

New York City Atheists Inc.

Serving the Tri-State area

An affiliate of American Atheists, Atheist Alliance International & Center For Atheism

WEB: NYC-ATHEISTS.ORG COOPER STATION - Box 93, NY, NY 10276-0093 212-330-6794

SEPTEMBER 2007

Vol. IV Issue No. 9

ATHEISM IS A CONCLUSION NOT A BELIEF

UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

SEPTEMBER

Sept. 9*	Sunday	12:00 P.M.	NYCA Brunch, Library, Book Club
Sept. 18**	Tuesday	7:00 P.M.	NYCA Meet-Up
Sept. 20***	Thursday	6:30 P.M.	NYCA Monthly Meeting

OCTOBER

Oct. 14*	Sunday	12:00 P.M.	NYCA Brunch, Library, Book Club
Oct. 16**	Tuesday	7:00 P.M.	NYCA Meet-Up
Oct. 25	Thursday	6:30 P.M.	NYCA Monthly Meeting

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- * Press Box Restaurant & Pub – 932 Second Ave. (49/50th) 2nd Floor
** Stone Creek Bar and Lounge – 140 East 27th St. (3rd/Lex)
Register at <http://atheists.meetup.com>
*** SLC Conference Center – 352 Seventh Ave. (30thSt.) – 16th Floor

WEDNESDAYS

THIS WEEK IN ATHEISM CABLE SHOW
6:30 PM-CH 57 (MANHATTAN CABLE)
LIVE STREAMING: WWW.MNN.ORG

THURSDAYS

NYC ATHEISTS CABLE SHOW
7:00 PM-CH 67 (MANHATTAN CABLE)
LIVE STREAMING: WWW.MNN.ORG

ATHEISTS BOOK CLUB CABLE SHOW
7:30 PM-CH 67 (MANHATTAN CABLE)
LIVE STREAMING: WWW.MNN.ORG

PROUD TO BE AN ATHEIST!

2007

NEW YORK CITY ATHEISTS MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

NYC Atheists Inc. is a 501-C3, non-profit, non-partisan educational association.

Our meetings and membership are open and all are welcome (both non-believers and believers) atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, skeptics, secularists, separation-of-church/state advocates and individuals who are questioning and searching beliefs.



KENNETH BRONSTEIN

The Need for Support Groups For Newly Outed Atheists

We've received overwhelming support from members for my two prior proposals in this "Sermon" column: (1) the "Un"ceremony—an Un-Confirmation or Un-Bar Mitzvah in which Atheists would renounce their childhood religious indoctrination and (2) identification of two syndromes related to childhood religious indoctrination— Childhood Religious Intimidation Trauma (CRIT) and Childhood Religious Indoctrination Stress (CRIS). This month, I am proposing a solution to the problem of religious indoctrination trauma: Support Groups.

The secular community must support the exodus from religious organizations of those who have been affected by CRIS and CRIT and are having difficulties, or are unsure about how to deal with a world in which they are no longer guided by, or dependent on, the supernatural, or who simply want to learn how to respond to those who question their decision to become a nonbeliever. I am proposing that Support Groups be established by nonbeliever communities nationwide to encourage these individuals in their journey toward living a life based on reality.

Support groups are not new. One of the oldest is Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), started by an ex-alcoholic who, alas, used the notion of god to buttress his temperance program. Since then, a secular form of AA has cropped up, S.O.S (Save Our Selves or Secular Organizations for Sobriety), based on secular and scientific ways to overcome alcoholism and drug dependency. There are support groups now for divorced people, single parents, cancer victims, grief counseling and for people recovering from ailments and problems of every kind. The central idea is that a group of people get together to share their pain, their problems and their solutions, and to give solace, comfort and courage to fellow sufferers as well as help them adapt to a new phase of their life.

Life Without Illusions

I envision NYCA setting up, for those who have given up their religion, a Support Group that will provide emotional support, help establish social networks, provide sympathetic understanding, help build their self confidence and self-esteem and generally ease their road to Atheism. Remember, one of the things we're told religion provides to its adherents is a sense of "comfort" and the secure feeling that someone heavenly is constantly watching over them. The prospect of life after death, rewards in heaven, the protection of an all-seeing god, are all placating concepts that may give illusory comfort to the believer, however deceptive they seem to us. It takes courage to give up these illusions without something to take their place. We need to teach our new converts to Atheism how to enjoy and make the most of life without illusions, to put their priorities on the here and now, and to find peace and comfort in myriad realistic ways through work and love and friendship.

