

New York City Atheists

July 2002

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Events

PICNIC!

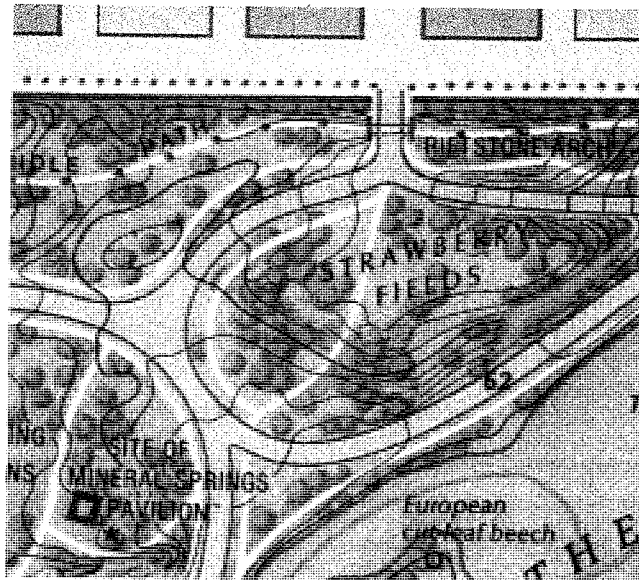
Potluck Picnic

Sunday, July 28, starting
11:00 A.M.

Central Park, near West
72nd St. entrance

Directions: Take the B/C or 1/2/3 trains to 72nd Street. The B/C stop at the park entrance; the 1/2/3 are a couple of blocks west of the park. At the entrance, you can either turn right and walk down the curved road, or turn left and enter the Strawberry Fields path (which is marked by a sign, soon followed by an "Imagine" mosaic). Take either path into the park and you'll reach the park's inner road, with a tall statue on your left. Cross the road and walk up the grassy hill, which is topped by a giant rock and is marked on the map with a square. We will be on that hill, between the statue and rock. Look for a purple flag or sash.

Bring snacks for yourself plus at least one more. Nothing requiring cooking -- the park forbids grilling. There are several delis near the 72nd Street intersection one block away from the park. NYC Atheists will supply sodas, ice, plates, and forks. For more information, contact
(212) 330-6794 or
atheist@foody.org



June Meeting

The pledge and voucher decisions both began and ended our June meeting. We talked about the rulings' influence, whether the lower court's pledge decision might be reversed or overruled, and of many theists' insistence on merging patriotism and religion while refusing to understand, or acknowledge, that "under God" is an exclusionary religious phrase. We talked about the history of the pledge, and of the nature of patriotism.

We agreed that the director (Josh Karpf) should send to New York State federal legislators, in NYC Atheists' name, a letter supporting the pledge ruling, and letters to editors praising Dr. Michael Newdow, the winning atheist plaintiff of that case. The director declined to write a commentary on the issue for submission to newspapers, but agreed to edit another's. (See "Legally Compelled Patriotic Dogma" in this issue.) "Wouldn't it be better if we relied only on the Constitution and not on a capricious, vindictive, and inconsistent God," said one member's letter, sent via congress.org.

We agreed to replace the July meeting with a picnic. It will be held on Sunday, July 28, beginning at 11:00

A.M., in Central Park on a shady hill near the West 72nd St. entrance. (See "Events" on the first page. The time and location should meet member requests for accessibility, shade, and avoiding late-day heat.) NYC Atheists will supply some drinks and ice. Bring snacks for yourself plus at least one more, and blankets and folding chairs if you're grass-phobic. Look for a flag or sash colored purple.

We also discussed new meeting space. The Ys were suggested. The Greenwich Village Center, the Gay/Lesbian/Bi/Trans Center, and inexpensive hotels were last year's favorite candidates, and least expensive the Source of Life Conference Center on West 34th Street between 5th and 6th Avenues, which the Secular Humanist Society has recommended to us. We talked about the religious roots of the YMCA and YWHA, and whether Source of Life is church related. With 17 present, we voted 4-1 to relocate. Some spoke against weekday evening meetings, so meeting will continue on weekends, with an additional weekday evening meeting if there is a demand.

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The director asked advice on getting a tax ID number for NYC Atheists. Formal status with the state would allow us to receive donation checks made out to the organization instead of to individuals. The Foundation Center and Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts were recommended as resources, and the Council for Secular Humanism was said to grant use of its tax-exemption umbrella to its affiliates (which must also agree to follow specific "Affirmations of Humanism").

