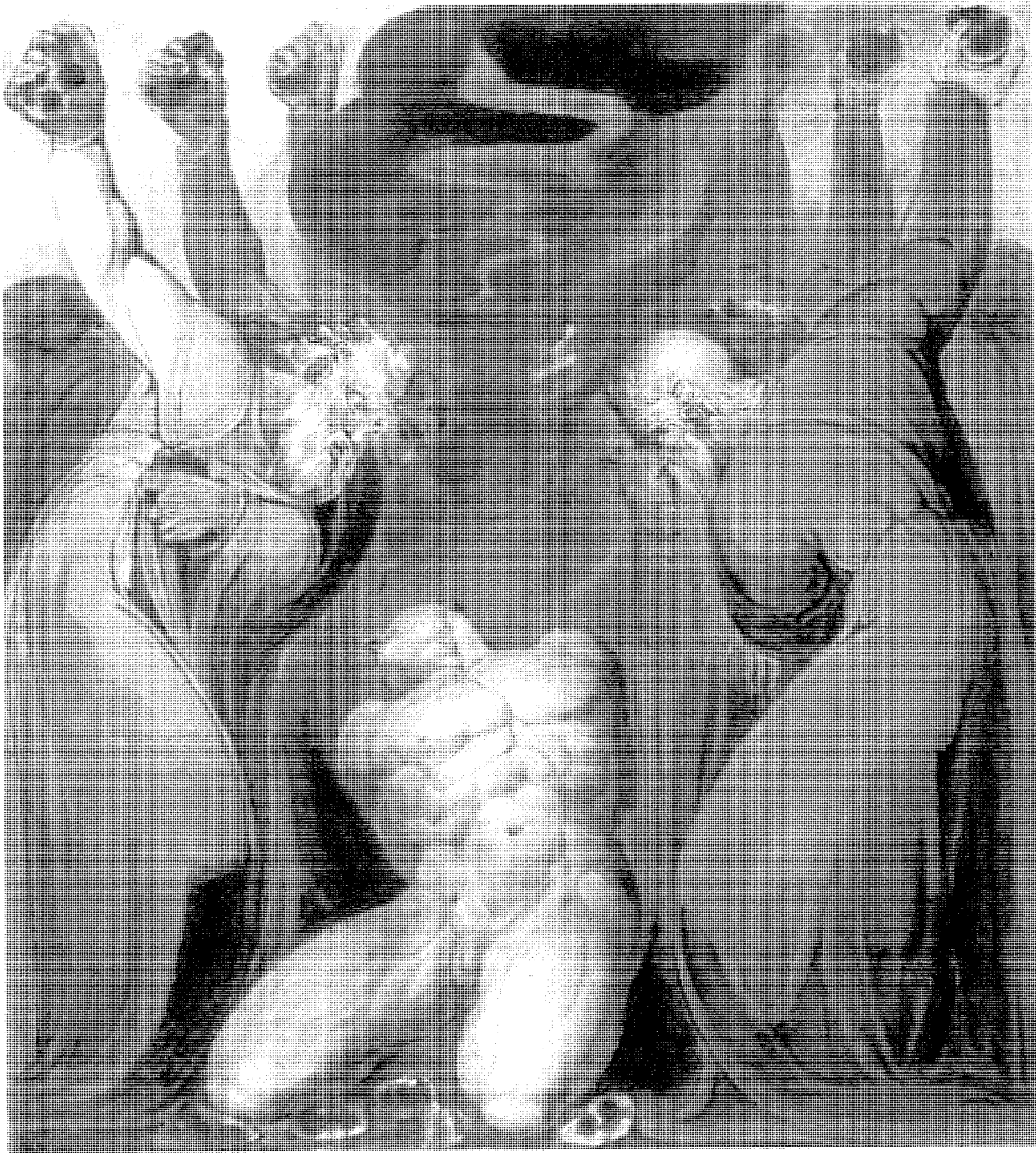
To demonstrate some of the issues involved in examining behaviors, self-awareness, and group communication, another exercise was conducted. Participants paired off and shared personal information with each other regarding some of their struggles. Afterwards, some pairs reported to the entire group about what had been said.

Also discussed were various other ideas and practices that a comprehensive approach to living a dynamic secular life should include, such as: science presentations which could stimulate wonder and discussion; viewing videos or live presentations which could stimulate group discussion of ethics; group support during major life-cycle events, e.g., parenthood, marriage, divorce, grief; group singing of "age appropriate" songs; and a secular approach to traditional holidays.

In conclusion Mr. Dowret declared that at present we are both poised for, and in desperate need of, a major cultural change. He suggested that no significant advance toward a healthier and more compassionate world will be possible unless the public can be encouraged to let go of their cynical and faith-based thinking. By forging a comprehensive and dynamic approach to living a secular life, we secular humanists are in a unique position to be the catalysts of that change.

The presentation closed with a vigorous but necessarily brief discussion. Everyone was grateful to Mr. Dowret for an enlightening and stimulating evening.

For more information please visit <http://www.onewitheverything.org>, or contact Mr. Dowret at [arnell7@juno.com](mailto:arnell7@juno.com) or 212-979-0225.



**William Blake (1757-1827). "The Blasphemer," c. 1800.  
Pen and ink and watercolor on paper, 384 x 340 cm. British Museum.**

Blake believed in the primacy of the imagination. . . . Blake famously wrote: "I must create a system, or be enslav'd by another man's. I will not reason & compare: my business is to create." So while other poets might be content to use characters from the Bible, or from Greek and Roman myth, Blake created his own mythology populated by a host of beings that he himself had either invented, or reinterpreted.

William Blake Online (Tate Britain),  
<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/blakeinteractive/imagin/index.html>