

New York City Atheists

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

January 2003

(212) 330-6794 PO Box 1187, New York, NY 10013
<http://nyc-atheists.org> info@nyc-atheists.org

Events

January Meeting

Sunday, January 19, 2003, 1-5 P.M.
Guest speaker: Warren Allen Smith,
author of *Celebrities in Hell* and
Who's Who in Hell
Source of Life Conference Center
352 Seventh Avenue, 16th flr, rm A
(Between 29th and 30th Sts.)
Donation requested

January Atheist Meetup

Tuesday, January 21, 2003, 7 P.M.
Join your fellow heretics for drinks!
Expected location: 288 (Tom & Jerry's
bar), 288 Elizabeth St., Manhattan
(Between E. Houston and Bleecker Sts., just off
the Bowery. Close to the Second Avenue F, the
Broadway-Lafayette 6, and the Prince Street
N/R.)
Call (212) 330-6794 or check
<http://atheists.meetup.com> to confirm location.

February Meeting

Sunday, February 23, 2003, 1-5 P.M.
Source of Life Conference Center
352 Seventh Avenue, 16th flr, rm C1
(Between 29th and 30th Sts.)
Donation requested

Also of atheist interest:

Darwin Day Celebration

Saturday, February 8, 2003, 2 P.M.
Featuring Carl Zimmer, former senior
editor of *Discover* magazine;
Prof. Elof Carlson of Stony Brook
University; LISH president Gerry
Dantone; and musical guest
Sonny Meadows
Plainview/Old Bethpage Library
99 Old Country Road, Plainview,
Long Island
Sponsored by Long Island Secular Humanists
Free. For more information, see "Darwin Day
in February" in this newsletter, and contact
LISH at 516-742-1662 or LISecHum@aol.com



Who's Who in Hell? Find Out at Our January Meeting

Warren Allen Smith, the longtime freethought activist and the author of *Who's Who in Hell* and *Celebrities in Hell*, will be the guest speaker at January's meeting of New York City Atheists. Free refreshments will be served; donation requested. Sunday, January 19, 2003, from 1-5 P.M., at the Source of Life Conference Center, 352 Seventh Avenue, 16th floor, room A (between 29th and 30th Sts.).

Smith has personally consulted with eminent atheists as far back as Charles Smith (1887-1964, editor in New York City of *The Truth Seeker*) and is expected to be negatively critical about contemporary humanist groups. He is cofounder, with Dennis Middlebrooks, of Freethinking-Activist-Nonbelieving New Yorkers (FANNY).

He recently accompanied Dr. Taslima Nasrin to San Diego, where she spoke at a freethinkers conference, and Los Angeles, where both spoke at an atheists' conference.

His recently published *Celebrities in Hell* lists American Atheists, Ellen Johnson, and the organization's Web site.



Dan Barker Akbar!

Atheism and Islam mix less well than oil and water. But freethinkers and Muslims mingled on a snowy afternoon this month when atheist activist Dan Barker of the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF) debated with Islamic scholar Hassanain Rajabali at the Imam Ali Mosque, aka the Islamic Institute of New York in Woodside, Queens.

The Shiite mosque had, through its educational Tawheed Institute, invited Barker to debate "Does God Not Exist?" on Sunday, January 5, as part of its post-September 11 series of interfaith events. The Tawheed Institute says that "at least 400 people attended and that included about 125 people from other faiths." The bright, modern hall did squeeze in people beyond its reserved 300 seats, but not that many more. Probably no more than around 20 freethinkers attended, thanks to the mosque's remote location.

The overenthusiastic body count would not be the first inobjective statement on the part of the Tawheed Institute, which that day distributed a pamphlet excerpting "a debate between a Scientist and the late Imam Chirri of Detroit." The "debate" in the pamphlet has the "scientist," identified only as "Wilson," asking humble questions of the imam. A

little skeptical investigation shows that "Wilson" was Wilson H. Guertin, a 1960s Methodist psychology professor who converted to Islam, and who is praised by current Islamic sources as a "scientist and an outstanding psychologist," but has no credentials except to be cited by current Islamic sources as a "scientist and an outstanding psychologist."