But several members urged delay, describing both complex regulations and the willingness of religious opponents to pounce on any errors. We should first have a board of directors, and a treasurer experienced with nonprofit finances, before formalizing what kind of entity we should be, said one member. Last summer's attempt to pass bylaws failed from lack of interest. Bylaws and a board election should be possible this autumn, when attendance is highest.

Joe Zamecki described the November 2 American Atheists-led Godless March on Washington, and a plan for a charter bus that he is now personally arranging. Planned stops between NYC and DC are the American Atheist Center in Cranford, NJ; Philadelphia; and Baltimore. The round-trip fare is \$60, with the option for an overnight hotel room at a group rate of \$59/room. Contact Joe at (908) 276-7300 or aa-joejr@aol.com to learn more.

Treasury

Late May's balance was \$309.38. We spent \$25.23 to print and mail June's newsletter, and \$15.91 in additional postage for letters to legislators and editors. We collected \$73 in donations at June's meeting, slightly less than at May's meeting. As of late July the treasury balance is \$268.24, excluding the cost of this newsletter and sodas and ice for the picnic.

"Under God" Under Attack

After the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals declared the Pledge of Allegiance unconstitutional, saying that the 1954 addition of the words "under God" violated the separation of church and state, the outcry seemed louder than even the U.S. Supreme Court's 1989 decision defending flag-burning.

Despite the ruling applying to only one-fifth of the nation (the Western states plus Alaska and Hawaii), and despite its built-in delay before regional enforcement, it drew attention away from the next day's far more influential U.S. Supreme Court decision validating public vouchers for private school.

Also damaging to local public education, yet barely heard in the religious din, was a New York State appeals court's decision that the state

Constitution required Albany to finance education only up to the eighth grade. And completely unheard was a Manhattan federal court's ruling that opens New York City public schools to rental by groups that hold religious services (see "Schools Rentable for Religion").

What is the future of the ruling? The decisions of the 9th Circuit court have a high reversal rate on appeal, not only for the court's relative liberality, but because its high number of judges -- 28, almost twice as many as the next biggest circuit -- leads to a large number of inconsistent rulings in a conservative legal environment that favors the power of precedent.

The New York State Legislature can expect bills requesting the state to enforce the existing requirement that public schools lead students each day in saying the pledge. Earlier this year saw a bill that would threaten to withhold state aid from schools, or have the state attorney general remove school board members in districts that do not comply. But that bill is still in the education committee.

New York area officials plan no changes to local pledge practices since the 9th Circuit has no local jurisdiction, and they are not too enthusiastic anyway. Governor George Pataki said, "This takes junk justice to a new height. It's unbelievable. Absolutely, this should be appealed." Mayor Bloomberg called the Pledge "part of our history and our heritage," and added, "We are a nation under God. Even our currency says, 'In God We Trust.'"

Board of Education president Ninfa Segarra, who successfully pushed a pledge policy in city public schools after September 11, blasted the ruling as "anti-religious." "Anyone who thinks there is no reference to God has never been in a school on exam day," said schools chancellor Harold Levy. Gubernatorial candidate Andrew Cuomo called the ruling "ridiculous on its face. It should absolutely be overturned." Cuomo's Democratic rival, Carl McCall, called the decision "outrageous and unfortunate." U.S. representative Nita Lowey (D-Westchester) called the court ruling "an outrage." Connecticut senator Joseph Lieberman said the decision "offends our national morality." "I am surprised and offended by the decision," said New York senator Hillary Rodham Clinton.

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"While our men and women in uniform are battling overseas to preserve the freedom that we all cherish, we should never forget the blessings of divine providence that undergird our nation. That includes the freedom to recite the Pledge of Allegiance in our nation's schools."

When the House of Representatives voted on a resolution to keep the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, 11 representatives, including Democrats Gary Ackerman of Queens, Jerrold Nadler of Manhattan, and Nydia Velazquez of Brooklyn, chose not to vote for or against the pro-Pledge measure, which the House approved by a vote of 416-3.

