

New York City Atheists

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

March 2003

(212) 330-6794 PO Box 1187, New York, NY 10013

<http://nyc-atheists.org> info@nyc-atheists.org

Events

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 (Between 29th and 30th Sts.) Donation requested

March Atheist Café Night

Our first coffeehouse social night! Sandwiches, salads, snacks available. Thursday, March 13, 2003, 7 P.M. Java & Jazz 868 Broadway between West 17th and West 18th St., north of Union Square.

March Atheist Meetup

Casual dining or drinks with your fellow freethinkers. Tuesday, March 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 will be promoted in e-mail if enough people register. Call (212) 330-6794 for details.

April Meeting

Saturday, April 26, 2003, 1-5 P.M. (Last Saturday, not Sunday, of month) Source of Life Conference Center 352 Seventh Avenue, 16th flr, (Between 29th and 30th Sts.) Donation requested

Atheist Activist Margaret Downey to Speak at March Meeting

New York City Atheists is proud to present, at its next monthly weekend meeting, freethought activist Margaret Downey, who will speak on her nine-year battle with the Boy Scouts of America, which discriminates against atheists by barring them from membership. Her lecture is entitled "Awarding the Boy Scouts of America a Badge of Dishonor." The meeting is on Sunday, March 30, 2003, from 1 to 5 P.M. at the Source of Life Conference Center, 352 Seventh Avenue, 16th floor. All freethinkers are welcome; a donation is requested.

After New York City Atheists' meeting, at 6:30 P.M., Downey will be interviewed on the *Equal Time for Freethought* public radio program on WBAI, 99.5 FM (see the Web site <http://foody.org/freethoughtradio.html> for archives of past shows).

Downey is founder of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia, the Anti-Discrimination Support Network, and the Thomas Paine Memorial Committee. She is one of the most popular speakers in freethought. She has been involved in many controversial issues including freedom of choice, freedom of expression, and, of course, the separation of state and church and rights of nonbelievers.

Downey was instrumental in convincing Steven Spielberg to drop his support of the discriminatory Boy Scouts of America. Through her activism, the city of Philadelphia has had city proclamations of "Freethought Week" and "Thomas Paine Day." She has represented the godless community at several United Nations conferences and spoke at the UN Freedom of Religion and Belief



meeting. She was a victorious co-plaintiff of a recent challenge to the posted 10 Commandments on a courthouse building in West Chester, PA.

Downey is a past board member of the American Humanist Association, a current board member of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, the Humanist Institute, and the Thomas Paine National Historical Association. She is on the advisory board of the Robert G. Ingersoll Museum and the Atheist Alliance. She is a regular guest of the media, appearing on NPR and radio programs all over the country. She was also one of the speakers at the Godless Americans March on Washington.

Tabling and Education at March Meeting

To promote atheism and build our mailing list, we plan to table at a Manhattan street fair in April or later. Discussion at our February meeting and since then, with NYC Atheists member Ken taking leadership on this

project, has favored tabling at the Earth Awareness Festival on April 20, or at a later event.

A sturdy six-foot folding aluminum table can be purchased for around \$75, and we should buy chairs and a vinyl NYC Atheists banner, or borrow an American Atheists banner. A 4' x 5' backboard that can hold a thought-provoking sign, or poles for raising the banner, or a canopy are also possibilities. We can give away past NYC Atheists newsletters, a flyer custom-made for the event (which Jake has kindly offered to print), and other freethought groups' books and pamphlets. An inexpensive permit might be needed from the city, but no proof of incorporation (we have none) or tax ID should be necessary if we don't sell anything. Please let NYC Atheists know if you can help purchase, store, and/or transport tables, chairs, and signs. If storage space cannot be donated, we could rent storage space for future use of such items. All of this will take money in addition to member labor. Please consider a donation to help make all this possible!

Twenty-three people came to our February meeting to talk about tabling, among other topics. Members recommended possible issues to bring up at a tabling, including "In God We Trust" on money, post-office posters promoting "In God We Trust" as a national motto, freedom of thought, biblical contradictions, and the irrationality of religion. Some members urged positivism about freethought rather than negatively critiquing religion. We could show famous atheists, friendly quotations, interrogative phrases (e.g., "What Is an Atheist?"), or talking points from American Atheists' Statement of Aims and Purposes and the Humanist Manifesto.

Some members suggested that a tabling could offer a list of

upcoming events. A member suggested we pay close attention to what people ask so we can improve future tabling. (See "Report from Venice Beach" elsewhere in this newsletter for a California atheist group's recent description of tabling.)