Socrates firmly believed that before anyone can understand the world, they first need to understand themselves. I see our Support Group participants as seeking self-understanding through rational thought, reason and truth. Through reading, study and group discussion, the participants will build up their self-assurance and courage and learn to defend their Atheism with confidence. In fact, if you will indulge my penchant for acronyms, I would like to attach the word P.R.O.U.D to the goal of the Support Group concept. It will stand for Personal, Rationality and Reason, Objectivity, Understanding and finally, Declaration of the participant's status as Atheist. Pride has had a big role in movements for freedom and recognition. Black pride and Gay pride have been planks in both the Black equal rights

movement and the Gays' fight for acceptance, and both groups have been successful in getting across the idea that it's okay to be Black or Gay. Likewise, we Atheists need to embrace—and promote—the idea that being an Atheist is something to be proud of.

In fact, the ultimate objective of the Support Groups I envision is that the participants will be able to publicly express and defend their Atheism. Manned by volunteers experienced in group leadership, our Support Groups will be incubators of future Atheist leaders and scientists, authors and thespians, teachers and law makers, who will pass on our legacy as those who were courageous enough, in a time when religion was rampant, to stand up for the truth. ☐

I would appreciate your comments. Ken Bronstein at NYCATHEISTS@AOL.COM or 212-535-7425

UPCOMING SEPTEMBER EVENTS

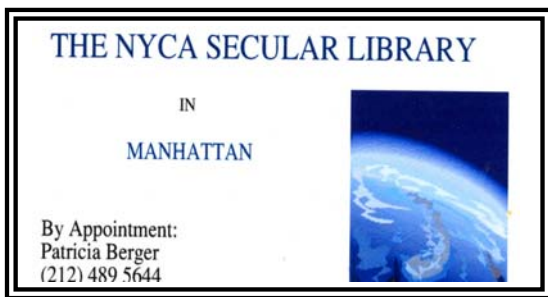
September 9 Sunday 12:00 P.M.
NYCA Brunch, Book Club, Library

Location: Press Box Restaurant & Pub
932 Second Ave. (49/50th) 2nd Floor

Cost: Lunch Buffet - \$20 includes juice, coffee, soda, tax and tip. (Alcoholic drinks extra)

After brunch, we go to the NYC Atheists' library located on West 48th street.

Pat Berger, NYCA Librarian, has selected "Atheists: A Groundbreaking Study of America's Nonbelievers." Attendees should purchase, and have read, the book. The book can be purchased from Amazon www.amazon.com



September 18 Tuesday 7:00 P.M.
NYCA Meet-Up

Location: Stone Creek Bar and Lounge
140 East 27th St. (3rd/Lex)
Casual conversation and drinks with your fellow freethinkers.

Cost: Free (cash food and bar)
Register at <http://atheists.meetup.com>

September 20 Thursday 6:30 P.M.
NYC Atheists Monthly Meeting

Location: SLC Conference Center
352 Seventh Ave. (30th St.) – 16th Fl.

Cost: \$5 Donation to help cover the cost of the room rental

Subject: View and discuss Sam Harris' CSPAN presentation about religion.



The Genius of Sam Harris

Sam Harris is the author of The End of Faith (2004) and Letter to a Christian Nation (2006). The second book is a rejoinder to all the criticism his first book attracted.

Sam Harris's basic theme in both of his books is that the time has come to speak openly and clearly about the dangers to society posed by religious beliefs. Harris criticizes all religions as both dangerous and impeding progress toward more enlightened approaches to ethics.

Harris says that he sat down to write *The End of Faith*—a book that Richard Dawkins, professor at Oxford University, argues should "replace the Gideon Bible in every hotel room in the land"—on September 12, 2001, the day after the 9/11

**ATHEISTS
BORN IN THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER**

attacks. In the book, Harris argues for the need to counter the politeness and deference that secularists extend to religions, which prevents open criticism of religious ideas, beliefs and practices. He points out that, in contrast, few would require “respect” for inaccurate views on physics or history; rather, we demand reasons and expect *evidence*. Thus, he says, the routine deference accorded to religious ideologies, in which we don’t ask for proof or evidence, demonstrates a double standard.