Nadler had originally voted no, but after the final votes had trickled in, he changed his ballot as voting "present." The only actual "no" votes on the pro-Pledge measure came from Reps. Bobby Scott of Virginia and Mike Honda and Pete Stark of California, all Democrats. Nadler defended his decision by saying he agreed with the California ruling but felt Congress' reaction was "ineffectual." "I think the court did the right thing," he said, adding that since the ruling will be appealed, Congress should not meddle.

A nationwide *Newsweek* survey found that 87% polled said the pledge should contain "under God"; 9% said no. Asked if the government should avoid promoting religion in any way, 36% said yes, but 54% said no, and 60% of respondents said they think it is good for the country when government leaders publicly express their faith in God. Only 12% thought the government should eliminate all references to a god and religious belief in schools, government buildings, and other public settings, while 84% said such references are acceptable if they don't mention a specific religion. Only 45% of those polled said that the United States is a secular nation in which religious belief, or lack of it, isn't a defining characteristic. 29% believe the United States is a Christian nation, and 16% believe the United States is a Biblical nation, defined by the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Newdow now lives in Sacramento, California but grew up in Teaneck, New Jersey, where "his family could not be prouder to see him take a stand," reported *Newsday*. Upstate Rome, New York, where Baptist minister Francis Bellamy wrote the pledge in 1892 for *The Youth's Companion* magazine, was not pleased, although even Bellamy never meant "under God" to be included. Indeed, Bellamy's church still has a stained glass window that bears the original godless wording. The pledge has evolved in another way: a stiff, one-armed salute that accompanied the pledge was dropped in the 1930s after the rise of the Nazis.

Sources: "God-Awful," *New York Post*, 6/27/02; "Decision Stuns Mayor, Parents," *Daily News*, 6/27/02; "Ruling Will Change Nothing in City Schools," *Newsday*, 6/27/02; "U.S. Court Rules Pledge of Allegiance Is Un-American," *Daily News*, 6/27/02; "N.Y. Pols Turn Backs on Full-Fledged Pledge," *New York Post*, 6/28/02; "Vast Majority in U.S. Support 'Under God'," CNN.com, 6/29/02; "Court That Ruled on Pledge Often Runs Afoul of Justices," *New York Times*, 6/30/02; "A Pledge on the Pledge," *Newsday*, 7/3/02; "Family Supports Ex-New Jersey Man's Challenge to Pledge of Allegiance," *Newsday*, 6/28/02; "Hometown of 'Pledge' Author Rails against Court Ruling," *Newsday*, 6/27/02.

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to listen to past programs.

Schools Rentable for Religion

In the same final week of June that witnessed the pledge and voucher cases, Manhattan Federal Court Judge Loretta Preska ruled that the New York City Board of Education must allow a religious group, the Bronx Household of Faith, to rent space in a public school for meetings that include worship (Christian hymns, prayer, preaching, teaching, and communion).

In 1994, when the Bronx Household of Faith had first applied for space, the board had said that it was against policy to let religious groups use public school buildings for worship. Bronx Household of Faith argued that the policy violated free speech. The church revived its application after the U.S. Supreme Court last year forced the upstate Milford School District to let a religious club meet on school premises there.

Preska cited the Supreme Court's finding that religious clubs could use public school buildings as long as they aren't used solely for "mere religious worship. City lawyers are reviewing their options regarding the case. "Because religious services are different from any other activity that takes place in the schools, in our view, excluding them does not violate the First Amendment," one said.

Source: "Religious Group Can Use School," *Daily News*, 6/27/02.

HELP NYC ATHEISTS GROW

Our monthly meetings and newsletter are free, but we depend on donations to keep them going. Donation amounts are reported in the monthly treasury report, anonymously unless requested otherwise. Donations are non-tax-deductible, and checks must be made out to "Josh Karpf." Mail to New York City Atheists, PO Box 1187, New York, NY 10013.

Correspondence

(From e-mail)

I attended my first meeting of NYC Atheists on Sunday, June 30, and am considering the relationship I would like to have to the group in the future. It seems to me that people have various reasons for participating in this group, some of which I can guess. I think it would be useful to solicit reasons from people willing to submit them.

Undoubtedly, some people are interested in NYC Atheists as an opportunity to socialize without having to endure anyone's religious agendas. Others see NYC Atheists as an interest group which support various political activism of various sorts. My feeling is that when one is involved in activism, one needs to be very clear about goals, methods and message, whereas when one socializes one can be more lax. For that reason, it is desirable to maintain a clear distinction between these two categories of activity. I see the role of NYC Atheists as one of facilitating the goals atheists might have in attending without actually insisting on any of them.

