

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

FEBRUARY 2008

Vol. V Issue No. 2

212-330-6794



KENNETH BRONSTEIN

PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"

WHY WE NEED AN ATHEIST MOVEMENT: RELIGION'S MORALITY HAS FAILED

Religionists are always asking us, "How can Atheists possibly be moral?" What they mean, of course, is how can anyone be moral without the fear of god or the threat of punishment in hell. Yet, despite religion's exclusive claim to morality, and despite more than 2,000 years to perfect their system, religion and the churches have failed abysmally to create a moral, just or principled world.

Let's define "morality": According to Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, morality is (a) a doctrine or system of moral conduct (b) particular moral principles or rules of conduct (c) conformity to ideals of right human conduct.

Religions Violate Own Codes

In all of today's religious systems, in which rules of moral conduct have been written down, studied and revered since the Bronze Age, where is the agreement on, or enforcement of moral conduct or the rules of conduct? Apparently there is enough latitude in all current religious systems to allow for violation of moral rules of conduct without accountability or reprisal, or—in some cases—without any challenge at all, particularly, it appears, when the violation is committed *en masse*.

For example, "Thou shalt not kill," which is a moral imperative in almost all religions, is violated every day by allegedly "moral" governments hungry for oil or control or moralistic about imposing their own form of government on another country, generally in the chauvinistic belief that the predator's form of government is superior. Yet Christianity's 10 commandments do not say "Thou shalt not kill except in Iraq or whenever you don't like someone else's "regime." The commandments do not say, "Thou shalt not kill one-on-one but it's okay for 160,000 young men in uniform to decimate a whole population." Despite religion's lip service to "morality," it flouts its own rules of conduct every day, in instances too numerous to count, in ways that cause death, genocide, hunger and suffering, and impede the progress of humanity.

Religious Morality Flouted

Or take religion's rules in relation to sexual conduct. So many of religion's "Thou Shalt Nots" have been violated by religious leaders—the very leaders who tout the morality of religion—from the Fundamentalists' Reverend Ted Haggard's trysts with a male prostitute to Catholic Priests' sexual abuse of altar boys to the Hassidim's virtual imprisonment of their womenfolk by relegating them to domesticity and childbearing, to the Muslim execution by stoning of women who have been raped or adulterous.

This is religious morality? I hold that religion's doctrines of moral conduct, based on a 2000-year belief scheme, have failed. Judeo-Christianity's Bronze Age religious morality is archaic, contradictory and too vague. When those in power can interpret the moral code to suit their own purposes, when genocide, hunger, poverty and warfare are still rampant in a world that can, ironically, find a way to get to the moon—then our priorities are wrong and our prevailing morality has failed.

I urge that religion's so-called "morality" be replaced by modern, scientific, logical, Atheist and humanist 21st-century morality codes such as those outlined in the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, (<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>) and that children worldwide be educated in its precepts, not out of fear of a god or of punishment after death, but simply because this moral code lays out the foundation of the right things to do for the continuation, health and progress of humanity. □

How To Write a Letter-to-The-Editor That Will Be Published

page 2

By Dennis Middlebrooks

I have been writing letters to newspapers, magazines and newsletters for nearly 40 years now. Not all get published, but I would say that, overall, my success rate has been around 50% or higher. Getting a letter published is easier than you might think if you follow certain rules:

1) Before submitting a letter, you should read over letters to-the-editor of any publication you are thinking of writing to, in order to get an idea as to what type of letters the editors tend to publish.

For instance, the *New York Daily News* treats its "Voice of the People" section as sort of a community bulletin board. They not only print letters dealing with articles and columns appearing in the *News*, but with almost any topic that has some relevance to the generally blue collar and working class readers (e.g., subway service, sports, neighborhoods, crime, etc). All published letters are very brief.

The *New York Post*, on the other hand, has long used its Letters Page as an amen chorus for its right-wing editorial policy. They may print one or two opposing views for balance. Letters dealing with general topics are not printed. Letters can be quite long, especially if they attack the Democrats.

The New York Times prefers letters dealing with major news stories, *Times* editorials or Op-Ed columns. It really helps to have a "letterhead" from a university, think tank, no-profit or business organization, but I have been published without it. Most published letters are no more than two paragraphs.

Ed. Note: NYCA member Dennis Middlebrooks has had seven letters-to-the-editor published in 2007 alone.

