

New York City Atheists

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

February 2003

(212) 330-6794 PO Box 1187, New York, NY 10013
<http://foody.org/atheist.html> atheist@foody.org

Events

February Meeting

Sunday, February 23, 2003, 1-5 P.M.
Discussion: Spring tabling; religious influence in education; plus socializing. Free refreshments.
Source of Life Conference Center
352 Seventh Avenue, 16th flr, rm C1
(Between 29th and 30th Sts.)
Donation requested

February Atheist Meetup

A casual evening with your fellow freethinkers.

Tuesday, February 18, 2003, 7 P.M.
Mustang Harry's bar/restaurant
352 7th Ave.

(Between 29th and 30th Sts.; same building as our monthly, weekend conference-center meetings)

Location chosen by registering and voting at <http://atheists.meetup.com>. Atheist Meetups in Westchester, Long Island, and northern NJ were canceled due to too few registrants.

March Meeting

Speaker: Margaret Downey, founder of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia, on her battle with the Boy Scouts' anti-atheist discrimination
Sunday, March 30, 2003, 1-5 P.M.
Source of Life Conference Center
352 Seventh Avenue, 16th flr, rm E
(Between 29th and 30th Sts.)
Donation requested



Meetings in February and March; Margaret Downey

Come to February's meeting of New York City Atheists! We'll brainstorm about how best to organize street-fair tabling starting in April, religious influence in education, current events -- and, of course, we'll socialize, all on February 23, from 1 to 5 P.M. at the Source of Life Conference Center, 352 Seventh Avenue (29th and 30th Sts.), 16th floor, room C1. A donation is requested.

Manhattan's next Atheist Meetup will be on Tuesday, February 18, at 7 P.M., at Mustang Harry's bar/restaurant, in the same building as the conference center. In March, we may begin an additional social weeknight at a Manhattan coffeehouse.

Activist Margaret Downey, president of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia and the Anti-Discrimination Support Network, speaks at our March meeting on her nine-year battle to pressure the Boy Scouts of America to admit atheists, and how to fight them now. Come hear her on March 30, 2003, 1-5 P.M., the last Sunday of the month, at the Source of Life Conference Center. Donation requested.

Crowded January Meeting Learns of a Crowded Hell

Twenty-seven people crammed NYC Atheists' January meeting to hear Warren Allen Smith, the author of *Who's Who in Hell* and *Celebrities in Hell*, discuss historical and modern heretics, and the challenge of documenting them.

"No one dies so long as someone remembers," said Smith, introducing his compendium of ten thousand nonbelievers. *Who's Who in Hell* includes atheists, agnostics, humanists, naturalists, rationalists, Ethical Culturists, skeptics, and anyone else "not into monotheism." It introduces many obscure freethinkers, and reveals the hidden heresy of many popular ones.

Smith described the transmission of history through oral storytelling, songs, statues, and books. Be skeptical of what you're taught, he warned. He called history books "mostly a bundle of judgments by people with vested interests."

Smith conceived of *Who's Who in Hell* in the 1950s, at a time of great freethought activism -- the Humanist Society of New York, he said, then had hundreds of active members. He corresponded with Thomas Mann on what a "humanist" was in *Dr. Faustus*, and learned from



Corliss Lamont of the philosophy of humanism.

Smith sketched his path through freethought historical works, starting with Joseph McCabe's *Rationalist Encyclopedia* (1950) and E. Haldeman-Julius's paperback Little Blue Books, and continuing with Pierre Sylvain Maréchal's *Dictionnaire des athées* (1798); Joseph Mazzini Wheeler's *Biographical Dictionary of Freethinkers of All Ages and Nations* (1889); and John Mackinnon Robertson's *History of Freethought Ancient and Modern to the Period of the French Revolution* (1936).

Smith called himself "just a journalist," compiling the work of previous researchers, then adding activists from current freethought groups. Over several years, the manuscript grew into a 900-page A-to-Z collection of biographies spiced with gossip and humor.

