

New York City Atheists Inc.

Serving the Tri-State area • An affiliate of American Atheists

March 2004

WEB: NYC-ATHEISTS.ORG

P.O. Box 1187, New York, NY 10013

212-330-6794

EVENTS

Following Events Will Be Held
at 352 7th Ave.

Between 29/30th Street 16th floor
Just South of Penn station
Suggested donation \$10

Thur, Mar. 25, 2004 6:30 PM

Mar. Monthly Meeting
Followed By Book Club

Speaker: Jim Laatsch
Subject: Life Beyond Earth

Jim Laatsch is a graduate student at the Columbia University's School of Earth and Environment Science. Recently he returned from Antarctica, where frozen and dormant "life" has been defrosted, regained its normal life cycle and reproduced itself. He will also discuss "life" that exists without light and metabolizes toxins.

These and other discoveries of the existence of "life" in extreme conditions and environments greatly increase the probability of finding "Life Beyond Planet — Earth."

Tue. Apr. 13, 2004, 6:30 PM

Madalyn Murray O'Hair

Speaker: Caroline Gilman
Subject: Madalyn O'Hair

On Madalyn Murray O'Hair's birthday, meet with Ms. Gilman, who was on the Board of Directors with Ms. O'Hair. Who was the real Madalyn Murray O'Hair? Video, Q&A, etc.

JOIN NYC ATHEISTS

Sun, Apr. 25, 2004 1:00 PM

April Monthly Meeting

Speaker: Bob Morgan
Subject: A public forum of
Atheism Issues

Attendees will participate in a
public forum on Atheism.

Thur, May 6, 2004, 7:00 PM

Day Of Reason Dinner

Location: TBD
Cost: TBD

Thur, May 27, 2004, 6:30 PM

May Monthly Meeting

Speaker: Bob Simon of *End of
Life Choices* (formerly
the *Hemlock Society*)

Subject: Discussion of living
wills, health care
proxies, caring friends,
legality of suicide, and
assisted suicide issues.

Thur, June 24, 2004, 6:30 PM

June Monthly Meeting

Speaker: TBD
Subject: TBD

Sun, July 25, 2004, 1:00 PM

July Monthly Meeting

The July Monthly Meeting will be
either a picnic or trip.

Sun, Aug. 29, 2004 1:00 PM

August Monthly Meeting

Speaker: Bob Morgan
Subject: A public forum of
Atheism Issues

Attendees will participate in a public
forum on Atheism

Sun, Sept 26, 2004 1:00 PM

September Monthly Meeting

Speaker: Ed Stephens, M.D.
Subject: Psychiatrist's
perspective: Why
Atheism is a tough sell.



Richard Milner
February 12th
Charles Darwin Day

ATHEISTS MEETUP

**When: 3rd Tuesday of the
Month at 7:00 PM**

Casual dining or drinks with
your fellow freethinkers.

Manhattan location to be
chosen by registering and voting
at <http://atheists.meetup.com>.
Mar 16. Apr 20. May 18. Jun 15.
Jul 20. Aug 17. Sept 21.

**CALL 212-330-6794 THREE
DAYS BEFORE MEETUP FOR
EXACT LOCATION**

**AS OF THIS MARCH
EDITION — ONLY NYC
ATHEISTS MEMBERS WILL
RECEIVE PRINTED COPIES
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WEB: NYC-ATHEISTS.ORG
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THE NEWSLETTER BY
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Ken Bronstein

PRESIDENT’S SERMON

First and foremost, — I (Ken Bronstein) want to thank Josh Karpf, the founder and past director of NYC Atheists. If it were not for Josh’s more than two years of total dedication and leadership, this organization would never had been established nor exist today.

Josh’s day job, as an editor, became so demanding that he had to resign from all his volunteer leadership positions. We all hope that this will be only a short sabbatical. NYC Atheists honored Josh at our January Membership Meeting and presented him with a certificate of appreciation and the gift of a *New York Times* Crossword Puzzle Computer.