We discussed, at length, whether atheists should promote a moment of silence as a substitute for prayer. Most litigation for church-state separation opposes moments of silence. We also talked about partisan politics, which NYC Atheists has avoided to accommodate the leftist-to-rightist range of its membership. Some members criticized this as a lost opportunity for social action. Others said they were grateful for the "big tent." We discussed the pros (funding and networking) and cons (loss of independence) of possibly merging with the Center for Inquiry (See "Join a National Group: The Center for Inquiry's Programs" elsewhere in this issue).

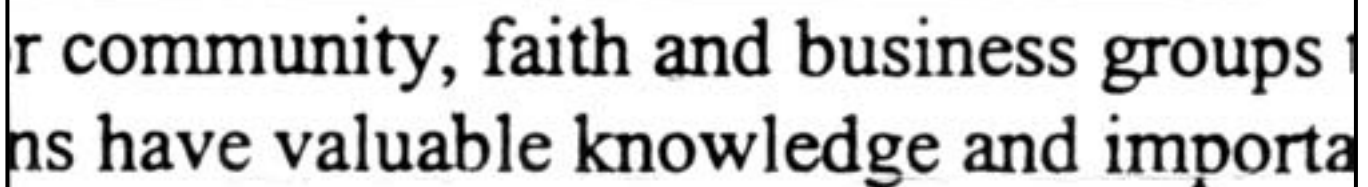
At the meeting, members Peter, Harold, Dan, Mason, Mario, Linda, Howard, Kirsten, and Dennis agreed to consider tabling during a street fair. Joe, Irving, and Scott have previously expressed interest. With members working in convenient and cooperative shifts during a fair, and helping to prepare days before the event, there should be plenty of support for tabling.

Next on our agenda was schooling. A member with children in the public school system showed New York City Department of Education literature that solicited involvement of religious groups. One was a memo saying that it "recognize[d] that there is an important goal for community, faith and business groups to play in the school system" (see photo below). The other was a pamphlet titled "Children First" (available online at <http://nycenet.edu/childrenfirst>) that promoted "faith-based community

forums."

The parent said that the school system had refused her requests to keep her public grammar-school children from being exposed to religious material, e.g., religious songs including "God Bless America" played with the pledge of allegiance, and a religion-saturated September 11 in-school remembrance. The group discussed how local public agencies, to ensure continued receipt of federal funds, either to cater to religious interests or to pretend to do so, thanks to the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Mayor Michael Bloomberg has shifted from opposing school vouchers to considering them. Some members suggested atheist volunteers visiting classrooms, or a written complaint from NYC Atheists to the Department of Education. After more discussion, the parent agreed to debrief more fully the director, who would then query groups with campus and legal expertise such as the Secular Student Alliance, the Campus Freethought Association, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and the American Civil Liberties Union, and report back at March's meeting.

Another member, Kirsten, who had written "Urge Schools to Teach Atheism" in the February newsletter, discussed her vision of urging atheist education at the university level, exclusive of religion and traditional philosophy courses. We discussed how well freethinking is taught in schools. Some remembered poor experiences; others had had good experiences, even in other courses of study such as English. We discussed a mass mailing to schools to promote atheist education. We will first query the Secular Student Alliance and the Campus Freethought Association to learn more about current conditions, and hopefully rediscuss at March's meeting.



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In preparation for March's meeting, at which atheist activist Margaret Downey will speak on her nine-year battle with the atheist-excluding Boy Scouts of America, we have rented a larger room and have mailed over 400 press releases to publicity contacts generously compiled by Ken. Larry, who interprets for the deaf, is generously donating translation services.

American Atheists president Ellen Johnson has tentatively agreed to address NYC Atheists at our May or June meeting. Our proposed bylaws, published in the February issue and to be voted on at our June meeting, have generated one suggestion: to open membership to theists who support the separation of church and state. Come summer, the membership may want to consider another Central Park picnic, our most popular excursion last year.

Supreme Court Rejects Kosher Cops, So State Plans Rewrite

The United States Supreme Court, in a minor triumph for church-state separation, has refused to consider reinstating New York State laws that label food as kosher. But state officials plan to write evasive new laws.