The problem, Harris argues, is that under the banner of moderation, respect and tolerance, we are prevented from credible criticism of extremist religion. Our tolerance of moderate religion provides the context in which religious fundamentalism cannot be adequately opposed.

Harris argues that it is absurd to continue to give equal respect to all religious beliefs, as the claim to owning the absolute truth is in nearly all belief systems. Moreover, moderation is bad theology because if one reads the texts literally, the extremists are, in a sense, correct: god really *does* want to put homosexuals to death or destroy infidels.

As for morality and ethics, Harris considers the time is long overdue to reclaim these concepts for secular humanism, where he feels they have always properly belonged. The link between faith and morality is a myth, he says, unsupported by statistical evidence. He notes, for instance, that the highly secular Scandinavian countries are among the most generous in helping the developing world.

Harris claims that far from being the source of our morality, religion is a travesty of ethical behavior, which he attributes to the tendency of religion to separate the concept of morality from issues of actual human suffering. He cites two examples: the impact upon the global AIDS epidemic due to the Catholic prohibition of condom use, and the attempts made by the religious lobby in America to impede funding for embryonic stem-cell research. Both of these are examples of what he considers an unethical approach to human suffering, in which religious beliefs override progress for humanity. □



MARGARET SANGER

Birth control activist

September 14, 1879 – September 6, 1966



H.G. WELLS

Science fiction writer

September 21, 1866 – August 13, 1946



CHARLES BRADLAUGH

Political activist

September 26, 1833 – January 30, 1891

**DEMOCRACY
NOT
THEOCRACY**

**Man invented god
God did not invent man**

**We all once believed in something
at one time,
that today
we are embarrassed about.**

Dear Ken et al,
I just read your August newsletter column [*The Trauma of Childhood Religious Brainwashing, Page 2.*] Wow! Your thesis is fascinating. Moreover, it makes so much sense, at least to me. Are you presenting this to the wider world? I'm going to forward it to a psychiatrist I know (she happens to be my mother) to see what she thinks.
--Catherine Clare

I've been calling it the crucifixion of childhood for years...the planned brainwashing of small children into accepting on faith the nonsense of so many generations before us. I recall a personal trauma: Having sailed through four years of Catholic high school with a 95/100 average mark in religion, I never believed the dogma but liked and respected my teachers. In my last term before graduation, I was foolish enough to voice the opinion that adults had to decide for themselves about birth control. My grade was lowered to 65--a failing grade--in my last term in that school. With no one to blame but myself, I was stuck with the mark and the nagging feeling that honesty isn't always the best policy.

Thanks for doing so much to keep freethought alive.
--Eileen Regan

The "Un-" Ceremony

Re your July "Sermon" [*"Say Goodbye to Your Religious Programming," Page 2*], wouldn't it be nice if a group of us who came from different religions--Catholics, Jews, Protestants, Muslims--all gave up our religions as a group, in the same ceremony? We could say something like, "We renounce our previous differences and are now all the same--one people, all on the same side." That could catch on.

--Eric Stone
Chappaqua

Stem Cell Research
Is
Pro-life

Dear Editor,
With all that we Atheists need to accomplish, do you think it was wise, or even feasible, for so many NYCA members to take a five-day end-of-summer cruise on a luxury resort ship going from New York to Nova Scotia? We Atheists have work to do, goals to accomplish. How does a vacation cruise help us achieve separation of church and state or educate the public about Atheism? I think it makes us seem like secular dilettantes instead of hard-hitting activists who want to change the world.

Hard-hitter in Yonkers

Dear Hard-hitter,

Many corporations, professional organizations and even churches sponsor "retreats" for their leaders and activists for team-building purposes. A corporate-sponsored retreat will generally take place away from their headquarters and is intended to focus the attention of higher-level management leaders on corporate problems in an environment away from daily distractions of the office. The goal is to get participants to think "outside of the box."

