

New York City Atheists

Serving the tri-state area • An affiliate of American Atheists

September 2002

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<http://foody.org/atheist.html> atheist@foody.org

Events

September Meeting

Sunday, September 29, 2002
1:00-5:00 P.M.

Source of Life Conference
Center

352 Seventh Avenue, 16th floor
(between 29th and 30th Sts.)

Discussion: September 11 and
its aftermath

Donation requested

Try Out Our New Meeting Space!

Join New York City Atheists at its new meeting space, the Source of Life Conference Center at 352 Seventh Ave., 16th floor (between 29th and 30th Sts., just south of Penn Station). We'll meet on September 29 -- still the last Sunday of the month -- from 1 to 5 P.M. to discuss the 9/11 attacks and aftermath. We'll supply free cold drinks, and the conference center also sells snacks.

All freethinkers are welcome. We'll ask for donations to offset the cost of the room rental and refreshments, and attendees will be asked to sign in at the building door. On the plus side, we no longer need to order food, so we can meet and mingle more flexibly. The conference center is not church-owned, though some church

groups do meet there. The westside location is near several subways and buses and trains, unlike the eastside Moonstruck diner.

Picnic Picks on Satan

At August's picnic, which 18 attended in much nicer weather than July's, we got to grill Joe Zamecki of American Atheists about the participation of satanists in the Godless March on America. Joe answered several questions at length. He described these particular satanists as nonbelievers in a supernatural devil, and as people using "satanism" only as a philosophical metaphor, still qualifying as "godless."

Most (if not all) members at the picnic still disliked the satanists' participation. Some said that it was guaranteed to draw bad press. Others (including Joe)

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HELP NEW YORK CITY ATHEISTS GROW

If you can't come to one of our regular monthly meetings, please consider donating by mail.

Membership and our monthly newsletter are free, but we depend on donations to keep meetings and mailings going. Donation amounts are reported in the monthly Treasury report. To protect the anonymity of our members, donors will not be thanked by name unless they request otherwise.

Donations are non-tax-deductible, and checks must be made payable to "Josh Karpf" until NYC Atheists acquires a tax ID number. Mail to New York City Atheists, PO Box 1187, New York, NY 10013.



said that atheists would never receive good press anyway. A visiting journalist asked for atheist reactions to September 11. For details on cheap bus and motel rates for NYC-area freethinkers, see last month's newsletter or www.godlessamericans.org.

Carl McCall Is on a Gubernatorial Mission from God

In a Rochester church last month, New York State comptroller Carl McCall invoked Moses and said, "The Lord has called me to provide the leadership and the direction and the vision that New York State needs." According to the *New York Times*, McCall has avoided racial issues "to present a palatable face to both white and nonwhite voters." Is religious insanity in politics palatable?

It's not only palatable, but popular. Besides churchgoers, McCall is also courting Jews. His campaigners got an Orthodox rabbi to suggest that voting for McCall is a pious act that would reward McCall's pro-Israel stance. Opponent Andrew Cuomo hastily played catch-up to McCall on Jewish issues. Both candidates emphasized recent trips to Israel, appeared at Jewish functions, and visited Jewish neighborhoods.

Governor George Pataki, who is very popular among Orthodox and Russian Jews, is also seeking their votes. He's even performing in a Yiddish play. Pataki convinced the chancellor of the State University of New York to

restore its longtime programs in Israel after they were suspended because of safety concerns. (The SUNY Israel programs once attracted 40 students a year; now they draw only two.)

Ordained minister Al Sharpton has been eager run for the presidency in 2004 -- and to dethrone his mentor and fellow clergyman Jesse Jackson, who ran in 1984 and 1988 but whose star fell last year after the *National Inquirer* revealed that though married, he had fathered a child secretly with a Rainbow Coalition employee. Sharpton's 2001 attempt for the New York City mayoral seat began strongly but ended with him weakening both leading Democratic candidates.