Magazines tend to print letters dealing only with articles or editorials appearing in the magazine in question. If you are writing to a Civil War magazine, for example, your letter had better deal with the Civil War and not poor subway service!

2) You actually have to take the time to sit down and write the letter. Most people do not get past step two.

3) Once you are ready to write the letter, you should put yourself in the place of the person reading it. The best way not to get published is to write longwinded tirades reeking of condescension and snobbery. Newspaper letters should be kept as brief as possible, no more than one or two paragraphs. You must get to the point quickly, and preferably inject humor, irony or sarcasm where appropriate. Magazine letters can be longer, but again should be as concise and direct as possible. Don't wander off onto tangents, and avoid "fancy words" where simpler ones will suffice (e.g., do not replace "unavoidable" with "ineluctable" or "beauty" with "pulchritude"). You are writing a letter, not a college thesis.

4) Always include your name, address, and phone number or e-mail address. Many publications will want to contact you to confirm that you wrote the letter. Be prepared to have your letter edited

5) Don't despair if your letter is not published. Keep trying! ☐

PROUD TO BE AN ATHEIST

By Nathaniel (Natty) Adams

Christopher Hitchens, one of my favorite living Atheist writers and thinkers, debated Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, a figurehead for modern American Judaism, on January 30th at the 92nd street Young Men's Hebrew Association (YMHA). I was curious beforehand as to how this would turn out in light of the venue, the 92nd St. Y, which is a landmark of Jewish history and culture in New York City.

Most Atheists are familiar with Hitchens' history as the best selling author of "*god is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*," but not many outside of Jewish circles know much about Shmuley Boteach. Here are some interesting facts about Rabbi Boteach: He was educated in the creepy messianic Orthodox cult of Chabad Lubavitch, which esteems a would-be theocrat by the name of Menachem Schneerson and debates whether or not he actually died. He co-founded the "Heal the Kids" program with Michael Jackson after Jackson's first charge of child abuse, he co-wrote a book in 2000 with oft-debunked "psychic" Uri Geller, complete with a forward by professional new-age charlatan Deepak Chopra.

Rabbi Outclassed

It should be clear enough by those credentials that Boteach was hopelessly outclassed. I've never seen a man so ruthlessly embarrassed, defeated, and hoisted by his own petard. The worst part of it is, Boteach didn't seem to realize at the end of the debate how soundly he had been thrashed and intellectually shamed.

It was a bit like watching Muhammad Ali box a wheelchair-bound toddler. Hitchens, after laying down an argument clearer than a crystal carpet, sat back and listened to a string of rhetorical flatulence comprised entirely of non sequiturs,

ad hominem attacks and outright lies (including the incredible claim, "Stephen Jay Gould doesn't believe in evolution.") If Hitchens can be described as nonchalant in the face of such absurdity, those of us less familiar with the Rabbi were aghast and completely nonplussed.

Last Resort: Accusations

As the debate progressed, Boteach became increasingly shrill and incoherent, flinging wild accusations of anti-Semitism into the air and repeatedly linking Darwinian evolution to Hitler and eugenics. He attacked Hitchens' position on the rather weak grounds that it was depressing and not very comforting. The kiss of death was when Boteach accused Hitchens of lying in print (a challenge with Hitchens takes very seriously) when he asserted that Rabbinical courts in Israel sided with the (soon to be fanatical murderer) Dr. Baruch Goldstein when he refused to treat non-Jewish wounded on the Sabbath. When confronted, Hitchens immediately stepped up to the plate offering source book, author's name and publishing company for reference.

Rabbi Ignored

Perhaps the strongest indication of how the evening went was afterward when the woman running the event asked the people waiting on line if anyone was there to have their books signed by the Rabbi. Not a single person moved. Boteach reclined and idly chatted with a couple of friends as dozens of people filed past him one by one to have their books signed by Hitchens. It's almost enough for one to feel sorry for the fellow.

NYCA member Natty Adams, 25, grew up in Greenwich Village. He is a dedicated blogger, a sartorial aficionado and astute observer of events around town.