The Barker-Rajabali debate itself grew stormy at times. But if the mosque organizers and home audience were not friendly to atheism, they were very friendly to atheists, offering good hospitality to guests and to Barker, whom the Tawheed Institute had flown out from Madison, Wisconsin, where FFRF is based. Women, most of them wearing head shawls, were seated separately from men, and they tended to talk more than men during the debate. A woman atheist in their ranks later suggested that such outings might be a rare social opportunity for them.

After admitting how uneasy Muslims were with the idea of criticism of their god, an organizer asked spectators to "put away their anger." He introduced an almost ten-minute singsong recitation of "Rahman," the "Beneficent" sura (chapter) from the Koran. The verses, then translated into English, praised the perfection of Allah's creations, starting with the Koran and man, and ending with heaven's maiden-filled gardens: "In them will be fair (companions), good, beautiful . . . whom no man or Jinn has touched . . . reclining on green cushions and carpets of beauty." Every other line of the sura asked, "Which then of the favors of your Lord will you deny?"



(This article is written in advance of the availability of the debate transcript, so it will contain minor inaccuracies.)

Barker began his opening arguments, saying there were more than 1 billion nonbelievers, including Buddhists. "The only guide to truth is reason," he said. "We should all welcome criticism." He showed his book *Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist* and his folk-music CD *Friendly Neighborhood Atheist*. He also recommended the more topical

Why I Am Not a Muslim by Ibn Warraq.

To Rajabali he stressed that they had much in common, denying the existence of a whole pantheon of gods present and past, but that atheists took the deity-denial of "There is no god but Allah" one step more: "I believe in one less god than you do," said Barker. "Atheism is not a belief, but a claim of knowledge. . . . We have no need for some master up there to whom we can bow as a slave."

An all-knowing, all-powerful god is fictional, said Barker. The absence of evidence was the evidence of absence, and if something as obvious and almighty as a god did exist, why where there nonbelievers, and why this very debate? "We don't debate the existence of gravity," said Barker.

The religious are insecure about their theism, said Barker, asking us to imagine the credibility of people who kept repeating "There is no law but evolution, and Darwin is its prophet." Science explains natural phenomena such as lightning and soil nutrition, both once credited to gods, said Barker. He dared Rajabali to suggest a falsifiable statement to test the hypothesis for a god's existence.

Barker asked how a supposedly merciful and just god could permit the suffering of the innocent in the September 11 terrorist attacks, and he said that since Rajabali and the audience were surely ethical people, they would have stopped the attacks, which would have proven them better than their god, who permitted the attacks, and whom he called the terrorists' accomplice.



Rajabali replied that Barker's arguments were similar to Barker's past debates and Web site, "almost . . . like a dogmatic presentation against the existence of God." He said that the Buddhists in Barker's 1 billion tally were not atheists, said he didn't understand the difference between atheists claiming knowledge rather than belief, and expressed incredulity that atheists could ignore the evidence of a universe that he said was clearly designed, with life existing in perfect form. "Just because we don't know

something doesn't imply that it's not there."

"You want something falsifiable?" asked Rajabali. "Disprove my existence." Our existence is proof of a god, he said. Because Allah is an absolute power, beyond definition, he cannot be framed in relative terms such as matter, time, and space, he said.

Why would you do good if you're an atheist, asked Rajabali. "You came from nothing, you have no goals. Why would you do [good] in this transient time of existence?" God can be seen as both merciful and just despite the existence of "evil" in the world, he said, when thought of "holistically," instead of being "compartmentalized." Would Rajabali himself have stopped the terrorist attacks? Would God? he asked rhetorically. Rajabali said he would have, but that since God was not on trial, the question was irrelevant.



Barker, in turn, said that Rajabali still had not offered evidence for a god's existence, only for the ungodly ignorance of atheists. In reply to Rajabali's argument from design, Barker said that gaps in scientific knowledge "do not give you the excuse to plug in your god," and that many freethinkers consider life to be horribly designed, and that we are lucky to survive such designs. Rajabali, speculated Barker, would not give up his god belief even if those gaps in knowledge closed. "You're using these gaps to pretend to be intellectual." Barker closed by saying that Muslims treated Allah as if he were a person, an impossibility if Allah were unlimited.