It was difficult finding a publisher for *Who's Who in Hell*, said Smith. The secular humanist Prometheus Books, the Unitarian Beacon Press, Open Court, and Routledge all declined. But Lyle Stuart of Barricade Books, the publisher of Ed Koch's *Guiliani: Nasty Man* and *The Anarchist Cookbook*, did publish it.

Smith said he got good reviews in the general and book-trade press, but that the refusal of *The Humanist* to review it, and a negative review in *Free Inquiry* -- which called it a "deficient directory" -- hurt the book's distribution to the very freethought audience he sought, and

reduced the feedback he wanted for an improved second edition. Smith said that he then resigned from the Council for Secular Humanism, the publisher of *Free Inquiry*. He speculated that a "hatchet job" had been authorized because he hadn't included some secular humanist achievements. He no longer calls himself a secular humanist, he said.

Barricade Books has since published his second book, *Celebrities in Hell*, which Smith said could inspire many nontheists to come out of the closet. Hell is a silly theological invention, one that has done great harm to anyone who has been brainwashed into believing it, Smith concluded.

After several audience questions, plus a social break that included sales of the autographed *Celebrities in Hell*, we reconvened. Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists; and Binghamton University's David Sloan Wilson, whose recently published book *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion and the Nature of Society* describes religion as a biological adaptation, were proposed as future speakers. (See "Is Religion Darwinian?" in this newsletter.) We discussed whether twelve-step groups welcomed atheists; Michael Newdow's characterization of atheism as a religion; and the History Channel's surprisingly critical coverage of biblical archeology.

Kirsten brought up street tabling. That had been discussed in April 2001's meeting, when New York City Atheists was new, but had not drawn enough support. Now, more members are interested. The director's suggestion of informal sidewalk tabling was rejected in favor of street fairs. Kenneth offered to investigate further. Jake, who prints the newsletter (which is usually typeset by Ileen; thanks to both for their hard work) offered to print flyers for us.

We can discuss tabling ideas and other issues at February's meeting. If you have ideas and are interested in helping, please come or contact NYC Atheists at atheist@foody.org or (212) 330-6794.



Ordering *Who's Who in Hell* and *Celebrities in Hell*

Who's Who in Hell (1,349 pp.) retails for \$125.00 and can be obtained from Barricade Books, 185 Bridge Plaza North (#308-A), Fort Lee, NJ 07024, (201) 944-7600.

You can also buy it for \$99 from Rationalists NY, 31 Jane St., Box 10-D, New York, NY 10014 (make check payable to "Rationalists NY").

To donate a copy to a public library for \$75, contact the author at wasm@nyc.rr.com or (212) 366-6481.

Celebrities in Hell is available for \$14.95 from Barricade Books, and \$15 from Rationalists NY.

Both also may be ordered from bookstores and from online retailers such as Amazon.com. and Barnesandnoble.com.

National Conventions

With spring will bloom the national conferences of many freethought groups. November's Godless Americans March on Washington has inspired many to again meet freethinker activists and enthusiasts from across the country. Here are new opportunities to do so.

American Atheists April 18-20, 2003 Chicago, Illinois

American Atheists' 29th annual national convention will feature "tours, speakers, awards banquet, social events and much more. . . . Social events including the informal and popular Thursday night 'jump start,' dinners, the Report from the President, Life Member's Dinner, and American Atheists Awards Banquet ... Join us as we commemorate the 40th anniversary of the historic U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Murray v. Curlett*, the ruling that helped overturn coercive organized prayer and Bible verse recitation in our taxpayer supported public school system! This was a historic case for Atheist civil rights and the First Amendment separation of government and religion."

Guest speakers will include Jonathan Levy, an attorney involved in a class action lawsuit against the Vatican Bank seeking restitution of World War II era loot, petitioning the United Nations to act against the Vatican's violations of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and diverse litigation involving fundraising fraud, cults, and other crimes all committed in the name of the Catholic Church; Kimberly Blaker, editor and coauthor of *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America*; Eddie Tabash, a constitutional and civil rights attorney who ran as an atheist for the California State Assembly; Gottfried Nimietz, a German attorney who is fighting that country's notorious "blasphemy law"; Normal Bob Smith of the Web site <http://www.jesusdressup.com>; Helen Radkey, a renowned religion and



genealogical researcher, writer, and lecturer specializing in the Mormon church; Frank Zindler, director of the American Atheist Press and editor of *American Atheist* magazine; Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists; and Conrad Goeringer, editor of AANEWS and staff writer for *American Atheist* magazine.