ATHEISM IS A CONCLUSION NOT A BELIEF



If you live in the in the New York area, you may have already seen it: a huge 14-foot by 48-foot billboard on the New Jersey Turnpike just before you get to Exit 18. It's big, blue and beautiful, and it says simply, "Don't believe in god? You are not alone." At the bottom, it directs you to the web site *FreeThoughtAction.org*, which in turn has links to a number of atheist and humanist organizations.

The FreeThought billboard is the brainchild of Jan Meshon, a Manhattan entrepreneur with a sales and marketing background. Meshon grew up in a Jewish family in Philadelphia but says he has been an atheist as long as he can remember. It was 9/11 that awakened a new atheist imperative in him, he says. "When a bunch of nuts grab planes and yell 'God is Great' as they fly those planes into buildings—and the response of America is 'God Bless America'—then it becomes very clear to me that religion is a matter of life and death."

Nonbelievers Up

At the same time, he'd read in the American Religious Education survey that the number of nonreligious people in America has doubled in the past 11 years, while the number of religious people has declined. "The nonreligious are the third largest 'religious' grouping in the country behind Catholics and Baptists, yet we get absolutely no attention, no respect," Meshon says. "It doesn't even cross the minds of politicians that we are a group they should give some consideration to."

Meshon decided to change that, using whatever talent and knowledge he had. He found a web programmer named Joseph McDaniel Stewart in

North Carolina who had an "incredible web site up about 9/11 that was totally fact-based." Together, the two men put together *FreethoughtAction.com*, their home web site. Meshon then approached the American Humanist Association (AHA) who welcomed them within the AHA organization as an adjunct.

"We're not trying to compete with other organizations," says Meshon. "This is just a marketing campaign. We don't hold meetings. There are plenty of places to go for that."

A Bargain Rate

The billboard cost an initial \$3,000 to put up, which included \$500 for the artwork by a graphic designer. It will henceforth cost \$2500 a month for the space, which those in the know say is a bargain rate achieved by Meshon's marketing and negotiating expertise. "The art is reusable," points out Meshon. "It's printed on a vinyl sheet that can be put up and taken down."

The New Jersey Turnpike billboard went up in January and immediately created a buzz. "We've heard from hundreds of people all over world," says Meshon, "and almost every single one is thanking us." The billboard works, he says, because "you can't ignore it. You can't just turn the page or flip the channel."

"We don't take one dollar out of it," adds Meshon. "We're volunteers. We are covering overhead ourselves. Every dollar goes toward putting up more billboards. If this catches on, we will have hundreds of billboards around the country and a measure of respect as well as acknowledgement that we exist in this country."

You can reach Jan Meshon at Contact@freethoughtaction.org

"Faith means not wanting to know what is true." -- Friedrich

Who Benefits From Religion Besides the Churches?

Dear Editor,

It seems to me that religion wouldn't persist in our society if a lot of people *who aren't really religious themselves* didn't benefit from it. Don't you think there's a wink-wink attitude toward religion in many segments of our society that aren't technically religious themselves—but benefit from it?

--Skeptic in SoHo

Dear Skeptic,

I think you are asking, is there tolerance of religion—indeed, encouragement of it—from certain elements in our society that benefit from the conformity and obedience that religion encourages.

Of course you are right. I think there are at least five sectors of our society that profit from a docile population waiting for its reward in heaven. They are: employers, the Armed Forces, schools and teachers, racists and politicians. Let's take them one at a time:

(1) EMPLOYERS. A docile, obedient workforce that is waiting for its reward in heaven is not as likely to demand higher wages, join a union or picket an employer. I often ask friends who are mired in blue-collar jobs, "If you knew for certain there was no afterlife, no heaven or hell, would you still work for minimum wage?"

Keep in mind that Catholic priests refer to their congregants as their "flock," and to themselves as "shepherds." What hews more to obedience and conformity than a flock of sheep? Who is more suited to the discipline of an assembly line than the worker who believes that suffering on earth will earn him a place in heaven?

(2) THE ARMED FORCES. Soldiers must follow orders unquestioningly; thus, the armed forces value conformity, discipline and obedience. To put oneself in harm's way or to break the civilization-wide taboo of killing another human being, one has to justify that what one is doing is necessary and right—and nothing performs that

function as well as the belief that god is on the side of the killers. The scandal at the Air Force Academy of young officers-in-training being coerced to go to chapel and accept Jesus was just one example of the undercurrent of religious fervor that is necessary for warfare.