After the meeting, I played chess with a friend who also attended the meeting and with some people I met there. All in all, it was a pleasant afternoon.

Regarding the trip to Washington, DC, I am troubled by some questions and issues.

(1) I don't know who is actually sponsoring the November trip to Washington.

(2) I don't know why it was felt that a trip to Washington was specifically needed or desirable.

(3) Although Joe replied to my question about why we feel we have anything in common with Satanists and Wiccans, who apparently also want to attend in November, I am not satisfied with his answer. I feel that our choice of friends says a lot about whom we consider our adversaries and I think that that message needs to be very clear. I feel that inviting Satanists and Wiccans amounts to trying to broaden our base of support and enlarge our turnout at the cost of diluting our message (whatever it might be).

(4) Even if individual Satanists or Wiccans consider themselves atheists (as Joe claims), that may not reflect the official position of whatever organizations they participate in as Satanists and Wiccans. So it is also a matter of intellectual honesty.

Regarding some of the issues that were discussed at the meeting: a lot of the issues pertain to separation of Church and State, others to freedom from harassment on the grounds of one's religious opinions or lack thereof. I think such issues are probably more competently handled by groups such as the ACLU or the SPLC, just to name two. What then is it that NYC Atheists can do better by virtue of its special interest in Atheism? I think that consideration of this question and of the one I raised above, regarding the reasons people have for attending NYC Atheist events, can serve to crystallize the concept of NYC Atheists and to facilitate the desirable goal of giving it more organizational structure.

My two cents,
Allan

Thanks for writing, Allan. I hope you'll come again.

*The Godless Americans March on D.C. will be led by the national group American Atheists. Its Web site, www.godlessamericans.org, says it's for "giving 'Godless Americans' a new voice and presence. Like every other group that has fought its way from the margins of society into the mainstream, we have demands -- a new agenda for a secular America." A similar previous project was *The Day That Counts**

(www.thedaythatcounts.org), a petition drive that ended with leaders giving a D.C. press conference. In both cases, other free-thought groups joined American Atheists as cosponsors. In the new event, freethinkers will actually journey there themselves.

The charter bus is a personal project of Joe Zamecki, to bring supporters from New York, northern New Jersey (where American Atheists is based and where Joe is its operations manager), Philly, and Baltimore. Members of local groups such as NYC Atheists, the Corliss Lamont Chapter of the American Humanist Association, the Secular Humanist Society of New York, the Council for Inquiry, and Long Island Secular Humanists will hopefully sign on. Why go to a demo on the Mall? If demos/marches/protests for any issue don't interest you, don't go; you'll be bored. If you've enjoyed others in the past -- to support an issue, to meet people with similar ideas, to help try to get press coverage -- you might like this one. It's just before Election Day, when politics will be buzzing most people's brains.

There's been a lot of debate among atheists about the role in atheist organizations of not only Wiccans and satanists, but of humanists and Ethical Culturists and humanistic Jews. It works both ways: some humanists

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dislike atheists, with their harder-core criticisms of religion, in their own groups. Like you say, broadening support to enlarge a turnout can dilute a message. Some atheists are opposed to any such collaboration. Many years ago, American Atheists refused to work with other free-thought organizations. Now it works with them, although its own membership requirements are still strictly atheist.

NYC Atheists is an independent local group that, as an "affiliate," has an official friendly working relationship with American Atheists. We voted for that in April. NYC Atheists has worked unofficially with all the local groups mentioned above, plus others ranging from Albany to Philadelphia. We've worked together on projects and have promoted each other's events. So far, NYC Atheists has had no formal membership requirements, and has been informally self-regulating. For instance, last year, after one member claimed that religious people had unique health benefits and suggested an imitative "Congregation of Atheism," with singing of altered hymns, the meeting thoroughly panned his proposal.

Finally, I agree with you about NYC Atheists having no advantage in politicking. We're small and local. I know zip about the Student Press Law Center, but the ACLU, despite its resources and experience in defending civil rights, has preferred to focus on freedom of religion rather than freedom from religion. I think that atheists should join both local and national groups. National activist groups favoring freedom from religion include American Atheists (www.atheists.org), Atheist Alliance (www.atheistalliance.org), the Council for Secular Humanism (www.secularhumanism.org), the Freedom from Religion Foundation (www.ffrf.org), and, to a lesser extent,

Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (www.aui.org). You might want to consider membership in one of them to support and learn more about their work. Thanks to affiliation, American Atheists offers a 20% discount on first-year membership members of NYC Atheists.