I want to thank the membership for having confidence in electing me to the office of President.

For 2004, our primary objectives are membership growth, organizational development, financial stability and our member’s increased interest and knowledge of Atheism. We will meet our objectives by increasing and extending our outreach activities: street fair and location tabling, advertising, a cable show, special events and interesting and knowledgeable speakers at our meetings. Our activism will include letters to editors and government officials and participation at rallies and demonstrations. I want, need and appreciate your feedback, you can contact me at NYCATHEISTS@AOL.COM or 212-535-7425.

STREET TABLING

We begin our 2004 Street Fair Tabling on April 17th (Saturday) on Broadway between 110 – 118th Street. We will be notified as to the exact location about two weeks before the event.

Street Fair Tabling has been a very successful and important outreach activity that has informed the public that there is an NYC Atheists group, establishing name recognition and recruiting of new members.

Volunteering to staff our booth is both fun and rewarding.

We divide the staffing into two shifts: 9:00 A.M. – 1:00 P.M. and 1:00 – 6:30 P.M. Even if you can only offer an hour or two this is also welcomed.

If you would like to be placed on the Tabling Volunteer list, send your email address to info@nyc-atheists.org or call 212-330-6794.

World’s Shortest Books

- Prayers That Work
- Life After Death
- Proofs Of Miracles

MIRACLES: FACT OR FICTION

On Thursday February 26th, Richard Carrier described and explained the development, analysis process and applications for his “Toolbox For The Analysis Of Historical Claims.” Carrier tested and gave examples of historical claims that met or failed his toolbox. An example that failed was the Resurrection Of Christ:

The Toolbox

1. First three rules of the historical method:
 - a) don’t believe everything you read
 - b) ask for primary evidence
 - c) understand the historical context
2. Four stages of proper historical procedure:
 - a) textual analysis
 - b) literary analysis
 - c) source analysis
 - d) historical analysis
3. The argument to the best explanation:
 - a) conformity
 - b) plausibility

- c) explanatory scope
- d) ad hoc-ness
- e) explanatory power
4. The argument from evidence:
 - a) physical-historical necessity
 - b) direct physical evidence
 - c) unbiased/counter biased corroboration
 - d) credible critical accounts
 - d) an eyewitness account
5. The criteria of a good historian:
 - a) critical awareness of problems
 - b) names and evaluates sources
 - c) record of reliable scholarship
6. Criteria for miraculous prophecy:
 - a) clearly envisions event
 - b) recorded well in advance of event
 - c) actually came true
 - d) could not have been staged
 - e) cannot be guess or accident



Richard Carrier

BOOK CLUB

The next meeting of the NYC Atheists Book Club will be right after our March 25th (Thursday Evening) Monthly Meeting. We continue using the book *Science and Religion* edited by Paul Kurtz. Copies are available for \$15 including shipping. Contact: info@nyc-atheists.org or Phone: 212-330-6794.

We will use this book for the next four to five Book Club Meetings. The reading assignment for this Book Club Meeting is the section titled: *Cosmology and God* (pages 31-79).

Charles Darwin's 195th Birthday Party

On Thursday Night, February 12th, the NYC Atheists held a birthday party for Charles Darwin. Darwin, who was born in 1809, published in 1859, his book *Origin of Species*, which proposed the principle of common descent. Darwin proclaimed that the mechanism of natural selection enabled the evolution of species. We were extremely fortunate to have had Richard Milner as our guest speaker.

Milner, through narrative and song described and explained Darwin's life and work. Some interesting items that were discussed were the parallel work of Alfred Russell Wallace, Darwin's evolution from medical, religion, and finally biology studies (the transition from saving souls to saving beetles) and Darwin's relationship and debates with Huxley. Milner also stated that Darwin's life objective was to discover the Laws of Life.

Milner asked: are not plant and crop hybrids, animal breeding, the wolf into the domesticated dog, excellent examples of artificial selection?