A Brooklyn federal court had already ruled unconstitutional the state kosher laws, as then did the 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals. The original suit was filed by Long Island butchers whose meat had been certified as kosher by a Conservative rabbi, but who were then found to violate the state's sixteenth-century definition of kosher. The appeals court found that the state laws promoted religion and that they discriminated in favor of Orthodox Judaism. New York State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, and Orthodox Jewish organizations then appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Governor George Pataki, favoring Orthodox Jewish voters who supported him strongly in the last election, quickly said he would propose new legislation that would

replace the law's explicit religious criteria with more neutral language tying inspections to "consumer expectations and trade standards." Silver and Spitzer said they would create a task force to develop legislation on kosher products that would withstand court challenges.

Jewish Week says that the Supreme Court action effectively neutralizes the state agriculture department's Kosher Law Enforcement Division, and perhaps its counterparts in other states. But Luzer Weiss, rabbi and director of that division, suggested that the state's nine inspectors would continue as usual, assuring that kosher food received a seal of approval from a religious authority. In practice, that authority would almost always come from an Orthodox rabbi or group of rabbis.

You can write the New York City area's State Assembly members (call the League of Women Voters of the City of New York at (212) 213-5286 for contact information) to encourage them to vote against any such new law, to respect the separation of church and state.

Integrated Marketing & Communications, which surveys kosher foods, says that two-thirds of the U.S. kosher market of about five million people are non-Jews who associate kosher with high quality. Two-thirds may be an exaggeration, because while that firm also claims that 15 percent of American Jews follow kosher diets, the recent coverage of the New York State kosher laws reported that only 5 percent are kosher. But the kosher market wields a power beyond its total purchasing power. In a recent example, Kraft Foods, the owner of Stella D'Oro, a Italian-American national brand of cookies made without milk or butter, decided in January to use to use a cheaper chocolate that contained milk. New York City-area Orthodox Jews often serve Stella D'Oro cookies after their Sabbath lunch, which almost always includes meat. Kosher laws dictate that milk cannot be mixed with meat even in the stomach until after several hours (the exact time varies depending with the Orthodox sect). After the

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.

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.

Orthodox complained, despite their tiny proportion of national sales, Kraft rescinded the plan.

A recent *New York Times* article on a halal abattoir (the Islamic equivalent of kosher) in the South Bronx, Musa Slaughterhouse, did not mention any state oversight of its ritual killing. Halal rules mandate that the animal to be eaten must be killed by a Muslim as he says, "Bismillah Allah-u-Akbar" ("In the name of Allah, Allah is great.") Musa Slaughterhouse, whose customers "seem to be united not so much by religion as by a desire for freshly slaughtered fowl" and exotic animals, is inspected weekly by the federal Department of Agriculture. It cannot sell to restaurants or businesses, but it can sell to mosques and to individuals, many of whom are Hispanic, Jamaican, Haitian, Italian or West African.

This past autumn, two of the largest Orthodox kosher certifiers, the Orthodox Union and the Orthodox Jewish Council of Baltimore ("Star-K"), settled out of court with a former ritual slaughterer whom they claimed had shown "gross religious insubordination." The National Labor Relations Board had sued on behalf of the ritual slaughterer when the two religious authorities had decertified him after he claimed to have found kosher violations at a Empire Kosher Poultry abattoir in Pennsylvania. The OU and Star-K tried to avoid a civil court in favor of a rabbinical court, or *beth din*. Their court briefs invoked

the Establishment Clause and First Amendment to attempt to dismiss the case on church-state separation grounds.

Coop City, in the north Bronx, although its original population of Jewish residents has diversified to include blacks, Hispanics, and Asians, requires that lunches cooked in its program for the elderly be kosher, even on its monthly "International Day" meant to introduce other ethnic cuisine. Brooklyn's Maimonides Medical Center, which has a strictly kosher kitchen in deference to its nearby Orthodox Jewish community, is offering "traditional home-style glatt kosher Chinese hospital food" for its growing population of Chinese patients, with less than edible-sounding results.

This year, kosher food even went into orbit for the first time. Ilan Ramon, the Israeli astronaut who died in the *Columbia* tragedy, reportedly was so nonreligious that some freethinkers considered claiming him as one of their own. Yet he was the first astronaut to bring into space kosher meals, in addition to a microfiche of the Bible, mezuzahs -- miniature cases containing scripture, hung on doorposts of rooms in observant Jewish homes -- and he solicited rabbinical advice on how to follow Jewish customs in space, such as whether to say a morning prayer every 90 minutes as *Columbia* circled the Earth.

June 2002 and September 2002's newsletters (<http://foody.org/atheist/insanity0902.html#unconstitutional> and <http://foody.org/atheist/insanity0602.html#state>) offer previous coverage.