In his opening argument, Rajabali noted that the opening prayer had praised Allah's creation as perfect, and he said that what we see is imperfect only because of the imperfection of our perception. He said that he didn't need to prove that the universe was designed, and that if Barker rejected such obvious proof, Barker was shutting his eyes to it and begging the question. What caused the Big Bang, and why were natural

laws so constant and favorable to life while scientists' explanations for those laws varied so, he asked. The Koran upholds the anthropic universe, he said.

God, who is not bound by relative frames of reference, created a perfect universe out of mercy for us, said Rajabali. Pain and suffering exist so we can be tested and tried: we have the free will to choose from right and wrong, though God already knows what our choice will be. Allah planted atheism in Barker's soul, said Rajabali, adding that agnosticism would more objective for Barker than the prejudice of atheism. The perfect universe includes "evil" only as a lack of good, much as coldness is a lack of heat, or darkness a lack of light. To appreciate a healthy baby, you must see a sick or killed one, said Rajabali. A lot of "evil" is manmade, not natural, he said.



"Most religious people are good, despite their holy books," replied Barker. He said he had not rejected a designed universe, but that that design was the result of natural selection. Again he said that Rajabali's god was a "god of the gaps," and that Rajabali was begging the question by answering one mystery with another. He then complained that Rajabali's "attack[ing] me, my motives, saying I don't *want* a god" was an ad hominem attack unsuitable in a debate.

God *is* on trial, said Barker. "He claims to be all good, and you pray to him, but your prayers fail." In the example of September 11, "God cares more about the free will of terrorists than about those who died. God must have found good in it. If you exempt your god, then that's moral cowardice." Atheists are *more* moral because they're willing to criticize anything, he said. For a god to threaten those who do bad -- or even unbelievers who do good -- with hell is morally weak, he said in closing.



Rajabali said that Barker still ignored the evidence from design, and that natural selection was only part of something greater. He also said that

Barker's satiric bashing of religion was very insulting and nonacademic.

After a short break (including dashes to rest rooms, whose stalls featured plastic watering pitchers for lefthanded cleansing), both debaters answered audience questions submitted to the moderator. Barker was asked what was the foundation to his morality. He replied that morality is, by definition, the minimization of harm, and that different cultures had different moralities. Rajabali called that self-centered, and complained that Barker's Web site equated polygamy with cannibalism in a list of customs socially acceptable in some cultures. Barker said the key question was why he should be punished for living as moral life while still being an unbeliever.



Won't there always be a "god of the gaps" since science can't explain everything? was another question.

Barker said that Darwin hadn't known of genetics, but that science had closed that gap. Rajabali said science could not address morals, ethics, love, or faith, and complained that Barker wanted to bring God to a relative world so Barker could deny him. Barker disagreed, calling love observable and measurable, and cited recent books such as *The Blank Slate* as evidence that "science does address issues that you call mysterious."

Discussion, and the audience, grew more heated from then on, sparking many whispers and angry murmurs, plus an "Allah akbar!" from the audience rear and a freethinker's "Answer the question!" from the front. What of the millions killed by Stalin, Hitler, and Pol Pot? asked an audience member. Barker, calling Stalin seminary-trained and Hitler Catholic, said they were tyrants for political gains, not killing in the name of atheism. Barker admitted that atheists have done horrible things, and that he denounced them. Rajabali said that the lack of an absolute moral code was in itself a danger.



Rajabali, asked if he would even consider an agnostic position, called that a starting point but that you must go further to find

truth. He also repeated his insistence on an absolute moral code, and said that it's impossible to "legislate" atheist ethics. Barker complained that atheists did indeed have ethical beliefs, and that Rajabali was attacking a straw man by denying it, and was committing another ad hominem attack by calling Barker ignorant.

Civil laws are fluid and can be improved while religious laws are too fixed, said Barker. Rajabali said that was too relativistic, and that it made possible Hitler and Saddam Hussein. He added that democracy, deciding issues "51 to 49," was not moral. He also said that he was not calling Barker ignorant, just lacking understanding.

The debaters also discussed the utility of prayer. When hell came up, Barker said he would be honored to be in hell, in the company of so-called sinners and away from the absolute dictatorship of a god.