Because NYC Atheists is a local affiliate of the national group American Atheists, NYC Atheists members are eligible for a 20% discount on American Atheist memberships, 20% discounts on American Atheist materials over \$50 ordered through NYC Atheists, and reduced convention registration fees.

Conference rates: \$85 members, \$100 members couples; seniors and students \$55; nonmembers \$100; meals and cruise \$30-\$69.

Hotel rate Hotel rate: Single, \$95/night; double, \$105; triple, \$115; quad, \$125. This American Atheists National Convention conference rate is in effect from 4/14 through 4/21. Indian Lakes Resort, Bloomington, Illinois.

For more information:

Web site: <http://www.atheists.org/convention>

Contact information: American Atheists, PO Box 5733, Parsippany, NJ 07054-6733; (908) 276-7300; info@atheists.org

American Humanist Association May 9-11, 2003 Washington, D.C.

Titled "Making Humanism Count: Unity in Action," the AHA's 62nd annual conference will feature awardees and speakers including Sherwin Wine, founder and president of the Society of Humanistic Judaism;

Gloria Feldt, President of Planned Parenthood Federation of America; journalist Helen Thomas; Kate Michelman, President of The National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League; consumer advocate and political activist, Ralph Nader; Lester Brown, president of the Earth Policy Institute; Levi Fragell, of the International Humanist and Ethical Union; Stefen Jonasson of HUHumanists; Jone Johnson Lewis of the American Ethical Union, and Mel Lipman of the AHA. Also, the Humanist Manifesto III will be announced.

On May 8, an additional day-long seminar on "Making Humanist Ethics Work" will be led by Arthur Dobrin, Leader Emeritus of the Ethical Humanist Society of Long Island. On May 12, an additional day-long AHA/IHEU Joint Symposium on "Humanism: Engaging the World -- Confronting Injustice" will take place. On the same day, attendees are encouraged to visit national legislators and policy makers, with AHA facilitating appointments.

Conference rates: AHA members: \$95 per person before April 15; \$115 per person afterward. Nonmembers: \$130 per person before April 15; \$150 per person afterward. Banquets \$35-65 extra.

Hotel rate: \$109/night conference rate, Hyatt Regency Crystal City Hotel

For more information:

Web site:

<http://www.americanhumanist.org/conference/index.html>

Contact information: American Humanist Association, 1777 T Street, NW, Washington, DC 20009-7125; (800) 837-3792;

aha@americanhumanist.org

Atheist Alliance International
April 18-20, 2003
Tampa, Florida

"You'll be in the pink, meeting old friends and finding new ones. It means wonderful educational experiences, fabulous food, provocative programs, and exciting excursions. In other words, a spring break for grown-ups!"

Guest speakers will include evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, skeptic James Randi, Eagle Scout Darrell Lambert, and president of the Philadelphia Freethought Association Margaret Downey.

Conference rate: \$100 meetings only; \$199 meetings and meals.

Hotel rate: \$69/night conference rate, Hilton Tampa Airport Westshore, Florida.

For more information:

Web site:

<http://www.atheistalliance.org/florida/conventionflyer.htm>

Contact information: Atheist Alliance International, 4773 Hollywood Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90026; 866-HERETIC; info@AtheistAlliance.org

Council for Secular Humanism
April 11-13, 2003
Washington, D.C.

Titled "One Nation Without God? Secularism, Society, and Justice," the conference will feature speakers including Christopher Hitchens, Ibn Warraq, Pervez Hoodbhoy, Paul Kurtz, Eugenie Scott, Massimo Pigliucci, Peter Beinart, Julia Sweeney (of *Saturday Night Live*), Rob Tielman (Commissioner of Education of the Netherlands), Eddie Tabash, and others.

