

New York City Atheists Inc.

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

June 2003

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

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

Events

June Meeting

Sunday, June 29, 1–4 P.M.

Speaker: Ellen Johnson, president, American Atheists, on "Is Atheist Activism Right For You?"

Source of Life Conference Center
352 7th Ave., 16th flr.

(Between W. 29th–30th Sts., just south of Penn Station)

Donation requested

June Street Fair Tabling

Sunday, June 22

Broadway between 68th–69th Sts. Visit our table, or e-mail info@nyc-atheists.org or call (212) 330-6794 to volunteer.

July Atheist Café Night

Thursday, July 10, 7–9 P.M.

Java & Jazz

868 Broadway between W. 17th–18th Sts., north of Union Square

July Atheist Meetup

Casual dining or drinks with your fellow freethinkers.

Tuesday, July 15, 7–9 P.M.

Manhattan location; call (212) 330-6794 to confirm.

352 7th Ave. (Between West 29th–30th Sts.; just south of Penn Station)

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.

Ellen Johnson to Speak at June Meeting



New York City Atheists is proud to present, at its next weekend meeting, another nationally renowned activist from American Atheists. Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists and a leading spokesperson for atheist civil liberties, will ask us, "Is Atheist Activism Right For You?" Johnson has presented testimony on behalf of American

Atheists to numerous government agencies, including the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Johnson also will lead a historic "breakthrough" meeting with officials of the White House liaison.

Johnson will speak at the New York City Atheists meeting on Sunday, June 29, which will be held from 1 to 4 P.M. at the Source of Life Conference Center, 352 Seventh Avenue, 16th floor. All freethinkers are welcome; a donation is requested.

Ron Barrier: Can Religion Make Morality?

At our "May" meeting (held on June 1 to avoid a holiday weekend), Ron Barrier, the national spokesperson of American Atheists (of which NYC Atheists is an affiliate) and cohost of the *Atheist Viewpoint*

Photo by Jake



television program, spoke on, and led a discussion of, religion's ability to shape morality. Thinking of Madalyn Murray O'Hair's quotation "Religion has caused more misery to all of humankind in every age of history than any other single idea," Barrier took the position that "absolutism" of any kind causes misery. Absolute power corrupts absolutely, he continued, and "religion," especially Christianity and Islam, "pretty much have a stranglehold on political activity throughout the world."

After comparing intellectual, more liberal religion with popular, "every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess" religion, Barrier said that religion couldn't form norms of morality (though he conceded that it could contribute to it) because religion can't form such norms in its own community. "I can't think of one controversial position that religion hasn't taken both sides on" -- e.g., bigamy, child abuse, positions on gay and reproductive rights -- "encouraging, in a Darwinian fashion, the propagation of religion no matter what happens."

Barrier said that the Unitarian church uniquely respected individual intellectual rights, although it's now swinging toward "spiritual" language.

Religion fuels nationalism, and has a long record of discrimination against minorities, said Barrier, especially when religion is favored by the local political system.

"The phony believer will get along better in this society

than the honest atheist," said Barrier after discussing Darrell Lambert, the Scout barred from the Boy Scouts after being given ten days to come up with a god.

The founders of the United States had a secular ideal in mind, said Barrier, one that granted the greatest amount of intellectual freedom. But over the years, religion has slowly seeped into American politics, even flooding it. A secular framework would at least allow the religious and secular communities to get along, Barrier concluded.

Barrier then led an animated discussion that addressed situational ethics, religious fear and hypocrisy, and the motivation for speaking up for atheism. We discussed the great effectiveness of the United Kingdom's National Secular Society, atheism's role in communism, how multiculturalism may cause religions to weaken as they compete for secular resources, and the demographics of atheists.

Today, Incorporation; Tomorrow, Tax Exemption

Before and after Barrier's meeting presentation, we discussed our group's progress and plans. New York City Atheists is now New York City Atheists Inc., thanks to Ken and Mel, who are now pursuing federal and state tax-exempt status. Eileen is researching grant opportunities. A board of directors -- Ken, Josh, Caroline, Dennis, Eileen, and Mason -- has been created, and bylaws, which

were passed around at the meeting, are being written based on the version in the February newsletter. Both the bylaws and future board elections will be subject to democratic decision making by the membership.

We showed Joe's video of NYC Atheists' street-fair tabling, and the teaser and first few minutes of the Godless Americans March on Washington (GAMOW) documentary commissioned by American Atheists, available soon from LightLyre Films (lightlyre@eudoramail.com or 785-542-5013). Many were interested in a second march. Joe and Ron discussed the high cost of such a multigroup national demonstration -- American Atheists funded GAMOW last year -- and Joe urged future multigroup participation and funding.

We discussed how to select members to represent the us to media. Some wanted to set official principles for such use, and to require knowledge of the scientific method. Others wanted candidates to stand for election.

One member suggested reducing the advertised meeting length. Another member suggested a shorter social break.

In addition to getting the American Atheists TV program *Atheist Viewpoint* on Manhattan and Long Island public-access cable (see elsewhere in this issue), some members are exploring the creation of our own public-access TV program. Members have also suggested special excursions, a book club, hikes, grief support, and a movie screening. To get involved with

these or other projects, E-mail info@nyc-atheists.org or call (212) 330-6794.

Sunday Blue Law Is History

Striking a blow for the separation of church and state, and for the rights of the nonreligious New York citizens, the state legislature has changed the "Sabbath day"-inspired blue laws. Starting Memorial Day weekend, liquor stores may now be open for business on Sundays for the first time since Prohibition.

