

## ATHEISM IS A CONCLUSION NOT A BELIEF

PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"



**KENNETH BRONSTEIN**

### **Religion Is a Business; It Should be Taxed**

It's ironic, but Atheists, as tax-paying citizens of this country, are subsidizing religion, whose very premise we deplore. The fact is, because of religion's tax-exempt status, which costs our nation \$1 trillion in loss of tax revenue each year (that's \$1,000,000,000,000; count the zeros), churches are getting a free ride. To judge the enormity of that tax revenue loss, think of it this way: If you laid a trillion dollar bills end to end, they would stretch nearly to the sun. Or another way: If religion was a country, it would be the sixth wealthiest country in the world.

Someone once estimated that if U.S. churches were taxed, we could pay off our \$9 trillion national debt in about 10 years or reduce up to 8.3% of the annual U.S. federal budget.

### **Churches Get Free Services**

Wait a minute, you say: "I don't want to support churches with my money." Yet, every man, woman and child living in the USA today is subsidizing religion to the tune of some \$3,333 per year. You can say you don't want to subsidize religion all you want, but you don't have a choice: Your support of religion is a hidden subsidy that comes not only from the churches' tax-free status but also from all the services that churches do not have to pay for. Though they don't pay state and local taxes, churches get free water, free police protection, free garbage pickup, free fire protection. We tax-paying citizens pay their bill for those services, and our own bills are significantly higher because the churches aren't paying their share. So every time you see a Sanitation Department truck picking up trash from the local church or synagogue, slap your forehead and remind yourself: "I'm paying for that!"

The churches get additional perks today that add to their coffers. The Republican administration's "Faith-Based Initiatives" give grants to churches for various projects formerly done by other agencies, or even by the churches themselves at their own expense—projects such as Battered-Wife Shelters, facility repairs, pre-schools. Thus, the income of churches today comes not only from tithing, donations, legacies, sales of religious mementos, fund-raising, school tuitions or payment for life-passage services such as weddings and funerals, but now—in what many contend is a violation of the separation of church and state and, moreover, allows the churches to discriminate in hiring for these projects—churches get income from federal grants. That's a lot of untaxable income.

### **Religion is Retail Biz**

I contend that churches today are businesses and should file a business income tax. The church is not only selling its services—such as life-passage rites and counseling—and its religious tzotchki, such as rosaries and crosses, but it is selling less-tangible items such as a dream of life eternal, passage to heaven, moral behavior guidance, a genealogy of saints and other idols, expiation of sins, guidance by invisible

deities or angels, a sense of belonging. For most of these intangible items, such as passage to heaven, I have long contended that the church should be sued for consumer fraud. There is no proof extant that anyone has ever scaled those pearly gates and, therefore, the church is selling the equivalent of the Brooklyn Bridge to gullible people. page 2

In short, the church is basically a business enterprise selling packages of goods to its customers. Just as in other retail outlets, you can buy the whole package and get a special deal (shall we call that wholesale?) or you can pay a one-time retail fee for, say, your Mom's funeral. You can even charge it (some churches even allow members to use charge cards to donate), you can bargain with them, you can run up a tab. So are we talking about the Catholic Church here or Bloomingdales? It's hard to tell. The main difference seems to be, when you leave Bloomingdales, you are usually holding a package; with the church, you are usually left holding the bag.

Because religion is really a business, it should be self-sufficient without tax exemptions, just like other vendors. Psychiatrists pay taxes, as do undertakers, teachers, counselors. Why, then, when similar services are offered under the aegis of a church, does the provider go tax free? I think it is time for us to reassess the churches' tax-free sleigh ride and make them pay their fair share. Either that, or let Bloomingdales go tax-free too. ☐

I would appreciate your comments. Ken Bronstein at [NYCATHEISTS@AOL.COM](mailto:NYCATHEISTS@AOL.COM) or 212-535-7425

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### UPCOMING NOVEMBER EVENTS

November 11                      Sunday                      12:00 P.M.  
NYCA Brunch and Book Club

Location: Kennedy's Restaurant  
327 West 57<sup>th</sup> St. (8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> Ave.) – Rear Room

#### Meeting Program

Speaker: Jennifer Lange  
Institute of Humanist Studies, Legislative  
Liaison

Subject: Stop the NYS Religious Freedom  
Restoration Act!