Topics will include "Who Fans the Flames of Hatred? Religious-Political Extremism in America," "Why I Would Never Vote for an Atheist! Discrimination Against Nonbelievers," "Will Islam Come into the 21st Century? Secularization of Islamic Societies," "Dogma 101: New Threats to Secular Education," "Spreading the Gospel with Your Buck: Faith-Based Initiatives," "Galileo Revisited - Religion and Science: Cloning and Stem Cell Research," "Love the Sinner, Just

Don't Let Him in the Army: Gay Rights and Secularism," "Breaking the Stranglehold of the Right to Life Movement: Life and Death Decisions and Ecclesiastical Power," and "Can't Get No Respect - Media Roundtable: Getting Access to the Media for the Nonreligious." Attendees will also be celebrating Thomas Jefferson's 260th birthday on the final afternoon with a special program at the Jefferson Memorial.

Conference rate: \$179. Banquets \$30-\$39 extra. Hotel rate: \$119/night, single or double, conference rate guaranteed until March 11, Capital Hilton.

For more information:

Web site: <http://www.secularhumanism.org/conference/index.htm>

Contact information: Council for Secular Humanism, P.O. Box 664, Amherst, NY 14226-0664; (716) 636-7571;

info@SecularHumanism.org

Other annual conferences have been held recently or are planned for later in 2003. Please report any omissions to atheist@foody.org so they can be included in March's newsletter.

The *Center for Inquiry - Florida* held a conference titled "Evolution of Humanism: Entering a New Epoch" in St. Petersburg, Florida. Invited speakers were Phillip and Marjorie Appleman; Robert Steiner; Bill Cooke; Paul Kurtz; Debbie Roffman, sex educator; intelligent design opponent Massimo Pigliucci; Janet Reno; Gerald Larue, Bill Cooke (New Zealand), Richard Lead (Australia); Amanda Chesworth; Katha Pollitt; Don Addis (*Free Inquiry* cartoonist); Eleanor Smeal; and Sally Roesch Wagner. Scheduled topics included "Darwin 101," "The Future of Reason: Raising Independent Thinkers," "Sex and Sensibility," "Dehumanizing Behavior of Society at Large," "Freethinking Women," "Secular Humorism," "Conflict in Cedar Key: God in the Classroom!"

The *Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal* (CSICOP) hosted a World Skeptics Congress in June 2002 in Burbank, California, attended by 500 participants from twenty-three countries, including a large delegation from China, India, and skeptics from

Latin America. "Nearly 500 people attended . . . hearing a first-ever opening session on confidence games and financial scams, a fascinating semi-debate-format session on evolution and intelligent design (featuring, among others, evolutionary biologist Kenneth Miller and ID proponent William Dembski), another plenary session on urban legends, and a variety of paired concurrent sessions challenging attendees to make difficult choices about what not to miss."

The *Freedom From Religion Foundation* hosted its 25th and largest-ever convention in San Diego, California, on November 22-24, 2002. "The gathering, including freethought celebrities and newsmakers, featured speeches, music, birthday cake, comedy, and an unannounced 'mystery guest': Darrell Lambert, whose Eagle Scout badge was just revoked by Boy Scouts of America because Darrell is an atheist. Michael Newdow, M.D., who won the historic Pledge decision this summer, was honored as 'Freethinker of the Year,' with the audience erupting into several spontaneous standing ovations. *Saturday Night Live* alum Julia Sweeney was a crowd favorite, talking about how she 'let go of God' as a former Catholic. Foundation musician Dan Barker teamed up with editorial cartoonist Steve Benson for a freethought look at religion in the news. Steve, the grandson of Mormon president Ezra Taft Benson, also received an 'Emperor Has No Clothes' statuette, which honors public figures for 'plain speaking on religion.' Chemistry Nobel Laureate Paul D. Boyer, 84, appeared and shared some of his views as a 'devout atheist' about religion and science. Two student activist awards of \$1,000 each were given to: Maryland litigant and first-year college student Blake Trettien, 18, who initiated a current lawsuit against a Ten Commandments monument, in a public park; and Darrell Lambert, 19, of Washington State. Stanford Prof. Robert Sapolsky, a bestselling science writer, also received an "Emperor" award as a writer willing to identify himself publicly as an atheist. Sapolsky spoke in part on his intriguing theories of the

