

# New York City Atheists Inc.

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

April 2004

Vol. I Issue No. 4

WEB: [NYC-ATHEISTS.ORG](http://NYC-ATHEISTS.ORG)

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

212-330-6794

## EVENTS

### Following Events Will Be Held

At 352 7<sup>th</sup> Ave.

Btw. 29/30<sup>th</sup> Street — 16<sup>th</sup> floor

Just South Of Penn station

Suggested donation \$10

Tue., Apr. 13, 2004, 6:30 P.M.

Madalyn Murray O'Hair

Speaker: Caroline Gilman

Subject: Madalyn O'Hair

On Madalyn Murray O'Hair's birthday, meet with Ms. Gilman, who was an American Atheists board member. Who was the real Madalyn Murray O'Hair? Video, Q&A, etc.

Sun., Apr. 25, 2004 1:00 P.M.

April Monthly Meeting

Speaker: Bob Morgan

Subject: A public forum of  
Atheist Issues

Attendees will participate in a  
public forum on Atheism.

See Page 4.

Thur., May 6, 2004, 7:00 P.M.

Day Of Reason Dinner

Location: EURO Diner  
126 East 28th St.  
(Lex-Park)

Cost: Individual Checks

Thur, May 27, 2004, 6:30 P.M.

May Monthly Meeting

Speaker: Bob Simon, 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.

Sun., June 27, 2004, 1:00 P.M.

June Monthly Meeting

Speaker: Gerry Dantone, Long  
Island Secular Humanists  
Subject: Morality (Religion versus  
Humanism)

Sun., July 18, 2004, 1:00 P.M.

July Monthly Meeting

The July Monthly Meeting will be  
a NYC Harbor Cruise.

Sun., Aug. 29, 2004 1:00 P.M.

August Monthly Meeting

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

Attendees will participate in a  
public forum on Atheism

Sun, Sept 26, 2004 1:00 P.M.

September Monthly Meeting

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

## GAMPAC

*Godless Americans Political  
Action Committee*

On March 9, 2004; Ellen Johnson,  
Executive Director, announced the  
establishment of GAMPAC  
(Godless Americans Political  
Action Committee)

The objective of GAMPAC is  
"Mobilizing America: Nonbelievers  
for Political Activism."

See: [www.godlessamericans.org](http://www.godlessamericans.org)

Their website has an outstanding  
search capability for Elected  
Officials, Issues and Legislation,  
Elections and Candidates and  
Media Contacts.



**Madalyn Murray O'Hair**

## ATHEISTS MEETUP

When: 3rd Tuesday of the Month  
at 7:00 P.M.

Casual dining or drinks with your  
fellow freethinkers.

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

Call 212-330-6794 three days  
before Meetup for exact location.

## NYC ATHEISTS SECOND SUNDAY BRUNCH

Starting on Sunday, May 9<sup>th</sup>  
NYC Atheists will begin:  
Second Sunday Brunch

Where: Euro Diner  
126 East 28<sup>th</sup> St.  
(Btw. Lex. & Park Ave.)  
Time: 12:30 P.M.  
Cost: \$ 12.50 (tax, tip, included)

No reservations required

Future dates: June 13, July 13,  
Aug 8, Sept 12, Oct 10.



**Ken Bronstein**

**PRESIDENT’S SERMON**

**New Footing for a Crumbling Wall**

On Wednesday, March 24, 2004, I participated in the demonstration on the steps of the United States Supreme Court in support of Michael Newdow, who was personally pleading his “under god” Pledge of Allegiance case before the court. Newdow has dedicated more than six years of his life personally arguing his case though the court system.

I am uncertain as to what the court’s decision will be, but no matter what the outcome, the 30,000,000 American non-believers must now begin the long march to effectively repair “the wall” between church and state. There will be victories and defeats along the path, but I am confident that in the end we will be successful.

We need a full court press, a 100% effort with no excuses; it is too important to all of us for anyone to remain a casual observer. Remember, it is the individual that makes a difference. You cannot depend upon faith or miracles. You may directly contact me, Ken Bronstein, at [NYCATHEISTS@AOL.COM](mailto:NYCATHEISTS@AOL.COM) or 212-535-7425.

**STREET TABLING**

We begin our 2004 Street Fair Tabling on April 17<sup>th</sup> (Saturday) on Broadway between 110 – 118<sup>th</sup> Street, followed on Sunday, May 2 on Broadway between 86 – 96st. We are notified of 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 a NYC Atheists group, established name recognition and recruited 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 a hour or two, it is also welcomed.

If you would like to be placed on the Tabling Volunteer list, send your email address to [info@nyc-atheists.org](mailto:info@nyc-atheists.org) or call me at 212-535-7425.