Josh

Thanks for the pointer to the website <http://www.godlessamericans.org> where I was able somewhat to inform myself about the march. I didn't find anything about the Satanists and Wiccans so I sent email and was informed that these groups are "endorsing" the event but will not appear on the speakers platform, for precisely the reasons that we as atheists would not want them to appear. That resolves any problems I had about their relationship to the event.

One of the goals of the march, as I understand it, is to make politicians aware that their gratuitous religious rhetoric (not to mention more concrete bias in legislation) is not appreciated by a significant portion of the electorate, a portion which is demonstrating by its willingness to travel to Washington en masse, that it can vote as a block. Since the rhetoric is invariably that of a particular body of religions, the same message would be delivered no matter whether "godless" is spelled with lower case g or upper case G. I'm glad to know that in this event, organized by American Atheists, it is lower case g, even if some of the endorsers support it from the point of view of upper case G.

Sincerely,
Allan

Legally Compelled Patriotic Dogma vs. Liberty and Justice

By Frank

As an atheist, a rational thinker, and an American, I think the reasoning behind the ruling against pressuring children to say the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools is an understatement; it is not only the words "under God" that offend me. It is also the actual meaning of the pledge, the fact that most people say it without carefully considering its meaning, and the fact that children are told to say it long before they are likely to have any concept of its meaning. It is no coincidence that this is a practice very similar to the way in which religious parents push prayer on their children.

I imagine that the majority of American atheists share my opinion on this; the reason most atheists reject religion is a preference of reason to dogma.

The amendments in the Bill of Rights, and many of the other amendments to the Constitution, were passed to preserve the rights stated in the Declaration of Independence. If Thomas Jefferson were alive today, he would probably not side with any person in support of any violation of any such amendment.

This is the First Amendment:
"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

One argument claims that this grants us "freedom of religion but not from it." This is really just a very silly word game. What if my religion prohibits me from voicing or evidencing my belief in a god? (Perhaps my god demands a level of humility that forbids me from displaying my belief in any manner.) Unless it is claimed that the amendment's injunction against

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"prohibiting the free exercise [of religion]" applies only to "established" religions, then an apparently atheistic religion is equivalent to actual atheism for all practical purposes. But to make such a claim would imply that the amendment itself, part of the most supreme law of the land, was "respecting an establishment of religion", and certainly "prohibiting the free exercise thereof" which would put it entirely in violation of itself. Since our country's founders would never have written law in violation of itself, the laws of logic dictate that the freedom granted by the First Amendment must include the freedom to be an atheist.

But no law can force a child to believe anything anyway. A child may be pressured into saying these words, but if the child does not believe them, then the law that pressures the child into saying them is simply pressuring the child to lie through implication. What moral does a child derive from being pressured to speak an implied lie?

The Pledge itself is, in fact, unfaithful to the ideals put forth by the founders of our country. Look at the last right mentioned in the First Amendment listed in the document that gave legal force to those ideals: "to petition the government for a redress of grievances." Why would I need to petition for a redress of grievances a government (i.e. "the republic for which it stands") that I have sworn allegiance to?

As for my allegiance to the government, they have my allegiance so long as and to the extent that they live up to these principles. In other words, if a Hitler comes to power, he will not have my allegiance to any degree. In fact, even if his entire wardrobe were red, white, and blue, I would still give him far less respect than I would give a homeless stranger on the street.

As for my allegiance to the flag, well, let's be realistic. I could not honestly say that a homeless stranger on the street has my allegiance to any degree either, yet if I consider the hypothetical situation in which such a person were in danger of death, and the only possible way of preventing the fatal outcome were the absolute and total destruction of a flag, I can't imagine myself hesitating an instant to implement the remedy; any innocent human life is worth more than a piece of cloth, regardless of what that piece of cloth symbolizes.

I have a strong allegiance to the principles that this country was founded on- the ideals of liberty, and justice for all. This allegiance is not because I made a pledge- I never made that pledge voluntarily; I am not morally bound by it. My allegiance to these principles is due to the simple fact that they are worthy of my allegiance. Allegiance given for this reason is far more valuable.