Last July, HBO broadcast a 19-year-old FBI surveillance video of Sharpton talking guardedly with an undercover federal agent who offered to include Sharpton on a major cocaine deal. "They obviously didn't have enough on the tape to arrest him or else they would have," said an expert familiar with the case. Sharpton claims that the government was trying to entrap him then, and smear him now. The FBI allegedly used the tape as leverage to get Sharpton to spy on fellow black activists. At the time, the FBI was investigating possible ties between the mafia and boxing impresario Don King, a Sharpton supporter.

Seven months before the videotape media circus, Sharpton showed great humor in a *New York* feature article. "I know I'm a glass of milk with a little bit of shit in it," Sharpton says, laughing. "But look at" -- and here the reporter interrupts

the dialogue to say "he names a local minister," probably referring to Floyd Flake -- "he's a glass of shit with a little milk in it." Flake, a former member of the congress who is now pastor at a 13,000-member church, has jumped from local to national exposure thanks to Black Entertainment Television carrying his sermons.

Meanwhile, American Atheists' TV show *Atheist Viewpoint* has fallen from Manhattan public-access cable because it lacks a sponsor. If you are a Manhattan resident and are interested in receiving the videotapes and delivering them to a cable station, contact Joe Zamecki at (908) 276-7300.

Sources: "To McCall, a Divine Mission," *New York Times*, 8/18/02; "In N.Y. Governor's Race, a Scramble for Jewish Voters," *Forward*, 7/5/02; "Pataki's Sights On Brooklyn," *Jewish Week*, 5/10/02; "SUNY's Israel Shuffle," *Daily News*, 8/27/02; "SUNY Reinstates Israel Programs," *Jewish Week*, 8/30/02; "Rev Vs. Rev," *New York*, 1/7/02; "'83 Drug Tape Stars Rev. Al," *New York Post*, 7/23/02; "Sharpton Says F.B.I. Tape Distorts Truth," *New York Times*, 7/24/02; "Sharpton Says Tape Has Been Leaked in Smear Attempt," Associated Press, 7/23/02; "Sharpton on drug sting tape: Rev Says Government Tried to Set Him Up," *Daily News*, 7/23/02; "Coke Tape Not Real Thing - Al," *Daily News*, 7/24/02; "Sharpton's Detour Down a Low Road," *Daily News*, 7/28/02; "Rev Vs. Rev." *New York*, 1/7/02; "Black Cable Net Adds Rev. Flake," *Daily News*, 6/5/02.

Unconstitutional Kosher Laws Are Stayed

The federal appeals court that in May had ruled that New York State's kosher laws are unconstitutional has granted the

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state the right to continue using the strict, Orthodox-Judaism-based regulations during the state's appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

NYC Atheists had asked State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer to respect, not appeal, the court decision. That Spitzer has ignored atheist interests is no surprise. Spitzer also has supported public aid to religious schools (see the June newsletter or foody.org/atheist/insanity0602.html for earlier coverage of both issues).

Surprisingly, some observant Jews worry that the Supreme Court, too, may rule against laws regulating kosher food. Since that could end kosher laws nationwide, perhaps the Supreme Court *should* hear the case.

Jewish groups differ on how to define kosher standards. For instance, some rabbis want to declare unkosher the kosher food coming from Lubavitch Orthodox Jews because of the Lubavitchers' messianic worship of their late grand rabbi, Menachem Schneerson.

No Jewish group calls McDonald's kosher. But the Orthodox Union, the Star-K kosher certification laboratories, and the Conservative sect's National Ramah Commission are claiming part of the \$12 million class-action settlement that McDonald's agreed to pay after the chain admitted that its french fries were secretly flavored with beef extract. Some observant Jews had felt they could eat the fries, which had been promoted as being cooked in 100% vegetable oil. The settlement gives \$1 million for "promoting the understanding of Jewish law,

standards and practices with respect to kosher foods and dietary practices, and the observance of such standards by persons of the Jewish religion." (The settlement also benefits Hindu and vegetarian groups.)

Kosher rules may be used to evade civil law. American prison officials complain that the federal Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act encourages inmates to "spontaneously convert" to Judaism to get more expensive kosher food. (Prisoners also invoke the law to grow "religious" beards in which to hide contraband, and to demand access to Wiccan magazines to learn a secret code language.)