The State Assembly and Senate amended their budget legislation to allow liquor stores to choose any six days of the week to be open for business. Although some proponents pushed for legislation that would give storeowners the choice to stay open on all seven days, the Institute for Humanist Studies, which campaigned to change the law (see the March newsletter or <http://nyc-atheists.org/insanity0303.html#ending>), is content with the compromise because it no longer restricts Sunday sales simply because of that day's religious connotations.

The *New York Times* reports that several states, facing their worst budget deficits in fifty years and eager for more tax revenue, are now allowing Sunday liquor sales and are receiving "barely a whimper from temperance interests." One *Times* article contrasted complaints from a minister ("At least keep the sabbath holy") with satisfaction from a liquor store owner ("I am not a churchgoing



Photo by Jake

person. I am just a businessman.")

Sources: "On the Seventh Day, a New Retail Option," *New York Times*, 5/25/03; "Hard-Pressed States Try Sunday Liquor Sales," *New York Times*, 5/19/03.

Atheist Viewpoint Is Back on the Air!

Atheist Viewpoint, with Ron Barrier and Ellen Johnson of American Atheists, can now be seen on the Manhattan Neighborhood Network public access channel 56 at 1:30 P.M. every Sunday starting June 22, to run through September 14th. It will be renewed for the autumn quarter. On Long Island, on the Hauppauge and Brookhaven Cablevision systems, it can be seen at 7 P.M. on Tuesdays, channel 20; and on Mondays, 7 P.M., also on channel 20. Thanks to Dennis and Paul for their hard work in getting the show back on the air for the first time in years.

Street Tabling This Month

We are tabling at a street fair on Sunday, June 22, on Broadway between 68th and 69th Streets.

The street fair is from 10 A.M. to 6 P.M. E-mail info@nyc-atheists.org or call (212) 330-6794 if you'd like to help volunteer in the morning or afternoon shift. At least twelve members have worked at at least one past tabling; more are very welcome. If you can't, come by to visit those who do.

Treasury Report

Early May's treasury balance was \$83.61. We spent \$110 to print and \$27.75 to mail the May newsletter, \$92.59 to print and mail a press release for the May and June meetings, and \$35.61 for street-fair-tabling Xeroxing. Members donated \$204 at the May meeting and \$105 by mail. As of early June, the treasury balance is \$126.66, excluding the cost of this newsletter.

Please consider donating to New York City Atheists. Membership and our monthly newsletter are free, but we depend on donations to maintain events 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.

American Atheists Protests Day of Prayer

Originally titled "Beliefs Clash But Spirit of Peace Prevails"

By Alicia Grey, [Newark] Star-Ledger, 5/2/03

Isabel Alvarez has been organizing National Day of Prayer services in front of the Woodbridge municipal building for the last four years, watching the event grow from a handful of members of her church to 30-plus people from local churches.

Yesterday two young men from American Atheists turned up and held protest signs and videotaped the gathering.

Alvarez, a member of the Woodbridge Christian Center, said she was surprised to see them, but "that's their right and freedom."

At one point, Alvarez and another woman held prayer

service programs up to block the sign one of the men held. The protesting placards stated "Government established prayer illegal" and "Keep church and state separate."

The Rev. L.L. DuBreuil of the First Congregational Church in Woodbridge, who serves on the Woodbridge Inter-faith Clergy Council, said she had no problem with the protest.

"I think it was wonderful. This is why our spiritual ancestors came to this county, so people could be whatever they needed to be."

Guillermina Adams, who attends Woodbridge Christian Center, went up to one of the men and told him, "Jesus loves him."

"No matter what they are doing, Jesus loves them. We love them," Adams said.

One of the demonstrators, Joe Zamecki, said the service violated the separation of church and state because Woodbridge Mayor Frank Pelzman participated in the program.

"We don't protest prayer itself," said Zamecki, who lives in Cranford.

The Rev. Noel Santiago,

senior pastor at Woodbridge Christian Center, said the separation of church and state doesn't prohibit the mayor from attending a prayer service.

"It doesn't mean we can't come to a city-owned property and proclaim there is a Lord," Santiago said.

He and others who spoke during the service prayer addressed both local and global issues, from the Woodbridge mayor and the school systems to President Bush and the military.

The Woodbridge prayer service was just one of close to 100 held around the state. Groups organized programs in churches, parks, schools and in of front of municipal buildings in most of the counties.

Alvarez started organizing prayer services while working for Lucent Technologies in Murray Hill. When she took an early retirement, she decided to start a similar service in Woodbridge.

"It is important to lift up the town and make sure people know we are praying for them," Alvarez said.

Write Letters to the Editor

This letter, published in the May 23, 2003 issue of the *New York Daily News*, is by Dennis Middlebrooks, a member of FANNY (Freethinking Activist Non-believing New Yorkers) and NYC Atheists:

Good Godless

After seeing that photo of President Bush embracing a Muslim cleric in Michigan, I cannot help but wonder if the day will ever come when a President will publicly embrace a prominent atheist. Atheists are loyal citizens who, as far as I know, never flew hijacked airliners into skyscrapers. But I won't hold my breath. In the land of the free, some are evidently more equal than others.

Dennis Middlebrooks

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. If you'd like to write letters in the name of NYC Atheists, which might improve chances of publication, e-mail info@nyc-atheists.org or call (212) 330-6794.

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