**JOIN  
NYC ATHEISTS**



**One of our Street Tablings**

**Jim Laatsch was our  
March Monthly speaker.**

Subject: *Life beyond Planet Earth.*

Jim described his Antarctica field work which uncovered frozen and dormant bacteria that were defrosted and returned to their normal life cycle and were able to reproduce. He also described “life” surviving without light and in toxic environments. He showed us examples of lab experiments that generated amino acids and adenine, both basic “life” building blocks. He described and discussed the potential of life on other planets and moons such as Mars and Jupiter’s Europa Moon.

Finally he showed us a Carl Sagan analysis that concluded a high probability of about 1000 potential Planets that might have “life.”

**One Nation Under God? A Last Vestige of Prayer in Our Schools**

*By Ron Widelec*

For many Atheists, the pledge of allegiance has stood as a constant reminder that non-believers are not fully accepted by our government and by a large portion of the population. This clear violation of the Establishment clause of the bill of rights has remained as one of the last strongholds of church in our schools, in addition to the moment of silent “reflection or prayer” and the song/prayer “God Bless America.” This issue is being dealt with today by the U.S. Supreme Court in the Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow case.

While “God Bless America” is only sung in schools from time to time, the Pledge is as constant as the sunrise. Every morning our students are told, and encouraged

to state, that this is a nation “under god.” Of course, the pledge is more of a patriotic verse, but it clearly has religious intentions as well, or at least it has since 1954. Most Americans are unaware of the true origins of the pledge. Many believe that the pledge has been around since 1776, and has been unchanged since it was penned. However, they are wrong on both accounts: The pledge was written in 1892, over one hundred years after the creation of the United States. Although composed by a Baptist minister, the ‘under god’ section was not there. The pledge read as follows:

“I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

In 1923 the term “United States of America” was added. Only fifty years ago, in 1954, did the term “under god” find its way into the pledge. Was there some realization half a century ago that led Congress to believe that this nation was established upon a god, or a sudden awakening of religiosity? In a way, yes. But it was not religion that sparked this awakening, it was a political power struggle.

During times of war and struggle, a nation looks for ways to unite its own people. Usually the demonization of the enemy does this well enough. For added success, a nation may then decide to illustrate how it is the exact opposite from its enemy in this demon-like way. For the United States during the Cold War, the answer was religion. Communist regimes were painted as Atheistic and ungodly, and thus evil and demon-like. Accordingly, the United States, through the lobbying of religious groups in Congress, was to be portrayed as the ‘good’ guys on god’s side. So, it was not religion that led to this ‘under god’ addition, but a social and political factor.

So why go through so much trouble to have this ‘harmless’ term removed from our pledge? Well, for one, it’s not so harmless. This is a clear violation of Separation of Church and State, despite the claims of bible-thumpers nationwide. The pledge, as it is now constructed, clearly states that, in the eyes of the United States government, god does in *fact* exist and is the basis of our nation. In doing so, the government is telling the thirty million atheists/agnostics in the United States that their *beliefs* about the (non-) existence of god are wrong.

To gain an understanding of the true scope of this violation of freedom of (or from) religion one must simply turn the tables and reverse the situation. If the pledge, or any other government statement or institution, stated that “god did not exist,” millions of Americans who believe in god would be outraged, and justifiably so! The government has no right to declare their beliefs incorrect, just as it has no right to declare an Atheist’s beliefs false. That is why secular government is the only way to achieve true religious freedom.

Another clear example of the very real harm of this addition to the pledge is the risk that Atheist students are forced to take if they choose not to recite the pledge. They must decide whether to betray their personal beliefs or appear unpatriotic. Especially in these times, when President Bush has constantly asked Americans to look to god in the hopes of our nation winning a war. When asked about his position on the pledge, Bush stated that “During these challenging times, we are determined to stand for these words.... When we pledge allegiance to One Nation under god, our citizens participate in an important American tradition of humbly seeking the wisdom and blessing of Divine Providence.” Bush has clearly shown that he

does not respect the beliefs of those who disagree with him religiously and that he is unafraid of stating it publicly.

There is, perhaps, no clearer example of the harm ‘under god’ can cause than that illustrated by former President Bush, the elder. In 1987, Bush was quoted as saying, “...I don’t know that Atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.” Of the two, the elder was the less religiously motivated and conservative, yet he questioned whether Atheists can be citizens or patriots based on their lack of belief in a god. That alone should be enough to demonstrate the harm of the ‘under god’ term in our pledge.