origins of religion and religious ritual. Atheist author Taslima Nasrin, who has been in exile since "holy men" declared a fatwa against her, received the "Freethought Heroine" award, and spoke movingly about her life as a young girl under fundamentalist Muslim sway. The convention concluded with a talk by foremost Darwin scholar Philip Appleman, 'Dancing with Darwin.' By audience demand, Philip, accompanied by his playwright wife Marjorie Appleman, recited his classic poem, 'Noah.' Its next conference will be in September or October in Washington, D.C."

At the *Secular Student Alliance's* 2002's conference, held August 8-11 at a Chicago hostel, "for the third year in a row, students from around the county made the trek to the three-day extravaganza. . . . This year's theme, 'Education Against Indoctrination,' featured a fantastic assortment of speakers with years and years of experience in the freethought movement. The conference was not only a chance to hear from those leaders and brainstorm for the future, but an opportunity for students to meet new friends, reunite with old ones and party till the wee hours of the morning. . . . Over 50 students, from 19 campuses, attended." SSA's next conference will be held August 7-10, 2003, in California (no further details available at this time).

Urge Schools to Teach Atheism

by Kirsten

If universities offer courses in religion (especially Islam, now that it has become politically correct to bend over backward to make that particular cult more accepted in this country), they should also offer courses in atheism, or the history of atheism.

I often think about a letter I received from the chairman of an Ivy League school's religion department, in which he said to me, "I choose to view the world through a lens other than the lens of Enlightenment rationalism." This white

fundamentalist Ph.D., who is teaching at one of the most prestigious universities in the country, in a powerful position to shape the minds of thousands of kids who stumble into his courses, is willing to put in print that he has made a *choice* to close his eyes to reason. I've seen him being interviewed briefly on TV as an authority on moral issues. It is a crime that even an Ivy League school is willing to put the intellectual development of their students at risk when they offer courses taught by a professor with an admitted preference for Endarkenment irrationalism (and no course in Enlightenment rationalism to counterbalance it).

I imagine there are thousands of anti-Enlightenment idiots like him across the country. It might be worth our while to write to universities to encourage them to include, in their departments of religion or philosophy, courses in atheism in order to balance off the ill effects of teachers like this, or at least to call their attention to the fact that some of us object to the subject of atheism being given short shrift, or no shrift at all, in their course catalogs. Maybe schools even should be challenged for having religion departments separate from philosophy departments. Why does religion deserve special attention and separate money used for its promotion to young people? It should either be subsumed under the tent of other philosophies, and be open to critical scrutiny, or it should be counterbalanced by another department that offers nothing but atheist thinking, history, current political status, and even psychological studies in mind manipulation.

Somebody would have to do research to find out if the kind of course I'm proposing is already out there, and how many universities have religion departments, and how many philosophy departments cover atheism really thoroughly, the way religion departments no doubt cover religion. I'm not the person to do that kind of research, but maybe others in the group would be willing.



"A Good Dose of Pure Monotheism"

Last month's "Does God Not Exist?" debate at a Queens mosque, between the Freedom from Religion Foundation's Dan Barker and the Tawheed Institute's Hassanain Rajabali, was remembered slightly differently at the mosque than by our January newsletter (<http://foody.org/atheist/insanity0103.html>). According to the mosque:

"Dan Barker, the first presenter, and a veteran debater against the existence of God, articulated mostly the same arguments that he normally uses when debating with Christian scholars. Brother Hassanain Rajabali, during his initial presentation, and seeking to argue that God's existence cannot be disproved, gave the audience a good dose of the pure monotheism and the Absolute Oneness of God that Islam teaches and he presented some of the most current perspectives in science and philosophy on the issues. When stated by Dan Barker that God had the power to stop the brutality of September 11, but he did nothing about it, Br. Hassanain rebutted by saying: 'We are on trial, God is *not* on trial' and the audience gave a good applause! The speakers engaged themselves on some interesting theories and arguments on a scholarly level. . . . During the break, one atheist was heard remarking: 'I am glad I came here and I find that the Islamic concept of God makes more sense than that of Christianity.' "

Treasury Report

Mid-January's balance was \$551.85. We spent \$46.23 on postage, \$10.49 for January meeting refreshments, and \$220 for March's room rental. Members donated \$356 at the January meeting and \$75 (\$50 + \$25 [Paul Lozowsky]) by mail. As of early February, the treasury balance is \$706.13, excluding the cost of this newsletter's postage. Donations are not tax-deductible, and are anonymous unless otherwise requested.