Sources: "Supreme Court Passes Up Kosher Food Fight," Associated Press, 2/24/03; "N.Y. Kosher Law KO'd," *Jewish Week*, 2/26/03; "Pataki Faces a Separation of Kosher and State," *New York Times*, 2/27/03; "New York's Kosher Laws, Answering to a Higher Court," *New York Times*, 3/2/03; "Kosher: It's Not Just Chopped Liver," *Meat Industry Insights News*, 11/6/02; "Of Milk and Cookies, or How Orthodox Jews Saved an Italian Recipe," *New York Times*, 1/12/03; "Here, Islamic Law Guides How the Food Is Killed," *New York Times*, 3/26/03; "Kosher Butcher Claims He Blew Whistle, Lost Job," *Forward*, 11/15/02; "For \$2, the World on a Plate," *New York Times*, 10/18/02; "With Hospital Bed, You Get Eggroll, and It's

Kosher," *New York Times*, 2/2/03; "Keeping Kosher to Be an Out-of-This-World Experience," *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, 2001; "Jewish Astronauts in Space," B'nai Emet Synagogue:Messages:Special Sermons:2002, 9/8/02;

God Rains on Parade?

Six members of Long Island Secular Humanists and New York City Atheists marched in the alternative St. Patrick's for All parade in Sunnyside, Queens, on Sunday, March 2. The larger Manhattan parade applies



religious bigotry in excluding gay groups from participation. See photos below.

Treasury Report

Early February's balance was \$706.13. We spent \$45.46 on newsletter postage; \$14.04 for January meeting refreshments; \$185.39 for promotion of, and \$30 for audiovisual rental for, March's meeting; and \$160 for April's room rental. Members donated

\$167.65 at the February meeting and \$45 by mail. As of early March, the treasury balance is \$483.89, excluding the cost of this newsletter's postage. Donations are not tax-deductible, and are anonymous unless otherwise requested.

Please consider donating to New York City Atheists. We have rented an extra-large room for Margaret Downey's appearance, will be renewing our PO box and voicemail, and will have additional new expenses for street-fair tabling.

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 this 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.

Report from Venice Beach

By Henry Farber

Reprinted from *Atheists United*, February 2003

At our outreach table on the ocean walk, we get different people who approach us. We have noticed 5 main categories of inquirers that react in various ways to our presence:

- The ones that try to proselytize and convert us to their faith.
- The others that ask questions and have an open mind.
- Still others that agree with our philosophy, but are not joiners.
- The "hit and run" types that come by, take a pamphlet, don't say a word and continue walking.
- And finally, the argumentative type who professes that he is not religious but possesses the truth with a bible under his arm.

Last Saturday, two young men carrying a giant wooden cross, made of railway beams, stalled in front of our table and started praying and telling us that Christ died for our sins. "You pray for us, we will think for you" was our answer.

Another time, a small group of young fundies surrounded our table and, holding hands, started praying.

One of them asked Margie sitting among us, who had her leg in a brace, "Do you mind if I lay my hand on your knee while we pray for god to heal you?"

"Don't you touch me, young man, I don't need prayer, I have a good orthopedic doctor that takes care of my leg."

For those of you who don't know, Margie and I are married for 35 years, and this is why "the family that does not pray together, stays together."

Join a National Group: The Center for Inquiry's Programs

The Center for Inquiry is a nonprofit organization, founded by humanist philosopher and activist Paul Kurtz, that explores and advances critical thinking, intellectual freedom, and the scientific outlook through research, publishing, education, and social services. Its two main subdivisions are the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), which encourages critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view and disseminates factual information about the results of such inquiry to the scientific community, the media, and the public; and the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH), which promotes and explores philosophical naturalism and secular values, and defends the interests of the non-religious.

It also supports many independent programs and organizations that are skeptical, atheist, humanist, or simply pro-science education. It publishes the journals *American Rationalist*, *Free Inquiry*, *Skeptical Inquirer*, *The Skeptic*, and *Philo*, plus several organizational newsletters. In the New York City area, it has produced programs on alternative medicine, intelligent design theory, women in freethought, and the psychology of religion. It is, with the Humanist Society of Metropolitan New York and New York City Atheists, one of the three main supporters of WBAI-

FM's *Equal Time for Freethought* (see <http://foody.org/freethoughtradio.html> for archives of past shows).