It is for all these reasons that the Supreme Court, in the *Newdow* case, must finally clarify the meaning of freedom of religion, as it pertains to the beliefs of those who believe in god or gods, and those who do not. Freedom of religion must encompass three basic rights at the very least:

1. The right to hold any beliefs you choose pertaining to the existence or non-existence of supernatural forces and/or beings, without government interferences, either confirming or denying the ‘truth’ of those beliefs.
2. The right to practice the rituals that pertain to your belief system, should you decide to do so, without hindrance or assistance of government, assuming that these rituals are not harmful to others and counter to the law.
3. The right to be treated equally to all others regardless of what your beliefs and practices may be.

In the recent case of *Locke v. Davey*, the Supreme Court stated during arguments that atheism should receive the same treatment as any religion, claiming that the study of atheism is “theology”

and that Atheist organizations fall under the same rules and regulations as any religious organization. Thus, according to rule one, as stated above, the government cannot argue for or against the truth of any religious beliefs (including atheism) or religion in general. Again, secular government is the only way to achieve religious freedom.

This does not mean that those in the government or the population at large must give up their religious beliefs. It does mean, however, that the institutions of the government must take a neutral position. Thus, if a government official, at any level, wished to end a speech with “god bless America” or quote a divine entity, he or she is well within their rights to do so. But it cannot become a required procedure and necessary component of any official or institution. As such, Bush’s speeches in which he asks for divine providence are not a breach of the establishment clause because that is a personal decision on his part. If “god bless America” was made an official ending to all presidential speeches, and thus a component of the institution of the presidency, then it would be an infringement of the establishment clause. In the case of the pledge, if an individual desired to add the “under god” for themselves when they recite the pledge, it would be fine. But when stating “under god” becomes a mandated component of the pledge, it crosses the line into the realm of unconstitutionality. Other similar situations include “in god we trust” on our money, the opening “god save this court” of the Supreme Court, and the opening prayer used in many government meetings, both local and federal, including the U.S. Congress.

Unlike the obviously unconstitutional prayer held by Congress every day in session, this cannot be approved by the

courts as a longstanding practice. This practice is not longstanding, and has little or no relevance today. ‘under god’ is merely the ugly stepchild of era that ended over fifteen years ago. However, our current government, under the Bush theocrats, has found use for ‘god’ once again, this time pinning “our god” versus “their god” in the war on terror.

Any questions or comments...  
Email me at [Beowolf88@aol.com](mailto:Beowolf88@aol.com)

### APRIL 25th FORUM

NYC Atheists Goals 3  
Committee’s objective is to discuss, analyze and then to prepare papers of Atheism and society. The Forum structure is seen as a first step: speakers will present a variety of views on the topic. After any cross-discussion, the topic will be opened to general participation. We encourage each participant to suggest positive additions and alternatives, especially if you feel your viewpoint has been overlooked. In effect, all become participants.

In brief: the forum is seen as a genuine study of a topic and an attempt to combine our collective wisdoms to better understand each other— and to demonstrate to general humanity that one can live a full, rich, positive, and even “spiritual” life without recourse to fables of divine beings or other transcendent direction.

The First Forum: At the January Membership meeting, the general membership selected the topic: Can Atheism support a Morality?

A funny thing happened to Morality on the way to the Forum: some Members have questioned its existence. We may wish to include a concept that “ethics” better fits atheist thinking than does “morality”.

We will assume the following as representative as the general public’s ideas of morality:

*Moral Sense:* An individual’s feeling there is/are certain standard’s of right/wrong or good/bad human behavior (and character) — and that these are obvious to all.

This sense has been expressed by in a number of ways including:

- the sense that these standards are “innate” and/or eternal reflections of god(s) or other transcendent source . . . the sense that these standards should match the “prevailing standards of the community”.
- the sense that we can intuit or discover basic standards (such as the “golden rule”) underlying all moralities.

*Morality:* A generalized set of feelings, concepts, and philosophical beliefs concerned with and “define” correct (right/wrong, good/bad) conduct and character.

*Moral Code:* An articulated set of ideas that attempts to define such concepts and beliefs, usually with the added intention of regulating group (or sub-group) behavior.

For the purpose of the forum, we could assume that the “moral sense” actually resides, if anywhere, in the individual — and that pertinent moral codes are a product of the society or group that promulgates it. (Any personal moral code can be called just that.) I suggest this distinction to help us clarify the “moral” problems for an individual when in conflict with the “moral” views of others, especially when they can enforce theirs.

If these are acceptable terms, then the April forum questions center on questions such as:

1. Do we need a “moral” sensibility (perhaps, as opposed to ethical? nothing?)
2. If so, can Atheism generate an adequate version of a code that would sway people?