Sources: "Appeals Court Stays Ruling Against State's Kosher Food Laws," Associated Press, 9/6/02; "State Kosher Laws: It's Up to High Court," *Jewish Week*, 8/16/02; "A Historian's Polemic Against 'The Madness of False Messianism'," *Forward*, 10/19/01; "Kosher Groups Getting a Break in McDonald's Suit," *Forward*, 8/16/02; "U.S. Jails Feeling Penned In by Law Protecting Faith," *Forward*, 8/16/02; "Kosher Tale Nabs a 'Frankenfish'," *Forward*, 8/9/02; "As the Lower East Side Gentrifies, A Jewish Tradition May Be Facing Its Final Days," *Newsday*, 7/14/02.

NYC Recognizes Gay Marriages

Gay couples who have civil unions outside New York State will now be recognized officially by the city. The new law amends the city's current domestic-partner codes, making New York the first American city to recognize gay marriages performed elsewhere. Religious conservatives oppose legitimizing same-sex

relationships. This month, after the *New York Times* began announcing same-sex commitment ceremonies, there appeared clergy complaints such as the following from the pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church: "Are there no persons or organizations who will stand against this effort to relativize the entire moral order?"

Sources: "Mike Inks Law Recognizing Gay Marriages," *New York Post*, 8/28/02; "New York Times Runs First Same-Sex Commitment Ceremony Notice," Associated Press, 9/2/02; "Same-Sex Unions," *Letters, Newsday*, 9/2/02.

Church Prank May Sink Station

WNEW-FM's shock-jock hosts "Opie and Anthony" ran their top-rated radio show for five years, even while broadcasting descriptions of semipublic sex across New York City, while suffering only light fines from the FCC -- until they staged sex in St. Patrick's Cathedral, where police arrested an allegedly copulating tourist couple. The show was canceled, WNEW managers were fired, and the radio station's license is being threatened thanks to a strong public campaign from the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. Although no station has ever lost its license for broadcast content, no station has ever faced such selective enforcement of indecency codes to protect religious institutions, either.

Outside Manhattan Supreme Court, the two suspects (one reportedly Baptist) were harassed by the

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public. "You should be ashamed of yourselves!" "God is angry at you!" "God didn't like that! He's mad at your butt!" You can hear online excerpts of the offending program at playlist.yahoo.com/makeplaylist.dll?SID=3294767

Sources: "Radio Limbo for Unholy Jerk Jocks," *New York Post*, 8/20/02; "WNEW Brass Suspended," *Newsday*, 8/21/02; "Sin Duo Bedeviled," *New York Post*, 8/22/02; "St. Pat's Sex Pair Heckled at Court," *Daily News*, 8/22/02; "FCC Mulls Penalty for Sex Stunt," *Daily News*, 8/21/02.

Atheist Explosion of Letters

Kudos to New York City Atheists members Peter Kramer and Ron Barrier, whose letters to the editor were published in *Newsday* after that paper attacked atheism in its weekly "God Squad" column, to which a father had written about his agnostic son. "Be glad that Sean is only an agnostic and not yet an atheist," said the columnists. "If there is no God, there would be no reason to do good . . . there is no reason to get out of bed in the morning and no reason to believe that life has an edge over death, hope an edge over despair and love an edge over hate."

Long Island Secular Humanists, the Center for Inquiry, and New York City Atheists had urged freethinkers to write to *Newsday*. You can read Peter and Ron's letters below, plus two more:

Odd Reasoning

I can't believe that Rabbi Marc Gellman actually said, "Mostly, if there is no God, there is no reason to get out of bed in the morning" ["For Agnostic Son, a Deity Dialogue," Part

II, Aug. 24].

I am an atheist and I, along with millions of other atheists, have plenty of reasons to get out of bed in the morning. But even if I agreed with the rabbi, does this "prove" God's existence?

Peter Kramer
Bayside
August 30, 2002

A Rational Response

As an atheist, I found the recent column in your paper highly offensive ["For Agnostic Son, a Deity Dialogue," Part II, Aug. 24]. The answer provided by the monsignor and the rabbi to the parent of a 15-year-old self-proclaimed agnostic was appalling.