Freethinking Parents Discussion Group Online

"I would like to invite freethinking parents to join our very active Atheist Moms group on Yahoo," writes Carol Brendler in a recent issue of *Freethought Today*. The discussion group's Web page is http://groups.yahoo.com/group/atheist_moms. "We discuss everything about raising atheist children in this country: neighbor issues, cub scouts, freethinking books for kids, saying the pledge of allegiance, dealing with holidays, etc."

Other popular online discussion groups include:

- **atheist_only** (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/atheist_only), "A list for atheists, a safe haven of sorts, where we can discuss any topic of our choosing, religion, politics, family life, etc." Yahoo-based; owner's permission required for entry.
- **atheist-talk** (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/atheist-talk>) which is organized by Atheist Alliance, a national coalition of atheist groups. "Designed to connect people of like minds for rational discussion of issues and ideas." Yahoo-based; owner's permission required for entry.
- **Atheist_Singles** (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Atheist_Singles) - a small

Yahoo group more for discussing general atheist issues than for meeting people.

- **nyc-atheists** (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nyc-atheists>) is the new Yahoo discussion group for members of NYC Atheists! There we can converse online, outside of our meetings. E-mail atheist@foody.org to request admission.
- **AACHAT** is the discussion mailing list for members of American Atheists, of which New York City Atheists is an affiliate. NYC Atheists members are eligible for a 20% discount on national American Atheist memberships. To join AACHAT, e-mail owner-aachat@atheists.org
- **alt.atheism** (news://alt.atheism) is the oldest atheist newsgroup.
- **alt.atheism.moderated** (news://alt.atheism.moderated) filters out spam and religious posts.

Is Religion Darwinian?

by John Rafferty
Reprinted from the Secular Humanist Society of New York's *Pique*, February 2003

Is religious faith itself an evolutionary adaptation? Yes, says evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson of Binghamton University, in a New York Times interview last December 24. Summing up the theme of Dr. Wilson's new book, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion and the Nature of Society* (University of Chicago Press), Times reporter Natalie Angier says that Wilson "proposes that religion - with all its institutional, emotional and prescriptive trappings - ranks as a kind of mega-adaptation; a trait that evolved because it conferred advantages on those who bore it ... that the religious impulse evolved early in hominid history because it helped make groups of humans comparatively more cohesive, more

NEW EXPENSES THIS SPRING

Please consider donating to New York City Atheists in the months ahead. We are renting an extra-large room in March for Margaret Downey's appearance, will be renewing our PO box and voicemail, and will have additional new expenses if we table at a street fair.

Membership and our monthly newsletter are free, but we depend on donations to maintain meetings and mailings. Donations, which are non-tax-deductible, are reported in the monthly Treasury report, anonymously unless requested otherwise.

Make your check payable to "Josh Karpf" and send it New York City Atheists, PO Box 1187, New York, NY 10013.

cooperative and fraternal, and thus able to present a formidable front against bands of less organized or unified adversaries."

Wilson himself ("I tell people I'm an atheist, but a nice atheist") posits that if religion is a trait, then as an evolutionist, "the first thing I'll want to know about a trait is, is it an adaptation or not? So I ask that about religion. If it's not an adaptation, maybe it's a spandrel - a byproduct of some other evolutionary process - rather than an adaptation. Maybe back in the Stone Age it was adaptive to be nice to others because most people around us were relatives who shared our genes, and then we ended up being nice to non-relatives, too.