Besides its headquarters in Amherst, New York, and offices in other cities, the Center for Inquiry has had a "Metro NY" office in Montclair, northern New Jersey. Last month it opened new offices in Manhattan's Rockefeller Center. (See "CFI-Manhattan Summit Discusses Unity and Lack of Unity" in the November 2002 newsletter or at <http://foody.org/atheist/insanity1102.html#cfi> for previous coverage). You can see the new office at its open house on Friday, March 14, from 4-8 P.M., and Saturday, March 15, from 1-5 P.M." (Enter on the Fifth Avenue side, behind the skating rink and Prometheus statue, and sign in (with a photo ID) at the front desk.) "Take in the spectacular view, peruse the lending library, and meet CFI staff and volunteers, including chairman Paul Kurtz."

The Center for Inquiry is not, historically, a membership organization, though its CSICOP and CSH are. To help fund its new efforts, the Center for Inquiry has launched "Friend of the Center" memberships (<http://www.cfimetry.org/support.html> or call 973-655-9556), offering benefits relating to its programs and publications.

In November 2002, when NYC Atheists' treasury had dropped to a single digit, the Center for Inquiry informally proposed that NYC Atheists merge with it, to take advantage of possible meeting funding, new Center for Inquiry speakers, and some Manhattan-based administrative support. NYC Atheists' director might assume the unpaid Center for Inquiry post of Manhattan Events Coordinator, and NYC Atheists could continue with business as usual.

But we would be required to share our mailing list (which would require a change in our proposed bylaws) with the Center for Inquiry and with no other organization. That should not affect our affiliation with American Atheists, which does not share its mailing list and has never asked for ours. But your director

wishes NYC Atheists to be as independent as possible, and for it to organize and fund itself from within.

To learn more about the Center for Inquiry's programs, see its Web site at <http://www.centerforinquiry.net>, write to 30 Rockefeller Plaza, Suite 2829, New York, NY, 10112, or call 973-655-9556.

Ending Sunday Blue Laws?

The Institute for Humanist Studies has been lobbying New York State legislators in recent weeks to urge them to liberalize archaic liquor blue laws. The IHS says that many officials have expressed a keen interest in repealing these laws, not only for economic reasons, but to support the rights of the nonreligious.

Assemblyman Ron Canestrari announced on February 25 that he would be introducing legislation that would allow liquor stores to open on Sunday. Assemblyman John McEneny has continually been calling for the repeal of a law that bans Sunday sales of beer in grocery stores. Other legislators have expressed interest in repealing a regulation issued by New York State's Liquor Authority that prohibits restaurants from offering alcoholic beverages before noon when they are serving brunches. We look forward to sponsorship of this specific issue in both chambers of the legislature in the very near future.

Many people go grocery shopping on Sunday morning, and it is often inconvenient for them to have to come back later to buy beer because the law currently prohibits its sale before noon on Sunday. These restrictions also preclude the ordering of alcoholic beverages at restaurants during a Sunday brunch until the afternoon hours. Finally, a person who may need a liqueur for a Sunday social occasion will not be able to obtain the beverage if the timing of the event comes up on short notice because the law mandates the closure of all liquor stores for the entire day on Sunday.

While these may seem like small nuisances, there is a larger principle at stake. These laws not only represent a meaningless regulatory

burden on our state economy, they are objectionable for moral reasons as well. They provide no benefit to society and are a relic of our distant past when religious authorities had the untrammelled power to restrict dancing, singing, card playing, sporting events, buying goods and working on Sundays because they believed that such activities were sacrilegious in character.

The IHS believes that the observance of such prohibitions falls squarely in the realm of personal choice, not law. If some individuals want to follow the dictates of their conscience and refrain from engaging in such activities they are perfectly within their rights to do so. But they should not be able to impose their religious beliefs on other people, especially in a multicultural society where other religions have set aside different days for their Sabbath, or have no Sabbath at all.

The IHS has provided a sample letter, which is reprinted on the final page of this newsletter. To learn the name and address of the Assembly member who represents you, call the League of Women Voters of the City of New York at (212) 213-5286. For more information online, visit "A 924 -- Repeals Ban on Beer Sales in Grocery Stores on Sunday Before Noon" at <http://assembly.state.ny.us/leg/?bn=A00924>

Freethinking Online Personals

Some small online personals Web sites cater to freethinkers. Though they tend to have few members, and those whom they have may be across the country or world, the sites are free or free in part. Some larger personals sites allow you to filter out potential religious partners, but charge fees for use.