(3) SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS. Teachers want kids who "behave." I recall, in earlier grades, that a great deal of effort was spent on teaching us to *sit still*. When did we cross the line from well behaved to regulated, unquestioning, and intimidated? The church reinforces the same kind of intimidation and mindset of blind acceptance that schools do. In both church and school, the child who is obedient, quiet, and conformist is considered "good."

(4) RACISTS. The meaning of the Ku Klux burning cross on the lawns of African American families had no ambiguity: It meant, "we have god on our side" and was intended to rouse fear and subjugation. The use of the bible and "god's will" to justify slavery is legendary, yet, ironically, many slave owners, like Thomas Jefferson, were themselves nonbelievers—though they happily encouraged religious submission by their slaves. After all, when you cleave to an otherworldly Master in heaven, you are more likely to be submissive to a Master here on earth.

(5) POLITICIANS. Ah, what politician does not use religion as a prop? Who can forget the sight of both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush carrying their bibles out of their respective church services? The gesture said, 'I am one of you,' and 'I am moral,' and "god would vote for me.' It was the feckless use of religion as a prop by politicians who, ironically, did not hesitate to go on to commit the adultery and the killings that the bible they carried prohibits.

In short, Skeptic, you are right to question the use of religion by various segments in our society for their own purposes. Religion is being used to deprive you of decent income, to get you to kill other human beings, to brainwash your kids into unthinking zombies, to discriminate against

other races and to fool the populace into believing that thieving, selfish, dishonest politicians are selfless leaders inspired by a "higher authority."

Would this state of events change if Atheists were a majority in our society? Chances are, if Atheists were in charge, there would be no more warfare, your kids would be allowed, even

encouraged, to question the things they are taught in school; automation to eliminate the repetitive assembly-line jobs would be encouraged—and those dirty jobs that were left would merit high salaries; racism would wither away and politicians would not be judged on something so tenuous or so easily faked as belief in the supernatural. Isn't all this reason enough to be an Atheist?

--Jane Everhart, Editor

UPCOMING FEBUARY EVENTS

February 4, 2008 (Monday) 7:00 PM
Atheists Lifestyle Discussion Group

Subject: *What a Difference a Year Makes: An Update From Your Lobbyist in Congress*

Group Leader: Dr. Nando Pelusi,
Clinical Psychologist



Join Dr. Pelusi in discussions on how to live a more fulfilling Atheist / Secular life, handling uncomfortable situations, declaring your Atheism, etc.

Lori Lipman Brown returns to update us on how the past 12 months have catapulted nontheists into an even more prestigious position among members of Congress and the public. From the announcement of the first "Out" nontheist member of Congress, to the inclusion in the nation's premiere civil rights organization, (Leadership Conference on Civil Rights -LCCR) the Secular Coalition for America is taking the mission to increase nontheists' visibility and respectability to the next level. She will also update us on the hottest church/state topics in Congress in 2008, and how we can take action.

Location: Call Ken Bronstein (212-535-7425)
Must be a NYC Atheists Member to participate.

February 10, 2008 (Sunday) 12:00 PM
NYC Atheists Brunch / Book Club / Library

BOOK CLUB / LIBRARY

After brunch we move to the NYC Atheists Library located on East 79th Street.

EVENT SUMMARY

- WHAT:** Brunch, Speaker, Book Club and Library
- WHERE:** Kennedy's Restaurant
327 West 57th St. (8th/9th Ave.)
- COST:** \$20 (includes brunch, tax and tip)

We continue discussing Christopher Hitchens' *god is not Great*.
First three chapters - 42 pages / Need not have read the assignment to participate.

BRUNCH

Speaker: Lori Lipman Brown
Director, Secular Coalition for America
Washington, D.C.



February 12, 2008 (Tuesday) 8:00 AM
NYC Atheists Legislative Advocacy Day Trip

Contact: [Ken Bronstein for NYC meeting location, travel details and registration.](#)

We travel to Albany and the Institute for Humanist Studies (IHS) for their New York State Legislative Advocacy Day.

Advocacy Training and Meeting Legislators

The day begins with a fast-paced training course to learn about the day's main talking points and meet your team leader. Once at the Capitol, we work in teams, meeting with your elected officials and their staff. No one will meet with legislators alone! Advocacy teams will arrive for each appointment at the Capitol, deliver a packet of materials and talk about our issues.