I once attended such a retreat sponsored by a pharmaceutical company that I was doing some work for; it took place in an Inn in Westchester that had been rented by the pharmaceutical company for the weekend. There were lectures, discussions, self-improvement courses and—golfing. Believe it or not, the golfing was supposed to help team building. Go figure.

Our Atheist cruise to Nova Scotia was, I believe, not just a fun vacation—though it was that too—but an informal, self-selected, democratic retreat as well. We had three outstanding interactive discussions about Atheism led by Professor/Author Massimo Pigliucci of Stonybrook University, who gave us new insights on the challenges we face in organizing for Atheism, but I felt our cause also benefited in other ways in this trip. As we told about how we became Atheists, we got to know each other better. And the better we know each other, the better we work together as a team.

cont.

If Everybody Believes Something, Does That Make It True?

By Ron Widelec

[Editor's Note: Ron Widelec is an educator and writer based in Long Island who has been writing articles about various aspects of Atheism for us since the very inception of this newsletter. Recently, Widelec has engaged in an email repartee with another educator, Prof. Peter Kreeft, professor of Philosophy at Boston College, and the author of an Audio Lecture Series titled "Questions of Faith," available from the Barnes & Noble Portable Professor Series. Below, Widelec has shared with us both his challenge to Prof. Kreeft and Prof. Kreeft's response to the challenge. Who do you think is the winner in this philosophical jousting? Email your opinion to our Letters-to-the-Editor column.]

In one of his audio lectures, Prof. Peter Kreeft of Boston College refers to the argument that "common consent" favors Theism. This line of reasoning holds that if the vast majority of people that have ever lived, and the majority of those that are currently living, believe something to be true, *it is more likely to be true than false.*

This "common consent" argument demands a counterpoint. None was given in Prof. Kreeft's audio lecture, so I will provide one here. The premise of this argument is that if a large majority of people believe something to be true, it is more likely to be true. Two major problems with this assertion are the historical inaccuracy of common consent and the assumption of an equal playing field in the Atheism/Theism debate.

The argument from common consent imagines some linkage between the truth of an idea and the number of people that believe the idea to be true. There are countless examples throughout history of ideas that were widely believed to be true and turned out to be false. Perhaps an equal number of examples can be found in which the majority belief turned out to be true. It is pointless to make a list of these ideas on either side, but, historically, common consent has not been a very accurate indicator of truth.

I felt we got new ideas, achieved more solidarity and were given the opportunity to network with other Atheists from all over the country. There were Atheists on our cruise from New Jersey, Tennessee, upstate New York, Westchester, Long Island, Washington DC and Virginia. It was a leisurely, no-pressure chance to network, to find out what Atheist groups in other areas are doing to solve their problems and what their priorities and issues are. For example, our New York group was able to network with Washington people who do focus-group research and the idea came up of doing research on what we can do to encourage more closet Atheists to become open activists.

So, what about that part about using golf for a team building activity? No golf on board a cruise ship, alas: too many windows to break. And while no one has proven that using the shipboard Jacuzzi, disco dancing or watching the sunset together helps team-building, no one has said that it doesn't, either.

--Jane Everhart. Editor



Carnival Victory

Our cruise ship in St. John, New Brunswick

**BELIEFS
SHOULD BE BASED UPON
WHAT IS SCIENTIFICALLY OR
FACTUALLY TRUE
NOT
WHAT YOU WANT TO BE TRUE**

**Total
Separation
Of
Church and State**

The argument from common consent would be much stronger if the god debate existed on an equal playing field-- if *Ceteris paribus* applied to the argument. If each person began with a blank slate and came to believe/disbelieve in the existence of god after a careful examination of the facts and an in-depth inner debate based on reason, common consent might apply here. However, this is clearly not how most people come to their beliefs. The playing field is incredibly uneven. For most, a belief in god is a sort-of "default setting" installed into our operating system when we are children. Most children are never exposed to an alternative, or even made aware that alternatives exist, until their Theistic belief is pretty well cemented in their mind as an unalterable truth. Over time, religions have evolved very effective techniques for the indoctrination of children, ensuring that ideas, such as belief in god, will proliferate.