Milner concluded by reminding us that Darwin's work took place prior to DNA and molecular science (which has verified Darwin) and asked the question: is your life one that is more interested in "the rock of ages" or "the ages of rocks?"

The meeting concluded with all enjoying a large slice of a "low-carb" Chocolate Darwin Birthday Cake.

PARASKEVIDEKATRIAPHOBIA (The Fear of Friday the 13th)

February 13, 2004 was a Friday the 13th): The how, who, and why, did it begin.

What are superstitions? Superstitions are irrational or nonscientific beliefs in the existence of unknown powers with either positive or negative effects that may impact certain actions. Examples: picking a four leaf clover is lucky; stepping on a sidewalk crack is unlucky.

The number thirteen:

No one knows exactly how the number thirteen became unlucky

Egyptians counted ten fingers and two feet for a count of twelve; thirteen for afterlife. Later cultures reinterpreted the number thirteen to death. Later cultures reinterpreted the number thirteen to death.

Vikings and Hindu cultures believe that it was unlucky to invite/have thirteen people gather in one place. The last supper had thirteen attendees. Some believe

that this is the curse of the devil's dozen.

Friday:

Negative Biblical references to Friday include: Eve tempted Adam with the forbidden fruit, the great flood began, the destruction of Solomon's temple, Christ was crucified.

In pagan times it was their holy day or Sabbath. The Christian church recast it as the "Witches Sabbath" and evil doings.

The convergence of Friday and the Number 13:

Historians have not found prior to the twentieth century any significant reference to Friday the 13th as a special day of misfortune.

If one had to point to one possible event; October 13, 1307 (Friday the 13th) when Officers of King Philip IV of France carried out the mass arrest of the Knights Templars; a legendary order of Christian Crusaders, (who battled Islam) followed with seven years of torture and execution.

France: Secularism or Religious discrimination?

By Ron Widelec

France has been making headlines lately with its new proposal to ban all religious symbols from public facilities, including clothing worn by those who enter. France has done this in the name of secularism, a long and proud French position. However, this law is far from secular, and is likely being passed for other, more dubious, reasons.

Secularism means that a state cannot support or hinder any religion or religion in general. Part of secularism is that idea that no public funding can be used to support religion or the placing of religious icons in public venues. However, this new law would ban citizens, including children in school from wearing their own religious icons. Secularism says that schools cannot hang religious icons in the building. Preventing citizens from wearing their icons, many of which are religiously required, crosses the line.

Supporters of the proposal claim that this is secular because it bans all religious symbols, and that it will end religious fundamentalism, namely Islamic fundamentalism. While fundamentalism is a dangerous force, this law will do little to end it. In fact, it is likely to increase the hostilities that already exist. The real purpose is to stymie the influx of Muslims into France by creating an unwelcoming environment.

If France intended to end fundamentalism they wouldn't pass a law that will keep children out of public schools and force them to attend religious schools. Education and modernization are the keys to weakening fundamentalist ideas, not discrimination and the segregation it may cause. This law may be able to slow the rate of Islamic immigration, but will only cause the existing group, about six million, to become more withdrawn and fundamentalist in nature.

From the The Observer
(ENGLISH NEWSPAPER)
Sunday February 15, 2004

Children to study atheism at school

- National exam body plans new guidelines for RE: lessons
- Falling church numbers prompt radical syllabus reform

Children will be taught about atheism during religious education classes under official plans being drawn up to reflect the decline in churchgoing in Britain.

Non-religious beliefs such as humanism, agnosticism and atheism would be covered alongside major faiths such as Christianity or Islam under draft guidelines being prepared by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, which regulates what is taught in schools in England.

Although some schools already cover non-religious beliefs, there is currently no national guidance for what is taught, even though all schools must provide religious education.

The draft plans being drawn up by the QCA will not be compulsory, allowing religious schools the freedom to keep devout parents happy. But they will be regarded as best practice for heads, and are likely to be followed across the country.

A spokesman for the QCA said its guidance would be released for consultation in the summer term, but added: 'It is very much the intention that young people in the context of religious education should be studying non-religious beliefs. There are many children in England who have no religious affiliation and their beliefs and ideas, whatever they are, should be taken very seriously.'