Each Legislative Advocacy Day participant will receive an Institute for Humanist Studies Advocacy Day packet which includes the agenda, talking points, legislative office schedule and day schedule. We will be advocating against the so-called Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) legislation, and in favor of the expansion of stem cell research, comprehensive sex education, same-sex marriage rights, separation of church and state, and other important issues.

You MUST register in advance for the IHS Legislative Advocacy Day in order for us to make appointments for you to meet with your representatives.

February 19, 2008 (Tuesday) 7:00 PM
NYC Atheists Discussion Gathering (Meetup)

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

If you are into lively discussions, interesting people, provocative ideas, challenging conversation; if you like people who make you think and let you talk, if you'd like to get to know your fellow atheists better, what they're really like with no pretensions, no censorship, no affectations, this is the place for you.
Cost: Free (cash food and bar)
Register: <http://atheists.meetup.com>

February 28, 2008 (Thursday) 6:30 PM
NYCA MONTHLY MEETING

EVENT SUMMARY

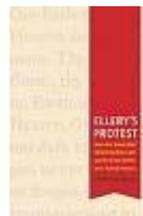
WHAT: *Ellery's Protest: How One Young Man Defied Tradition and Sparked the Battle Over School Prayer*, a talk by Prof. Solomon.

WHERE: SLC Conference Center page 7
352 Seventh Ave. (Bet. 29th & 30th St.) 16th Floor
COST: We would appreciate a \$5 contribution toward rental cost of the Conference Center.

Speaker: Stephen D. Solomon



Dr. Solomon is a New York University professor, where he teaches First Amendment law and is director of graduate studies in the Department of Journalism. He has written for *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New Republic*, *Fortune*, and other major publications, and has earned several national journalism awards.



His book tells the story of one of the most controversial Supreme Court cases of the last century --- the 1963 ruling that state-sponsored prayer and Bible reading in the public schools violated the First Amendment. The case raised a storm in American politics—where concerns over faith, children, and education collide. Madalyn Murray O'Hair was also a plaintiff in the case. □

Darwin Day at Stony Brook University

You are invited to Darwin Day 2008 at Stony Brook University on Tuesday, February 12, featuring evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson as the keynote speaker. Wilson will talk at 7:30 pm in the auditorium of the Students Activities Center on Stony Brook's campus.
Details can be found at <http://darwin.sbu.org/>

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

UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

FEBRUARY 2008

Feb. 4* Mon. 7:00 PM NYCA Atheist Lifestyle Discussion Group
Feb. 10** Sun. 12:00 PM NYCA Brunch / Book Club / Library
Feb. 12* Tue. 8:00 AM NYCA Legislative Advocacy Day (Albany)
Feb. 19*** Tue. 7:00 PM NYCA Discussion Gathering (Meet-Up)
Feb. 28* Thu. 6:30 PM NYCA Monthly Meeting

MARCH 2008

Mar. 3* Mon. 7:00 PM NYCA Lifestyle Discussion Group
Mar. 9** Sun. 12:00 PM NYCA Brunch and Book Club
Mar. 18*** Tue. 7:00 PM NYCA Discussion Gathering (Meet-Up)
Mar. 27**** Thu. 6:30 PM NYCA Monthly Meeting

*

Location: Call Ken Bronstein 212-535-7425

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

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

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

**** SLC Conference Center – 352 Seventh Ave. / 16th Floor - (29/30th St.)

WEDNESDAYS

THIS WEEK IN ATHEISM

6:30 PM (Manhattan Cable # 57)
Live Streaming: WWW.MNN.ORG

THURSDAYS

NYC ATHEISTS CABLE SHOW

7:00 PM (Manhattan Cable # 67)
Live Streaming: WWW.MNN.ORG

THURSDAYS

ATHEISTS BOOK CLUB

7:30 PM (Manhattan Cable # 67)
Live Streaming: WWW.MNN.ORG

NYCA
Cooper Station
P.O. Box 93
NY, NY 10276-0093

In This Issue

Page 1: *Religion's Morality
Has Failed*

Page 2: *How To Write Letters*

Page 3: *Hitchens Trumps
Rabbi*

Page 4: *Sign of The Times*

Page 5: *Who Benefits From
Religion?*

Page 6-8: *Upcoming Events
and Meetings*