In his closing statement, Barker reprised his opening comment about how much he and Rajabali had in common, but added that Rajabali suffered from religious walls that gave him respect within his circle but not outside in the world of "infidels." He said he didn't care what Rajabali's beliefs were, that he just supported the separation of church and state, which protected both of them. Rajabali replied that Barker's long history of mocking religion and their so-called "vicious god" showed that Barker did care, and he closed with an atheist-in-the-foxhole anecdote of being on a plane filled with presumably atheist Chinese people who suddenly prayed when there appeared to be danger.

The audience applause, after all that tension, was cathartic -- but handshakes and hugs between the debaters did not end the event, as the principal of the Tawheed Institute seized the chance to give a long, heavyhanded address which, besides praising the debate and the school for hosting the debate, said that "we always know God by asking questions about him."

After the debate, the overflow crowd spilled into the lobby for refreshments. Rajabali loudly lectured to an attentive circle in a hallway, and organizers generously plied freethinkers with food and drink.

Several freethinkers (excluding Barker and some of his associates who dined with mosque organizers) discussed the debate over barbecue afterward (apologies to the vegetarians who came). The debate was also discussed in the discussion group <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nyc-atheists> (NYC Atheists members only; e-mail atheist@foody.org if you haven't already joined the discussion group).

A Koran publisher expressed interest in attending a New York City Atheists meeting, and a Tawheed Institute organizer has asked if atheists would be interested in returning to the mosque to hear "in greater depth the Islamic concept of the 'necessary' existence of God."

The debate may be seen online at <http://www.madressa.org/webcast.htm> and a transcript is planned at http://www.madressa.org/debate_transcript.htm. Both Web pages are maintained by the Tawheed Institute, which also is selling a video of the debate for \$20, payable by cash or check, to the Tawheed Institute, 299 Knollwood Road, Suite 217, Elmsford, NY 10523. (E-mail admin@madressa.org for more information on the video.)

Online Discussion Group

Join nyc-atheists, the new Yahoo discussion group for members of NYC Atheists! There we can converse online, outside of our meetings. You can participate via e-mail, or by pointing your Web browser to the discussion-group Web page <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nyc-atheists>

Participation in the nyc-atheists discussion group is limited to members of NYC Atheists. E-mail atheist@foody.org to request admission.

Recent discussion topics have included the Dan Barker-Hassanain Rajabali debate, atheists and marriage, upcoming Meetup locations, atheism in western Europe, stamping currency, Natalie Angier's *New York Times* article "The Origin of Religions, From a Distinctly Darwinian View" profiling evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson, and conservative columnist Bill O'Reilly.

Church-State Separation in Black Brooklyn

by Eugene

I'm sad to say that church-state separation doesn't exist in black Brooklyn/poorer black communities.

For example, I recently went to Bed Stuy's Herbert Von King Cultural Arts Center, a community center inside this city park. The nice receptionist introduced me to the pastor's wife. There is Bible study on Saturdays, and Sunday morning church services. The pastor's wife invited me to attend when I told her I write about religious issues.

Next stop: Boy's High School, located on the corner of Marcy and Putnam Avenues, also in Bed Stuy. The school is public property and religious services should not be held there, yet on Sundays I've seen signs for a Baptist group that is illegally promoting religion there.

Saturday afternoon I went to a new barbershop not far from Boy's High. Once I got comfortable, I started to get offended by the gospel music. Next some older black men talking about "getting right with God"!

Even though the church unfortunately is a negative power to be dealt with, today, in many black churches here in Brooklyn, what we have are old ladies' clubs. There are few churches in the community where 35-45 percent of the members are black men. Perhaps, in eight or twelve years, after a significant drop in membership, we can expect to see many black churches closing, and a lot less power being held by the clergy in black Brooklyn, especially in poor ghetto communities. But for now, sadly, the church is too visible and powerful.

Treasury Report

Early December's balance was \$771.89. We spent \$44.40 on postage for December's newsletter, \$27.64 on mailing supplies, and \$8 on a DAT for *Equal Time for Freethought*. Members donated \$20 by mail. We have spent \$160 for the room rental for the upcoming February meeting. As of mid-January, the treasury balance is \$551.85, excluding the cost of this newsletter's postage.