The plans risk sparking a conflict between evangelists, who want to strengthen faith teaching, and secularists, who argue it is becoming irrelevant to modern life.

The first shot in the debate will be fired with a controversial report to be published tomorrow calling for RE to be renamed religious, philosophical and moral education and children encouraged to debate such ethical issues as whether it is permissible to express racist views.

'The whole thing is terribly biased in favor of religion right now - it's all about encouraging an identification with religion,' said Ben Rogers, author of the report for the Institute for Public Policy Research think tank.

'There are huge numbers of people who are atheists or whose families are atheists and who are coming into a class where their family's view is not acknowledged. You should be able to have a conversation about ethics that doesn't collapse into a conversation about religion.'

While 19 per cent of Britons attended a weekly religious service in 1980, by 1999 that had fallen to 7 per cent - prompting some to argue that RE should be scrapped as a compulsory subject. Secularists say there is little point trying to drum religion into skeptical children at school.

'We're not trying to suggest that nobody should learn anything about religion: it is part of our culture and informs our art and our literature,' said Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society, which has written to Education Secretary Charles

Clarke calling for atheism to be included on the syllabus.

‘But if you try to teach morality through “the Bible says” or the Ten Commandments, most children won’t accept it as they don’t believe the religious message. It would be much better if people learned morality by looking at current examples. It’s philosophy that we really want to be teaching.’

Religion in schools is a sensitive subject, with France renewing a ban on the wearing of the hijab while in Britain it emerged last week that a Luton schoolgirl had launched legal action after being sent home for wearing traditional dress.

But Rogers said that trying to keep religion out of schools would not work: ‘It won’t make religious strife go away - if anything it will exacerbate it. Religious education can play an important part in combating prejudices.’

If non-religious beliefs were included in classes, parents should lose their current right to withdraw pupils from RE lessons, Rogers said.

Marriage: Government or God?

By Ron Widelec

“We must protect the sanctity of marriage.” That is a statement that has been thrown around a great deal in the last few months as the debate over same-sex marriage has spread across the nation. However, without realizing it, those who argue the sanctity of marriage have destroyed their own case. By evoking the term ‘sanctity’ they have made clear that they wish to enforce a particular religion’s view of marriage.

Despite what President Bush may think, not every religion defines marriage in the same way (I guess his C+ wasn’t in religious studies). The Christian right-wing and their Republican cohorts are attempting to impose a Judeo-Christian view of marriage based on their reading of the bible — of course omitting the parts that discriminate against women (as women make up half of America’s voters).

In fact, if marriage is a sanctimonious issue, then government should have no role to play at all. Can the government play a role in performing a marriage if it is a sanctimonious act? Can the government give special privileges to couples because they took part in this, or any other sanctimonious act? If marriage is about religion, god, and sanctity then the government should not give those who take part any extra rights. Would it be acceptable if the government gave special rights, such as tax breaks, for those who have had a baptism or bar-mitzvah? If marriage is about sanctity can atheists marry? These are serious questions that must be addressed before this issue is resolved.

People can be wed by a justice of the peace without any religious ceremony or spiritual feelings. Perhaps those marriages should be banned for lack of religiosity. The fact is that marriage has nothing to do with religion, unless the couple wishes it to. Marriage is about the joining of two consenting adults under the law for whatever reason. Every argument made by the right wing falls seriously short. Let’s take a look...

1. God made us straight. God wants marriage to be between man and woman.

This point is not worth arguing. It has no fact based merits, and more importantly, the United States has a separation of church and state. Thus, what one group thinks is god’s law has no relevance. Our laws are not based on religious doctrines. Furthermore, the bible was written by man, and man is affected by environment. One can make a strong case that the anti-gay scriptures were written in response to Greek invasions. The Greeks, especially their soldiers, were famous for their homosexual practices. Thus, the anti-gay scriptures may have been anti-Greek in origin to vilify the enemy and protect the cultural identity of the conquered Hebrews.