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#### Book Club

Christopher Hitchens' "*god is not Great.*"  
(First three chapters – 42 pages).

Brunch Cost: \$20 includes tax and tip.

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November 20                      Tuesday                      7:00 P.M.  
NYCA Social Gathering (Meet-Up)

Location: Stone Creek Bar and Lounge  
140 East 27<sup>th</sup> St. (3<sup>rd</sup>/Lex)

Casual conversation and drinks with your  
fellow freethinkers.

Cost: Free (cash food and bar)

Register at [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com)

November 29                      Thursday                      6:30 P.M.  
NYC Atheists Monthly Meeting

Speaker: A. J. Jacobs  
Subject: *The Year of Living Biblically*  
(NYT Best Seller List - 10/24/2007)



Location: TBA

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

*The Year of Living Biblically* answers the  
question: What if a modern-day  
American followed every single rule in the  
Bible as literally as possible? Not just the  
famous rules—the Ten Commandments  
and Love Thy Neighbor (though certainly  
those)—but the hundreds of oft-ignored  
ones: don't wear clothes of mixed fibers.  
Grow your beard. Stone adulterers.

A.J. Jacobs' experiment is surprising, informative, timely and funny. It is both irreverent and reverent. It seeks to discover what's good in the Bible and what is maybe not so relevant to 21st century life. And it will make you see the

Good Book with new eyes. page 3  
Thou shalt not put it down. Jacobs is the editor-at large at *Esquire* magazine. He has written for *The New York Times*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *New York magazine*.

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## Letters to the Editor

### Betrayed by Sam Harris

*The following are responses to an article in the October 2007 newsletter titled "Betrayed by Sam Harris."*

To the Editor:

I completely agree with you on Sam Harris—what a letdown. But we could see this weird "spiritual" thing developing in the last part of his book, *The End of Faith*. It turned me off then and it turned me off even more at the AAI Convention in Washington DC. And to say that we don't need a name? This is out-of-touch ivory-tower-intellectual-think at its worst. We have a great grassroots movement going to rehabilitate the word "Atheist." How could we gather our fellow Atheists without the word? I know that when I decided to come out and join a group, I googled "atheist." What would Sam Harris google to find his no-name compatriots?

Lynne Williamson  
Washington, DC

To the Editor:

I agree with you about Sam Harris's talk. I was thinking exactly the same thing while I was reading his speech: "Duh...what about the Abolitionists?" I think Harris goofed and simply didn't want to admit it. Why not say "I was wrong" and get on with it? I also agree with you on Harris's ideas about transcendental meditation. I have to roll my eyes whenever he

turns to that subject...Yes, you were right in protesting.

Martin Heinsdorf--Manhattan

To the Editor:

My father fought all his life to be able to call himself an Atheist and I have been fighting all of my life to be able to call myself an Atheist—and I do call myself an Atheist, no matter who's asking or listening. Religion's scare tactics (that make some people believe in god) are working on some of us too...

If you look up the definition of Atheist or Atheism, you may find that it means, simply, "denial that there is a god." Therefore, if you deny that there is a god, then you are an Atheist. There's no other way to define it, so true Atheists need to get used to it and say it more (and as you put it, say it loud). You may also find that Atheism is defined as a *doctrine* that there is no god. I disagree that it's a doctrine. A doctrine is a principle that is taught. No one is taught to be an Atheist. It is decided after much education and thinking.

Mardi Jones  
Manhattan

To the Editor,

I say unto Sam Harris, "If you can't run with the big dogs, stay on the porch."

Edwin Kagin  
Kentucky

### SUPPORT GROUP

We are organizing a support group for Atheists with the purpose of providing solace, courage, friendship and comfort to Atheists who are undergoing life change. We will not depend on religion or the supernatural but instead use reason, logic and fellowship. If you are interested in taking part in such a support group, either as a participant or leader, call Ken Bronstein at 212-535-7425.