The new [Freethinkerpersonals.com](http://www.freethinkerpersonals.com) (<http://www.freethinkerpersonals.com>) urges atheists to try it. The site is currently free, but will eventually charge for use. [Atheist Singles](http://atheistsingles.com) (<http://atheistsingles.com>) has limited

free use, and requires a paid subscription for full use.

Larger online-dating services let you search for local potential friends and lovers who are atheist, agnostic, or "spiritual not religious," as well as by more traditional categories such as eye color and age. [Match](http://www.match.com) (<http://www.match.com>), [Matchmaker](http://www.matchmaker.com) (<http://www.matchmaker.com>), [Nerve](http://personals.nerve.com) (<http://personals.nerve.com>), and [Yahoo Personals](http://personals.yahoo.com) (<http://personals.yahoo.com>) All are popular in the New York City region, as well as in some other large cities. Fees are charged except for free introductory access. All support same-sex searches, but the site [Planet Out](http://www.planetout.com) (<http://www.planetout.com>) is more popular among non-straighties.

NYC Secular Sobriety

The Center for Inquiry plans to offer addiction recovery support groups in the New York metro area, and seeks volunteer group facilitators and others to participate in this new initiative.

The groups will be a part of [Secular Organizations for Sobriety \(SOS\)](http://www.sosnyc.org), a secular alternative to [Alcoholics Anonymous](http://www.aa.org). The only recent regional meetings, in Southold, Long Island, have been canceled. [Moderation Management](http://www.moderationmanagement.com) is another alternative. In Manhattan it meets on Tuesdays from 6 to 7 PM at: 131 West 72nd Street, New York, and on Thursdays from 7 to 8 P.M. at the [Harm Reduction Coalition](http://www.harmreductioncoalition.org), 22 West 27th Street, on the 5th floor. For more information about both [Moderation Management](http://www.sosnyc.org) meetings, call 212-462-9469 or see their Web site at <http://www.nyct.net/~mm/>

Another secular alternative is [Agnostics AA](http://www.agnosticaa.org), which meets at various locations across the city. In Manhattan it meets on Sunday and Thursday afternoons, and on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday evenings. In Brooklyn it's on Saturdays in the late morning, and in the Bronx on Wednesdays in the evening. For more information call New York Inter-Group at (212) 647-1680 and ask about [Agnostics AA](http://www.agnosticaa.org), or see the Web site <http://www.agnosticaa.org>.

Dear _____

I know that some elected officials in the New York State Legislature have been recently calling for the elimination of restrictions placed on Sunday liquor sales. I strongly encourage this course of action for both economic reasons and because the current prohibitions interfere with the personal religious choice of the individual consumer.

Assemblyman Canestrari recently announced that he is submitting legislation that would allow liquor stores to open on Sunday. In a similar vein, Assemblyman John McEneny has called for the repeal of a statute that bans sales of beer in grocery stores before noon.

As yet, no representative in either chamber has proposed legislation that would supersede the Liquor Authority's ban on restaurants serving alcoholic beverages before noon to those attending Sunday brunches. Would you consider introducing legislation in the 2003 session that would address this issue?

I believe that in all these cases such decisions should be a matter of choice, not something that a few individuals should impose on others through the force of law.

Recent studies indicate that Sunday sales by liquor store owners would bring in \$36.6 million annually in additional tax revenues to New York State. This is no paltry sum in these difficult times when the state is facing a revenue shortfall.

As for laws and regulations restricting Sunday sales of alcoholic beverages by grocery stores and restaurants, these are simply nuisances that are objectionable for moral reasons as well. They provide no real benefit to society and are an archaic relic of our distant past when religious authorities had the untrammled power to restrict dancing, singing, card playing, sporting events, buying goods and working on Sundays because they believed that such activities were sacrilegious in character.

I believe that the observance of such prohibitions falls squarely in the realm of personal choice, not law. If some individuals want to follow the dictates of conscience and refrain from engaging in such activities they are perfectly within their rights to do so. But they should not be able to impose their religious beliefs on other persons, especially in a multicultural society where other religions have set aside different days for their Sabbath, or have no Sabbath at all.

While we are all concerned with the serious hazard posed by driving and drinking and alcoholism in general, studies have shown that repealing Sunday liquor laws will not worsen the situation. Irresponsible individuals already know how to make provision for the weekend when grocery and liquor stores are closed or unable to dispense liquor. Indeed the fact that such beverages may not be readily obtainable on Sunday may induce "binging" behavior.

I urge you to act and draft legislation to repeal these vestiges of Sunday blue laws.

Sincerely,