2. The marriage of one Man and one Woman is what nature intended.

If homosexuality is so ‘unnatural’ why does it occur? Why in some societies is it so prevalent? The Greeks practiced the marriage of men and women, but were actively homosexual. In fact, sex with women was looked down on and was considered something used for reproduction only. In societies where homosexuality is not looked down on, or even encouraged, heterosexuality and homosexuality seem to exist in bounds. Before the spread of Christianity one man-one woman marriages were not the most common. Polygamy was far more widespread than monogamy in most regions of the world, specifically pre-state cultures.

Finally, it should be noted that those who make this argument are basically saying that god intended it this way, but substitute 'nature' to avoid separation of church and state issues. How can nature have intent unless driven by some supernatural force? Thus all the arguments from above apply to this as well.

3. Five thousand years of Western history support one man-one woman marriages.

It may be true that in five thousand years Western civilization has supported heterosexual marriage, but it has also supported slavery, crusades, racism, imperialism, and a wide variety of other things that would be considered atrocious today.

4. Homosexuals cannot have children together so they should not marry.

Is there a shortage of people in this country, or in this world for that matter? Are we afraid that the human population will no longer reproduce if gay marriage is allowed? There are many people who lack the ability to have children. If the ability to have children is the measure of marriage then these couples should be banned. On a similar note, if 'reproductional ability' is a co-requisite for marriage, when couples marry should they be obligated to have a child?

5. Straight parents do a better job of raising children and having a family.

Before this argument can be used we need a list of criteria with which to judge the success of parenthood. What is the definition of good parenting and a good family? Should the government decide? If straight couples cannot

meet these criteria, can they be denied marriage or forced to divorce, or will the only criterion be heterosexuality? Once a "legitimate" measure of good parenting is developed (whatever that means), serious analytical tests and studies will have to be done to prove that gay couples cannot raise children as well. Until then, this argument holds no water.

6. If marriage can be redefined, then polygamy can be allowed as well.

It is true that opening marriage up to new definition makes it possible to argue for polygamy as well. However, this argument falls short because it is based on the assumption that polygamy is obviously and innately bad or wrong. Although polygamy is considered wrong by many, I have yet to hear a convincing reason that it is socially harmful and worthy of being banned in the first place. In fact, polygamy is banned for the same reason homosexual marriage is banned; it violates Judeo-Christian values. And for those who desire a more 'natural' approach, keep in mind that polygamy was more widespread than monogamy in most regions prior to Christianization. Furthermore, to quell those who fear a rise of polygamy in the United States, the social factors in America make it highly unlikely. Polygamy is unlikely to arise in a state that has equal rights for men and women, which is a system that obviously runs counter to Polygamy. Not to mention the fact that almost every case of polygamy has arisen as a tool for population control and encouragement and reward for

aggressive males for tribal level warfare in pre-state societies.

7. If the U.S allows gay marriage, churches will be forced to perform ceremonies that are against their beliefs.

This argument is basically a scare tactic to make people think that the government could force religious institutions to give up their ideals. In fact, no such proposal has been made. Proponents of same-sex marriage are looking for the right for gay couples to be recognized as a legally married couple. These marriages would be performed by secular government institutions — *i.e.* Justices of the Peace — or by the numerous religious institutions that willingly decide to allow such marriages.

In fact, there are no good reasons to ban same-sex marriages, which is a blatant form of discrimination despite the right-wing's claims of compassion. This is just another attempt on the part of the Christian right wing to ban something that they consider sinful, despite the fact that it hurts no one. The Christian right wing believes the laws of the land are written in the bible, and while all can believe what they want, they must still play by Christian rules. And what's worse, they claim that preventing them from enforcing their religious rules on the entire nation is a breach of their freedom of religion. This is merely bigotry in the guise of freedom. Laws preventing same-sex marriage are one step away from the Texas law — finally overturned by the Supreme Court in 2003 — which basically made it illegal to be gay.