### NYC Atheists Affiliations

National Atheism Groups

[American Atheists](#)

[Atheist Alliance International](#)

[Center for Atheism - Home Page](#)

[Secular Student Alliance |](#)

[Camp Quest: It's beyond belief](#)

Lobbying Groups:

[Secular Coalition for America](#)

[The Institute for Humanist Studies](#)

**Common Consent Doesn't Prove Anything**

*The following letters are responses to the article titled, "If Everybody Believes Something, Does that Make It True?" by Ron Widelec, which appeared on Page 6 in the September 2007 newsletter.*

**To the Editor:**

Professor Kreeft talks about the "likelihood" of something being true. This is the terminology of probability theory, which applies only to repeated independent random events. The widely disparate beliefs he refers to don't qualify. You can't infer the likelihood of the existence of God on the basis of, say, people's belief in the roundness of the earth.

Kreeft asserts a belief that "humans are ... more usually right about values than about facts." This is an egregiously confused use of the ambiguous word "right." Statements about facts are "true" or "false." Statements about values are "good" or "evil" if you're a theologian, or "helpful to mankind" or "harmful to mankind" if you're a humanist like Bertrand Russell. In any case, the statement "god exists" is a statement about a fact, even if it has been the basis of many value systems, and as even Professor Kreeft admits, people are often wrong about facts, especially counterintuitive facts.

His accusation that atheism is snobbery is irrelevant to its truth or falsity. By his standards, anyone holding an unpopular belief about facts, whether true or false, is a snob. If so, any truth that is sufficiently counterintuitive to generate widespread disbelief divides humanity into a large class of mistaken disbelievers and a small class of perceptive snobs. So what?

Finally, his sarcastic search for an individual first "installer" of religious belief exhibits the common obsession of religious thinkers with first causes. But his own earlier mention of "Og" shows he's being deliberately disingenuous here and actually understands that it's "turtles all the way down," that religion was installed during prehistory by natural selection.

Harvey Wachtel  
Kew Gardens

**To the Editor:**

Prof. Kreeft didn't actually reply to Ron Widelec's analysis; where Widelec played a sharp game of tennis in his commentary, Kreeft responded with a fluffy game of badminton. None of what Kreeft says, including, "the psychological effect of disbelieving the vast majority of humans on an issue . . . like god," or any of his blurry prose actually addresses the question of whether common consent makes a belief *accurate*. Kreeft's confused pick-up on the "default position" actually leads back to Widelec's point as Kreeft himself says, "In science, effort usually produces truth and the default position is wrong," before he tries to save his thesis by simply saying that in religion and philosophy the default position is right. Someone should embroider "Wishing doesn't make it so" on his forehead.

In the end, Kreeft actually gives it up when he says " . . .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." That's right. Game, set, match, Widelec.

Betsy Gordon  
Manhattan

DEMOCRACY  
NOT  
THEOCRACY

ATHEIST  
PRIDE

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

PROUD TO BE AN ATHEIST!

*(Editor’s Note: The quotes below are from an article by Christopher Hitchens for the September 2007 Vanity Fair magazine about things he learned and encountered on his recent book tour to publicize his best selling book, god is not Great.)*

“You hear all the time that America is an intensely religious nation, but what you don’t hear is that there are almost as many religions as there are believers. Moreover, many ostensible believers are quite unsure of what they believe.”

“People seem to be lying to opinion polls. They claim to go to church in much larger numbers than they actually do (there aren’t enough churches in the country to hold the hordes who boast of attending)...But every single time that the teaching of “intelligent design” has been proposed in conservative districts, it has been defeated overwhelmingly by both courts and school boards.”

“A 2001 study found that those without religious affiliation are the fastest-growing minority in the United States.”

While speaking in Little Rock, Arkansas: "At the end of the event, I discover something that I am going to keep on discovering [on this tour]: half the people attending had thought that they were the only atheists in town."