Consider a hypothetical situation: Imagine that, somehow, tomorrow, the concept of god, religion, and all things supernatural were completely erased from the minds of everybody on earth, but our scientific knowledge and technological capabilities remained intact. Our understanding of the universe, while far from complete, is far greater now than it was when Theism developed. Are there still enough "gaps" remaining in our knowledge so that people will seek supernatural explanations? Would the concept of god re-emerge? More importantly, would it become the majority belief again?

Professor Kreeft's Response

The argument from "common consent" isn't much of an argument since, of course, we all know there are cases where the majority, even the immense majority, have been wrong. But I think people would still claim that on most issues, most people have been right. Perhaps this is simply pragmatic survival strategy—we have found that believing Og when he tells the tribe there is a mastodon in the ravine usually works better than disbelieving him. But there must always be some reason for pragmatic success: "It works" depends on what "it" is. So I do not completely agree with your claim that equally countless examples can be found in which the majority belief turned out to be true or false.

The psychological effect of disbelieving the vast majority of humans on an issue of great import like god seems to me more momentous than the probability of majority reports being usually true. I still affirm that humans are more usually right about basic values like justice than about lesser values like capital punishment, and more usually right about values than about facts. And the issue of god is surely a momentous issue. For if god does not exist, most humans have guided their lives by an illusion, and the thing they think the most importantly true is not true at all.

Atheism as Snobbery

That is the psychological point: it seems to me that there is a much greater psychological difficulty than there is a logical difficulty in dismissing the argument from common consent. It necessitates a very dim view of the mental competence of 19 of your 20 neighbors. I do not see how it can avoid snobbery. Certainly, most atheists do not want to be snobs; but how can you avoid it?

Your second argument counts for me, not for you, I think. I agree that Theism is the "default position," and therefore easy, while atheism comes late, after hard effort. In science, effort usually produces truth and the "default position" is usually wrong. But religion is not science. Religion is more like morality or psychology or philosophy. In those fields, the default position is usually right.

If you say this "default position" of religion was "installed" into our operating system when we were children, who installed it into our parents? This passing of the buck won't work, since everyone in the chain thinks it is not "installed" at all, but rather, is innate—"installed," so to speak, by the Creator and Designer of human nature. (What incredible power your first human installer must have had, to have been able to hoodwink almost the whole human race on the biggest sucker lie in history.) Like common consent, the prevalence of a belief is no proof—but it is a probability, a clue, don't you think? □

This newsletter is published by
New York City Atheists Inc.
Publisher – Kenneth Bronstein
Editor – Jane Everhart



Cruise: Dennis Horvitz



Cruise: Informal Meeting

NYCA End-of-Summer
Canadian Cruise
August 25-30, 2007



Cruise: Group Photo



Cruise: Fred Fischer's Birthday



Cruise: Massimo Discussion

RENEW / JOIN NYC ATHEISTS

Through our programs and activities, we work to bring awareness of our principles, our vision and, above all, of our existence as atheists to the community. We do it through our Website, our meetings and events, our Cable shows, our library and book club, our street Tabling and our newsletters --all of which are funded by your membership.

With the continued growth of our membership, we gather strength in numbers and will more effectively counteract the threat of a looming theocracy.



NYC ATHEISTS — 2007 MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION FORM

First Name: _____ Last Name _____

Street Address: _____ Apt No.: _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Email: _____@_____ Phone: (____) _____ - _____

NYC Atheists Inc. is a non-profit (501-C3), non-partisan, educational association with these purposes and goals:

1. To promote the total and absolute separation of church and state
2. To educate and inform the public about Atheism
3. To provide a forum for discussion about Atheism
4. To develop and engage in educational, cultural, charitable and social activities that are beneficial to the members of NYC Atheists Inc., the Atheist community and the community at large.

YOUR 2007 MEMBERSHIP DUES ARE TAX DEDUCTIBLE

Basic __ \$ 25 Friend __ \$ 100 Sustainer __ \$ 250 Patron __ \$ 500 Benefactor __ \$ 1000

Signature: _____ Date: _____

CHECK PAYABLE TO: NYC ATHEISTS INC. - SEND APPLICATION
TO: NYC ATHEISTS INC. MEMBERSHIP - COOPER STATION P.O. Box 93 NY, NY 10276-0093