The writers provide a series of their "best arguments" for the existence of God. If I were not already an atheist, the good monsignor and rabbi would have convinced me to become one on the spot. Their "proof" consisted of arguments that any intelligent 15 year old would see through in a moment.

What I found most offensive was the characterization of atheism as a problem to be solved. In spite of the fact that I don't believe in a supreme being, I have plenty of incentive to do good - I want this world to be a good place. I have no problem getting up in the morning, and I have no need of fairy stories to justify my existence.

Maybe this 15 year old is showing his intelligence by considering a world view that values rationality over blind belief.

Al Berg
Weehawken, N.J.
August 31, 2002

An Obvious Answer

The God Squad column "For Agnostic Son, a Deity Dialogue" [Part II, Aug. 24] stated that "if there was no God, there is no reason to be good." That statement implies that religion is the source of morality - to which I say that mankind, out of necessity, established codes of behavior for survival's sake. History is

rife with examples of "good" done in the name of God - the Inquisition, the Crusades, the jihad, etc. Who is more moral? Those who do good because they think it's the right thing to do, or those that would do good out of a fear of punishment in an afterlife? The answer should be obvious.

Joseph Brook
Whitestone
September 1, 2002

Dire Straits

The God Squad's "For Agnostic Son, a Deity Dialogue" [Part II, Aug. 24] column amounted to nothing more than an attack on rationalism and naturalism. If the reasons they gave for belief truly are their feelings, then its no wonder society is in dire straits these days.

Ron Barrier
Staten Island
September 2, 2002

Treasury

Mid-August's balance was \$330.55. We spent \$54.02 to print and mail August's newsletter, \$22.82 on the picnic, \$5 to Xerox Eugene's "Equal Time for Freethought" flyer, and \$112 on advance rent for September's meeting space. Members donated \$90 at the picnic, and \$45 (\$20 and \$25) via mail. As of mid-September, the treasury balance is \$271.71, excluding the cost of this newsletter.

LISTEN TO "EQUAL TIME FOR FREETHOUGHT"

Sunday evenings at 6:30 P.M. on WBAI-FM radio (99.5). See the Web page foody.org/freethoughtradio.html for upcoming and past programs.

***Seventh Heaven* Meets the Taliban**

By Josh

Two years before September 11, I published on the Web a parody of the popular TV show *Seventh Heaven*, foody.org/seventhheaven.html. The syndicated drama, starring an over-enabled family led by a minister father, stars characters wielding vaguely Christian conservatism against growth pains in American suburbia. Or, as official series educational materials say, "sharing love, laughter and life."

I spiced it up by placing the whole family in Kabul for a taste of Islamic conservatism. In "*Seventh Heaven* Meets the Taliban," the eldest son Matt, now Malik, joins the religious police and jails a vendor of blasphemous Miss Piggy dolls. Little Suleyman and Rahi (Simon and Ruthie) try to find out from Mullah Camden why girls can't go to school and why worn-out Mom, later divorced against her will, doesn't become an endlessly, virginally renewed houri in heaven with dad. Daughter Maryam (Mary) is betrothed to an elderly country uncle to keep her dowry in the family. And so on.

The screenplay was pejorative but well researched. Everything was part of Afghan fundamentalist Islam except young Leyla (Lucy)'s clitorrectomy, which I noted was common in nearby Islamic Africa. I even tried my first photo editing. Matt's face looked great pasted onto a mujahideen posing before the body of dictator Muhammad Najibullah as the Taliban



hanged him from a lamppost in August 1996, a month and a day before *Seventh Heaven's* premiere in the United States.

But my new Web page was ignored those first two years. The parody had no audience: Critics of religious fundamentalism don't watch *Seventh Heaven*, and *Seventh Heaven* watchers aren't interested in criticism of religion. Except for a teacher who said she was adding me to her curriculum, all I got were rare messages from confused teenaged girls (or people who claimed to be them).