Catholic Church Fights Choice, Gays

Several Roman Catholic bishops sued New York State to overturn a new law that requires insurers for most employers, including most Catholic hospitals and schools, to cover birth control and other women's health services. Several Protestant churches joined in the suit.

The bishops said that the law forces Catholic institutions to endorse anti-Catholic practices. In New York, the church says it operates 800 schools, 40 hospitals, 61 nursing homes and hundreds of social services agencies.

Last summer, the Catholic Church had failed to lobby the New York State Assembly for religious exemptions to the health-care law. Republican members, seeking more support from women voters, had spurned the church position and instead supported the Democratic Party-led version of the bill. (See the April newsletter or <http://foody.org/atheist/insanity0402.html> for previous coverage.)

In December, the Catholic Church also failed to block the state's anti-gay-bias Sexual Orientation Nondiscrimination Act.

Sources: "Bishops Sue State to Block Coverage for Birth Control," *New York Times*, 12/31/02; "Gay-Rights Act Galls Church," *Daily News*, 12/17/02

Rage Against Destruction Destroyed

The evangelical, Missouri-based anti-violence hip-hop group Rage against Destruction, which was warned by the New York City Education Department against proselytizing in city schools -- but was not barred from the local school system -- has shut down, claiming that it had decided its expenses did not warrant its outreach. Twenty full-time employees will be laid off.

The Anti-Defamation League and media had been critical of Rage against Destruction, saying it had deceived students and school officials into believing it was only concerned with nonviolence while it hid its religious agenda. The Anti-Defamation League recently described

Firefest as "an unabashed Christian evangelical festival with a high-pressure pitch aimed at vulnerable teens."

The Anti-Defamation League office in St. Louis, Missouri said it was surprised by the sudden decision to shut down, since it had been on the verge of settling its differences with Rage against Destruction. "Our only concern was the church-state issue," said an Anti-Defamation League representative. "We are not anti-religion."

November's newsletter or <http://foody.org/atheist/insanity1102.html#preaching> offers previous coverage.

Source: "Rage against Destruction Shuts Down," *Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis), 12/18/02.

"Megan's Law" List of Priests

A New York City area priestly-pedophilia survivors' group has created a Web site that lists local priests accused of preying on children: <http://www.survivorsfirst.org>

Catholics can use the site to see whether alleged abusive priests are working in their parish -- information not provided by bishops. "I'm not sure what the Web site will accomplish," said a representative for the Archdiocese of New York.

Source: "Priests 'Sin-Listed' on Web," *Daily News*, 12/19/02.

Could Chinese Psychic Have Predicted This? Also, Miss Cleo Gets Great Settlement

In an unheard-of prosecution of fraud in the name of religion, New York State has arrested a practicing psychic. Ying Liu, a Buddhist fortuneteller who for years peddled her psychic powers to Chinese immigrants from a storefront in Flushing, Queens. Her advertisements claim that she has predicted marriages, career advancements, and births, and that she has cured hypertension, cancer, and other illnesses.

The New York State penal code says fortunetelling is illegal. Under the law, a fortuneteller is defined as anyone who "claims or pretends to tell fortunes, or holds himself out as being able, by claimed or pretended use of occult powers, to answer questions or give advice on personal matters or to exorcise, influence or affect evil spirits or curses." The law does not apply to people who tell fortunes "as part of a show or exhibition solely for the purposes of entertainment or amusement." The law also, apparently, does not forbid predictions based in the superstition of more established religions.

A customer of Liu had complained to the state attorney general that he had paid \$8,000 for a transfer of psychic powers from Liu, which the customer had not received.

Liu was charged with grand larceny in the third degree -- stealing money by not delivering the promised goods, the psychic powers -- and fortunetelling. The state district attorney's office says that even in a city where soothsayers abound, especially in immigrant neighborhoods, fortunetellers are rarely arrested. "Prosecutions for the crime of fortunetelling are not unheard of, but they are still exceedingly rare," said a spokesman for the Queens district attorney. If convicted, Liu could be sentenced to up to seven years in prison on the grand larceny charge and up to 90 days in jail on the fortunetelling charge. The case is scheduled to be heard in February.