In Austin, Texas: “Marvin Olasky mentions many nice people who do good things because of their faith. I reply that I am ready to believe that too, as long as it is admitted that many people behave worse because of their religion. My challenge to Olasky: name an ethical statement or action, made or performed by a person of faith, that could not have been made or performed by a nonbeliever.”

In Atlanta: “The motto of the Confederacy was *Deo Vindice*, or “god on Our Side.” Atlanta was burned to ashes by people who thought that the deity took the *other* view. I basically implore the audience to get over it, and to consider the strong possibility that heaven takes no side at all in human affairs.”

In Washington DC, upon bumping into the Archbishop of Canterbury in a restaurant: “He looks much more like a sheep than a shepherd. What can one say, in any case, about a religion that describes its adherents as a flock?”

“One day, a decent candidate for high office will say that he is not a person of faith and the sky will not fall.”

“Everywhere I speak, I find that the faithful go to church for a mixture of reasons, from social to charitable to ethnic, and take their beliefs a la carte or cafeteria-style, choosing the bits they like and discarding the rest.” □



Tom Wolfe, author, and Jane Everhart, NYCA Editor, at the September 2007 Atheist Alliance International Conference-Washington D.C.



NYCA members at NYC Halloween Parade  
*Photo from flickr*

Stem Cell Research  
Is  
Pro-life

Total  
Separation  
Of  
Church and State

***A Seeming Wash-Out In Debate, He Is Redeemed On TV***

By Jane Everhart

If you, like me, are one of those Atheists who waited in line for an hour to hear the debate between Christopher Hitchens and Dinesh D'Souza and then were disappointed because Hitchens seemed less fervent, less dynamic than the religious guy, you can rejoice in the knowledge that things were turned around on the CSPAN presentation of the debate the following Sunday: Presto, chango!—with the aid of a decent sound engineer, the CSPAN version revealed that *not only was Hitchens dynamic* but he may have actually won the debate after all. Three cheers for the sound technicians (perhaps they are atheists?) who turned up the amps on TV to accommodate Hitchens' quietly modulated British voice.

I'm not sure there's any point to these debates anyway; I think they are an exercise in futility. Nobody's mind was changed by the very civilized, rather polite repartee between the conservative Dinesh D'Souza, author of *What's So Great About Christianity* (there's no question-mark after that title) and Christopher Hitchens, author of *god Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* and the current playboy hero of the Western Atheist World. The word-duel—in retrospect, I'd call it Bible Thumper vs. Oxford Iconoclast—took place at the Ethical Culture Society in New York on October 22, and was sponsored by The King's College, a Christian school located in, of all places, the Empire State Building.

**Religious Jabberwocky**

Hitchens, dressed in a light summer suit (his handlers at his publishing house must have impressed him with the need for dignifying this debate) but no necktie, his hair boyishly rumpled, seemed the underdog from the very beginning: Half the seats in the auditorium were roped off, reserved for the faculty and friends of King's College. Atheists were relegated to the rear of the auditorium and the balcony.

D'Souza began with a joke (“Like Henry the Eighth said to his wives, I won't keep you long”) then saying, “I am not going to use the Bible [as evidence], I am going to use science and reason [to prove that god exists],” he launched into the usual religious jabberwocky. I have heard that promise by religious debaters before—it was the same pledge that the Fundamentalist Evangelist debaters gave at the *ABC Nightline* debate with Kelly and Brian Sapien: that they would use reason and logic to “prove” that god exists. Like his predecessors, D'Souza failed in that attempt.

The three King's College students who sat in my pew focused unblinkingly and reverently on D'Souza, applauding his lame jokes, (D'Souza: “Like a mosquito in a nudist colony, I don't know where to start”), cheering the cliché question, “Why are Atheists so angry?” and clapping at D'Souza dubbing us “Militant Atheists” (Actually, I rather like the name “Militant Atheists”; it has a ring to it.)