Until a few hours after the terrorist attacks in New York City, which is my home, and in Washington. "You're people are next -- you fucking raghead. Your people are stupid, stupid losers and will always live in the asshole of the world. Fuck Ala alalalalalalalala" was the first

salvo to me in e-mail. "I hope your fellow Americans burn your house tonight," was the next day's message.

Bad satire takes on a life of its own. I had used Islam and *Seventh Heaven* to satirize each other. But in most readers' eyes, my American critique of Islamic culture was an Islamic critique of America, so the popular attacks on Islam now included attacks on my parody. For the next couple of months, in rolled the mail, mostly from American patriots (or people who claimed to be them). "The huge federal taxes I pay," said another, "are spreading the guts of Allah all over the middle East in my relentless bombing."

"You can see in his eyes that Mullah Camden lusts after his daughters," wrote a literary critic who had found a subplot I hadn't imagined. I hadn't even mentioned his eyes. "It is amazing how people, born with

individual brains with which to think for themselves, can be led to believe this bull dung," he continued, then ruining his own point with, "God gave us our brains for us to use, not to be turned over to self appointed leaders to use in their malicious endeavors."

"Females are superior and we should be treated as such," said another. "Get off your Testosterone junkie attitude and quit acting like a yeast infected lice monkey, quit jacking off, and celebrate women. Are you all GAY? Don't you want to see our beautiful skin everyday? You are all jealous and cannot stand to think that your wives may walk near another man. Haven't you ever thought about orgies? That would be one great way to stop your hatred and jealousy of all women. I am coming there to walk around completely NUDE! I will spit my love milk at you in the face and queef my way around your stupid society."

After a month, the patriots were replaced mostly by pro-Taliban Islamists, or people who claimed to be them. Bearing names such as Faiza, Shahid, and Saalik, and writing during the ground-war buildup, their rage at what one called Americans' "depraved society" equaled or exceeded that of the Americans themselves.

"The TALIBAN are the best trained FREEDOM Fighters in the world," said one. "Taliban have 1 weapon that no one else posses that religion!! . . . Addressing all the non Islamic population I would just like to say that on the day of Judgement you will all root in hell!! AND I and MY MUSLIM

BROTHERS will just laugh !! A message to all: There is no GOD but ALLAH Mohammed is massager."

Afghan women wear burkhas and stay at home, said another, "cos they too beautiful and may be in danger of rape or adultery. They know, i know we all know its to protect ourself. we like wearing it. western women dont need to wear it cos they too ugly anyway, and get coated with plastic. and because the "civilised" women of the usa flaunt their availability for sex u are getting mothers fucking sons, and sisters fucking brothers, and fathers with the "babysitter" oh how many times have we heard rthat one? so called christians are fucking their own sex! oh how holy. a man fucking another man in the church toilet, cumming on the bible! who know even the priest might be gay. so please dont make me laugh, cos ur society is such a mess! and it will never get sorted out! so u try to hide ur pain, insecurities and sexual frustrations by dissing the holy pure INTELLIGENT Afghans," said the writer. The final challenge, typographically screamed, was "GO TALIBAN. AND ALSO I THINK U ARE OBSESSED WITH THE WHOLE MIDDLE EAST THING. WELL I SAY GET OVER IT, UR DICK WILL NEVER BE AS BIG AS AN ARABS. . . . U STICK TO UR BOTTLE

BLONDE PUMPED UP PLASTIC BARBIE DOLL. AND BE CAREFUL AROUND US 'COVERED' WOMEN, WE MIGHT JUST SEE A HAIRY WHITE WANKER LIKE U AND GET OUR GUN OUT."

The ground war in Afghanistan over, at least for now. More or less buried with some who fought in it, the Web screenplay "*Seventh Heaven Meets the Taliban*" has returned to its pre-September 11 levels of rare feedback from confused teenaged girls. On one rerun of *Seventh Heaven*, originally aired half a month after my mocking version appeared, daughter Lucy walks a picket line protesting the Taliban, which inspires normally apolitical Mom to deliver a sermon on the subject, and youngest son Simon finds that he is the only boy in home economics class.