In another case, New York State wrote off a potential \$224,000 penalty from psychic Miss Cleo's shell corporation, the Psychic Readers Network, by agreeing to a \$25,000 settlement. The Psychic Readers Network has also reached a \$5 million settlement with the Federal Trade Commission. The New York State Consumer Protection Board had accused the Florida-based company of violating the state's telemarketing law aimed at protecting consumers from rip-offs and unwanted calls. The \$25,000 settlement allows the company to avoid potentially more costly legal action while still being able to deny it violated the law. See the November 2001 newsletter or <http://foody.org/atheist/insanity1101.html#some> for previous coverage.

Source: "A Psychic Faces Charges of Charging for Nothing," *New York Times*, 1/1/02; "State PSYchs Out Miss Cleo," *Daily News*, 12/6/02; "224G Penalty Is Foretold for Psychic Hotline," *Daily News*, 11/1/01.

Darwin Day in February

Darwin Day, commemorating the work of Charles Darwin, has been celebrated on or near February 12, Darwin's birthday, by groups in Europe, North America, and Australia for over a decade. Events range from large symposiums with serious and thought-provoking content to small movie gatherings and fun activities with an offbeat theme. Events may be educational in scope, activist-oriented, or solely for the enjoyment of a close group of friends or membership. The educational nonprofit Darwin Day Program has been promoting the



holiday and encouraging its celebration. Its Web site, <http://www.darwinday.org>, lists events across the country and links to many other related sites.

The long-term goal of the program is to make Darwin Day a global celebration by 2009, and to increase the educational outreach projects available. 2009 marks the bicentennial of Darwin's birth and the 150th anniversary of the publication of *The Origin of Species*. Till then, the program plans to build toward the goal of a global celebration by reaching out to all science enthusiasts around the world, encouraging them to celebrate Darwin Day and to champion the public understanding and appreciation of science within their communities.

Locally, Long Island Secular Humanists is celebrating Darwin Day on Saturday, February 8, 2003, starting at 2 P.M. at the Plainview/Old Bethpage Public Library, 99 Old Country Road, Plainview. Guest speakers will include Carl Zimmer, a former senior editor of *Discover* magazine, Prof. Elof Carlson of Stony Brook University, LISH president Gerry Dantone, and musical guest Sonny Meadows. For more information on the free event, contact LISH at 516-742-1662 or LISecHum@aol.com.

Zimmer will talk about a little-known aspect of Darwin's work: the years he spent poring over barnacles and orchids. Most people who know about this time think of it as a period when he was avoiding dealing with his theory of evolution. But just the opposite is true -- this gentleman's hobby revealed to him one of the most important features of evolution -- how radically new body plans emerge from ordinary variation. The title of the talk will be "Barnacles and Orchids: Darwin Killing Time or Discovering Evolution?" Zimmer is a science writer who has produced numerous articles and books about evolution. He was a senior editor at *Discover* magazine from 1994 to 1999 and now contributes articles to magazines including *National Geographic* and *Science*. His column "The Evolutionary Front" appears regularly in *Natural History*. His books include *Parasite Rex* and *Evolution: The Triumph of an Idea*. His next book, *To Paint the Soul*, will

appear in October 2003.

Prof. Elof Carlson's talk will be "Darwinism Confirmed through Comparative Genomics." Carlson is distinguished teaching professor emeritus from the Department of Biochemistry and Cell Biology at Stony Brook University. He is the author of several books, his most recent being *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea*, and his current book in production is a history of classical genetics, due in spring 2003. He is also a science columnist for several Long Island newspapers.

LISH President Gerry Dantone will talk briefly on "Evolution: Is it Moral?"

Join a National Group: Freedom from Religion Foundation

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 American Humanist Association (www.americanhumanist.org), the Freedom from Religion Foundation (www.ffrf.org), and, to a lesser extent, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (www.au.org).

You might want to consider membership in one of them to support and learn more about their work. So far, NYC Atheists, an independent local group, has had no formal membership requirements or dues, but it also has few resources. More established national groups have many resources, and keep you better apprised of national and international issues. In November, this column introduced American Atheists, with which NYC Atheists is affiliated.

The Madison, Wisconsin-based Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), originally a local chapter of American Atheists, is "a national membership association of freethinkers: atheists, agnostics, and skeptics of any pedigree." It was incorporated in 1978 as an educational nonprofit "to promote the constitutional principle of separation of state and church, and to educate the

public on matters relating to nontheism."