**The Lies of Religion**

In point of fact, D'Souza used the same tired old “reasoning” of the *Nightline* evangelists, whose logic was, “If there is a watch, there has to be a watchmaker; if there is writing in the sand, someone had to write it.” (My yawning response to that “reasoning” had then been, and still is—Hey, there are a couple of little old watchmakers in an attic in Switzerland who are making those watches.) D'Souza's take on that old adage was, basically: the universe is composed of the laws of science, and where there are scientific laws, there has to be a lawgiver. And that, he noted, justifies “faith-based science.” Thundering applause from King's College students and faculty at that *non sequitur*.

Hitchens seemed bored and almost too tired to respond to this old saw, but he gave it his best. “Dinesh has the advantage of believing this stuff,” he said with a sigh. He pointed out that faith is a common factor in all religions, that

faith is a *virtue* in religion, as is dispensing with evidence. The laws of nature cannot be suspended with prayer, he noted.

“Religion convicts us of thought crime, judges us and persecutes us even after death. How horrible to be condemned to live in that dictatorship,” he said. What is really immoral, he noted, is vicarious redemption, such as the crucifixion—“it is cruel and revolting.” Morality comes from history, he pointed out, not from religion. “But the height of immorality is to lie to people about life after death. People are frightened of death and the central lie of religion is [that you can live for] eternity.”

D’Souza was not above bringing up that dog-eared competition of Who Did The Most Damage to the World—Christians or Atheists? D’Souza threw out the names of the Usual Suspects—Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot—and claimed that, in contrast, on the Christian side, the Salem Witch Hunts had dispatched only 18 people. Hitchens countered that none of those alleged bad guys

did their deeds in the name of \_\_\_\_\_ page 7 secularism, while religious wars were fought specifically to establish or empower Christianity. Furthermore, Hitchens asserted, Mussolini was a Catholic and Hitler created Nazi Christianity. (Nobody, alas, claimed Vlad the Impaler for their side.)

In the end, while some of Hitchens’ statements hit the mark for me, and I admired him for being David to a Goliath audience, mostly I felt like Alice going down the Rabbit Hole into the world of Useless Debate. The bland, believing, Stepford faces of the King’s College students will stay with me forever, as well as the sad realization that they are paying tuition for what is presumably billed as an education but, in reality, is just training to take their place in the religious world. It made me acutely aware of the fact that to the best of my knowledge, there are no Atheist-sponsored colleges around. Richard Dawkins, take note; this may be an admirable project for the *Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science*. □



**NYC ATHEISTS — 2008 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 2008 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**

## UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

### NOVEMBER

Nov. 11*	Sunday	12:00 P.M.	NYCA Brunch and Book Club
Nov. 20**	Tuesday	7:00 P.M.	NYCA Meet-Up
Nov. 29***	Thursday	6:30 P.M.	NYCA Monthly Meeting

### DECEMBER

Dec. 9*	Sunday	12:00 P.M.	NYCA Brunch and Book Club
Dec. 18**	Tuesday	7:00 P.M.	NYCA Meet-Up
TBA ***	TBA	TBA	NYCA Solstice Dinner

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\* Kennedy's Restaurant – 327 West 57<sup>th</sup> St. (8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup>) – Rear Room

\*\* Stone Creek Bar and Lounge – 140 East 27<sup>th</sup> St. (3<sup>rd</sup>/Lex)

Register at <http://atheists.meetup.com>

\*\*\* To Be Announced

#### WEDNESDAYS

##### *THIS WEEK IN ATHEISM*

6:30 PM (Manhattan Cable # 57)

Live Streaming: [WWW.MNN.ORG](http://WWW.MNN.ORG)

#### THURSDAYS

##### *NYC ATHEISTS CABLE SHOW*

7:00 PM (MANHATTAN CABLE CH 57)

LIVE STREAMING: [WWW.MNN.ORG](http://WWW.MNN.ORG)

#### THURSDAYS

##### *ATHEISTS BOOK CLUB*

7:30 PM (Manhattan Cable # 57)

Live Streaming: [WWW.MNN.ORG](http://WWW.MNN.ORG)

NYCA

Cooper Station

P.O. Box 93

NY, NY 10276-0093

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