"Maybe religion is even a maladaptive spandrel today, the way our sweet tooth makes us fat. Or maybe religion is like a parasitic disease, which evolved to transmit itself like the AIDS virus, and isn't good for any of its hosts but gets passed on anyway."
Wilson argues that while religion has its cooperative and fraternal good points, slavery, witch hunts, and jihads are just as natural to its history. "Religious and other social

organizations may preach kindness and cooperation within the group, but they often say nothing about those outside the group, and may even promote brutality toward those beyond the brotherhood of the hive."

So, what is a religion?

"Religion has a superficial definition," Dr. Wilson says, "which is a belief in supernatural agents, but some people regard this definition as shallow and incomplete. The Buddha, for example, refused to be associated with any gods. Or you could say that religion is something that handles concepts of an afterlife, but that definition, too, is limited, and it excludes a number of faiths. A scholar at a religious conference told me that what little Judaism has to say about the afterlife is only there because Christians asked them."

In other words, Dr. Wilson doesn't have a clear-cut answer, and the question remains. . . .

What (in God's name) is a religion?

We spend much space and ink in these pages arguing the definitions of humanism, atheism, agnosticism, and "freethought" (as we like to call it) of all stripes. But how do we define what we're not? What do we mean when we say "religion"?

Is the religious impulse Dr. Wilson's Darwinian adaptation? Or maladaptive evolutionary spandrel? Mass (pun intended) delusion? Are specific religions just shuck and jive; were Maimonides, the Buddha, and Francis of Assisi con men? How is religion different from other societal constructs, like family and government, and what's the difference between a religion, a sect, and a cult? Is it possible that some specific religion - or the religious impulse itself - may evolve into a more rational, more tolerant construct we (or our distant descendants) might accept?

What's your opinion?

What is a religion? We invite our readers' ideas, definitions, opinions, and arguments - scholarly and snide, polite and passionate - which we will fashion into a special section (or the whole issue) in the May *Pique*. May goes to press in mid-

April, so manuscripts and letters (by e-mail to john@rafferty.net or snail mail to P.O. Box 7661, FDR Station, New York, NY 10150-1913) by April 1, please.

Book Review: *The Fatal Flaw at the Heart of Religious Liberalism* by Duncan Howlett

Reviewed by Jon Nelson. Reprinted from *Atheists United*, January 2003

For many freethinkers, the term "religious liberalism" may seem to be a bit of an oxymoron: given the omnipresence of so many religious fundamentalists on the contemporary political scene, it often seems to us that all believers must be fundamentalist.

Yet we all know that such is not the case. The majority of Christians, for example, do not believe the Bible to be inerrant; many do not even believe in certain core ideological dogmas such as the Trinity, virgin birth, or Resurrection. These people, known as religious liberals, seem to have always been with us.

Duncan Howlett's book *The Fatal Flaw at the Heart of Religious Liberalism* (Prometheus Books, 1995) is concerned with the current state of religious liberalism. For, while it is a historical fact that liberalism made significant progress in the religious community until fairly recent times, it has proven itself to be a spent force in recent decades. Howlett seeks to find out why.

The author begins by pointing out that "it was not until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the idea of questioning official church teachings and of searching out new and better ones gained acceptance within the church" (pg. 12). This means that, for some 1,800 years, the church promoted a reactionary theology and ideology that we today identify by the term "fundamentalist". Essentially, Howlett feels that religious pluralism was doomed because its adherents invariably turned back to the basic traditions and dogmas of their faith. Given the absolutist nature of their faith's "holy"

books, a basic contradiction arose in the thoughts and actions of those who, on the one hand, insist that their particular holy book contains words and wisdom to live by while at the same time adopting values that are essentially humanistic and reality-based.

While Howlett's "solutions" as a Unitarian/Universalist minister may rankle with many atheists, his work is still worth reading for its insights into the mindset of those who seek to discover "truth" by mystical rather than rational means.

EQUAL TIME FOR FREETHOUGHT

The *Equal Time for Freethought* radio program airs on Sundays at 6:30 P.M. on member-supported WBAI, 99.5 FM. Every three or four shows features call-ins; you can call at (212) 209-2900.