FFRF keeps three or four lawsuits in the courts at all times, and has ended a variety of violations of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. It publishes books and the monthly newspaper *Freethought Today*, sponsors high school and collegiate essay competitions with cash awards, hosts an annual national convention, and provides speakers for events and debates, such as Dan Barker's recent appearance at a Queens mosque (see "Dan Barker Akbar!" in this newsletter). It claims almost 5,000 members, with 600 additional nonmember supporters.

This year, FFRF hopes to work with Michael Newdow to file challenges to "under God" in the pledge of allegiance in all eleven federal circuits, and plans to expand its student scholarship awards.

FFRF's Web site is ffrf.org, and you can e-mail them at ffrf@mailbag.com. See the next page for a membership application with their mailing address.

HELP NEW YORK CITY ATHEISTS GROW

Please consider donating to New York City Atheists.

Membership and our monthly newsletter are free, but we depend on donations to maintain meetings and mailings going. Donations 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." Send your donations to New York City Atheists, PO Box 1187, New York, NY 10013.

Protest the MTA's Chaplain

New York City's Metropolitan Transit Authority, despite a budget deficit, is paying \$100,000 to fund a full-time chaplain and his secretary, according to the *New York Post*. Should any public agency have an *unpaid* chaplain, never mind a paid one?

Rabbi Tzvi Berkowitz alone makes \$60,000 a year as a full-time chaplain at the MTA for the past six years and is on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

If you wish to protest this, there are at least two possible officials to write to or call. The comptroller of the City of New York "makes recommendations on City programs and operations, fiscal policies, and financial transactions." The inspector general of the MTA "identif[ies] fraud, waste, abuse or mismanagement within the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), its constituent agencies, and those who do business with the MTA." Here is their contact information:

Comptroller William C. Thompson, Jr.
City of New York
1 Centre Street
New York, NY 10007
Phone: (212) 669-3500
Fax: (212) 669-2707
E-mail: citizens@comptroller.nyc.gov

Matthew D. Sansverie
Inspector General, MTA
111 West 40th Street, 5th Floor
New York, NY 10018
Phone: 1-800-682-4448
Web:
<http://mtaig.state.ny.us/html/complnts.html>

Also, you can write a letter to the editor to the *New York Post*, which broke the news in its January 6 article "Strapped MTA Pays Rabbi 60G":

Letters to the Editor
New York Post
1211 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10036-8790
E-mail: letters@nypost.com
Web letters submission:
http://www.nypost.com/postopinion/letters/letters_editor.htm

Writing Letters to the Editor

Use this list of major local print media (plus *USA Today*) to send letters.

Letters should respond to a journal's specific article or general coverage, and opinion/"op-ed" commentaries should reflect a journal's general style. Include your name, address, and daytime and evening phone numbers. The shorter the letter or commentary, the better the chance it will be used. All journals reserve the right to edit letters for length and clarity. Contact information is also given, where available, for opinion/"op-ed" commentaries. Always check journals first for the most current submission information and expected style.

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Equal Time for Freethought

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- Ibn Warraq, author of "Why I Am Not a Muslim"
- Taslima Nasrin, fatwa-sentenced, former Muslim, Bangladeshi feminist/human rights activist, author of "Myebela: My Bengali Girlhood"
- Ellen Johnson, of American Atheists, on the Godless Americans March on Washington
- Beth Lamont, of the Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York, on humanism, peace, Corliss Lamont, etc.
- Bill London, of the National Council against Health Fraud, on alternative medicine
- D. J. Grothe, of Gay and Lesbian Atheists and Humanists, on gays and freethought
- Margaret Downey, of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia, on Tom Paine, Supreme Court cases, etc.
- Ed Buckner, of the Council for Secular Humanism, on the Godless Americans March, the Christianity of America, and the Center for Inquiry
- Richard Dawkins on childhood religious "programming," genetics, etc.
- Paul Kurtz, of the Council for Secular Humanism, on humanism
- Ron Barrier, of American Atheists, on atheism
- Annie Laurie Gaylor, of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, on the pledge, priestly pedophilia, and women in freethought
- Norm Allen, Jr., on African-American humanism
- Call-in discussions