Let WBAI know you appreciate *Equal Time for Freethought*, and that you'd like the show to have a full hour instead of only a half hour. You can contact to the program director, Bernard White, by calling (212) 209-2800, or write him at WBAI, 120 Wall St., New York, NY 10005

On Sunday, February 23, "Equal Time for Freethought" will have a special two-hour show as part of WBAI's pledge drive. You can best support "Equal Time for Freethought" by pledging to become a member of WBAI during our show. WBAI also needs volunteers, including nonmembers, that week and the previous week to answer its pledge telephone lines. Call 212-209-2827 for more information.

To listen online to the show via WBAI's live Webcast, see the show's Web site, <http://foody.org/freethoughtradio.html>, which also has audio of most past programs and text notes on all past programs.

OTHER LOCAL GROUPS

Atheists, Agnostics and Freethinkers (NYU)

"An official student club at New York University. To provide an open forum for the discussion of a wide range of controversial issues of philosophical, social, and political interest. . . . To raise awareness of various issues related to Atheism, Agnosticism and free thought including the separation of Church and State."

Student Event Center, 5 Washington Place, Room 405, New York, New York

Contact: rdv206@nyu.edu

Web site: www.nyu.edu/clubs/atheists

Center for Inquiry - Metro NY (Council for Secular Humanism)

"A permanent gathering place for East Coast skeptics and secular humanists ... convenient to but just outside New York City, in northern New Jersey. We present lectures, seminars, and other events as we seek ideas, support, and funding to maintain a permanent humanist/skeptical center in northern New Jersey."

Phone: (973) 655-9556

Fax: (973) 655-9561

Mailing address: 89 Walnut St., Montclair NJ

E-mail: cfimetry@aol.com

Web site: www.cfi-metry.com

City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism (Society for Humanistic Judaism)

"If you consider yourself a secular Jew whose identity is primarily cultural or intellectual, but not religious, you may not feel at home in a traditional congregation. . . . We lead our lives independently of the will of a supernatural deity."

Phone: (212) 713-5031

Meets: Village Community School, 272 West 10th Street, Manhattan.

E-mail: info@humanistjew.org

Web site: www.humanistjew.org

Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York (Corliss Lamont Chapter of the AHA)

"Meets approximately twice per month - generally on the evening of the second and fourth Tuesdays, usually with a speaker followed by a discussion."

Meets at the Moonstruck East diner, upstairs room, 449 Third Avenue (corner of 31st Street).

Mailing address: 777 United Nations Plaza (lobby floor), New York, NY 10017-3521

Phone: (914) 588-5284

E-mail: info.hsmny@corliss-lamont.org

Web site: www.corliss-lamont.org/hsmny

Long Island Secular Humanists

Several events per month.

Address: LISH, Box 119, Greenlawn, NY 11740

E-mail: LISecHum@aol.com

Web site: nyhumanist.org/lish.htm

New Jersey Humanist Network

Meetings on the 4th Wednesday of the month at the Somerset Bridgewater Library. Directions: 908-526-4016.

Address: P.O. Box 51, Washington, NJ 07882.

E-mail: hbrown@nac.net

Web site: www.njhn.org

Secular Humanist Society of New York

Meets occasionally at the Source of Life Conference Center, 352 Seventh Avenue, 16th floor (between 29th and 30th Sts., just south of Penn Station), for lectures and discussion.

Address: P.O. Box 7661, F.D.R. Station, New York, NY 10150

Phone: (212) 861-6003

E-mail: jarents@bestweb.net

Web site: nyhumanist.org

Substance Abuse

Secular Sobriety, or SOS, is a secular alternative to Alcoholics Anonymous that meets on Long Island every Tuesday from 6 to 7 P.M. Those meetings are at the Unitarian Universalist Church, Main Road, Route 25, Southold, Long Island. For more information call Matthew R., 631-477-0746. Moderation Management is another alternative. In Manhattan it meets on Tuesdays from 6 to 7 PM at: New York Spaces, 131 West 72nd Street, New York, and on Thursdays from 7 to 8 P.M. at the Harm Reduction Coalition, 22 West 27th Street, on the 5th floor. For more information about both Moderation Management meetings, call 212-462-9469.