

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

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PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS DO NOT GIVE YOU SPECIAL RIGHTS OR PRIVILEGES

KENNETH BRONSTEIN

It recently came to my attention that a group of Muslim students in a Midwest state had petitioned their college to install footbaths for them so they could practice their Muslim foot-bathing ritual. What crossed my mind was: *What's coming next?* Holy water in classrooms so Catholic students could genuflect? Kosher food in public school cafeterias? A priest in public schools on Ash Wednesday so Catholic students could get that ashy spot on their forehead? Prayer rugs in school lockers so Muslim students can whip them out and kneel toward Mecca five times a day?

But the truth is, many religious practices have already insidiously invaded our schools, our public places and even our minds, and most Americans are not consciously aware of it. When was the last time the ordinary American schoolchild paid any attention to saying "*one nation under god*" in the Pledge of Allegiance? Most think those words have always been there. Nor are many Americans aware of the "*In god we trust*" on our currency. Christmas trees and Santa Claus and wreaths—most Americans take them for granted. I'm reminded of the young man in our Atheist Lifestyle Discussion Group who told us he came to work one morning and found, to his chagrin, that his cubicle had been strung with Christmas tree ornaments from one end to the other. It had apparently never occurred to his office-mates that he might find this offensive. They associated the ornaments with simple seasonal festivity. *What, Atheists are protesting these things? Why? They are just nice holiday decorations; they mean no harm...* The office-mates had totally disassociated these symbols from their religious origins.

I am also reminded of the student in Kearny, NJ who, when told that his fellow student Matt LaClair had protested their history teacher's preaching in class, responded, "Why did he protest? We have freedom of religion in this country, don't we?" It was a perfect example of how students have accepted that we have freedom of religion in America but do not quite grasp that freedom of religion also means the right not to have someone else's religion rammed down your throat in a public school. Matt's classmate was quick to grant the teacher what he felt was "freedom of religion" but did not understand that Matt had the right to be free from religion.

Religious Symbols Infiltrating Our Culture

The reason Atheists protest symbolic manifestations of religion, such as foot washing and Christmas ornaments in the workplace, is that these things represent a gradual infiltration of religious institutions into our society, an erosion of our freedom from religion. *This issue impacts all of us, not just atheists!* No one should have to endure religious rituals that have seeped into our schools, institutions and workplaces. It is especially problematic when the nonbeliever is at risk of suffering reprisals for being the outsider.

For example, take the increasingly common custom of prayer meetings held in the workplace. This is a terrible dilemma for the nonbeliever, particularly if the boss runs the prayer meeting and the worker does not want to participate. Will it affect the worker's promotions, his raises, and his job security?

Religion Invades Our Lives

There are other examples of how religious people affect the lives of those who do not subscribe to their religion: The druggist who refuses to dispense the morning-after contraceptive pill because he is a Catholic; the cab driver who won't drive a woman to an abortion clinic because he is against abortion; Catholic hospitals and doctors who refuse to do certain procedures, such as abortion, and will not give information to a patient that these medical procedures are available elsewhere or even refer the patient to another physician who will perform these procedures.

You may say, well, the patient can go to another druggist for her birth-control pills. But often this is not so easy. There is a famous case cited by atheists—a small town in the Midwest that had only one drugstore and one pharmacist. The patient would have had to take a bus or train to another town 60 miles away to have her birth control prescription filled.

Hidden Injustice: Churches Not Taxed

And speaking of special rights and privileges, the most notorious of all religious privileges is the tax exemption given to churches, synagogues and mosques, which forces all of us taxpaying citizens, including Atheists, to foot the bill for these institutions. When was the last time you heard anybody complain about that? It has become accepted unquestioningly in our society, a hidden injustice, so undisputed that when I first wrote about it in this column on November 2007, it caused an avalanche of letters-to-the-editor urging us to do something about it.

In the best of all secular worlds, entitlements such as footbaths, separate classrooms for men and women, school closings on religious holidays and tax exemption for churches would be eliminated. People in authority such as teachers, police, civil servants, or court officials would not be permitted to wear visible religious symbols. Birth control and abortion would be nobody's business but the woman's, and abortion would be as accessible without fuss or disapproval as a flu shot. And those tasteless tinsel Christmas tree decorations, plastic jesuses, plaster nativity statues and ubiquitous menorahs would be as passé as the pink flamingo figurine on suburban lawns.

This secular world may take a long time coming in America but in some parts of the world, notably Western Europe, it is already taken for granted. □



**L-R: Dennis Horvitz & Lori Brown,
speaker at our February 2008 Brunch.**



**L-R: Dan Eisenberg, Betsy Gordon, Jennifer Lange,
Ken Bronstein: NY State lobbying day, Albany**

**ATHEISM IS A CONCLUSION
NOT A BELIEF**

The Message from Minneapolis: Atheism is Sweeping the Country

Some 600 Pack Meeting to Debate, Bond, Plan

by Jane Everhart

Minneapolis—They came from all over the country to this frosty city, from California and Oklahoma and New York—a few even from Canada—undeterred by rumors of snowstorms approaching the great American northern Midwest. Some 600 Atheists, three times as many as came to the 2007 convention, encamped at the downtown Minneapolis Marriot on this Easter weekend, drawn, some said, to the 34th American Atheists (AA) convention by headliner Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*.

They were students and professional people, computer nerds and old-timers, but what was most noticeable to this writer was the large number of young, fresh faces drawn from Minnesota colleges, young people to whom atheism was apparently new and exciting and something they don't hear about much in college. As these young people in tee shirts and jeans, some sporting pierced lips and tattoos—whole tables of them in the huge hotel ballroom where the meeting sessions took place—solemnly listened to speakers and took notes, it became clear: Atheism is the new SDS, the new Rock and Roll, the new way to rebel. *Who knew?*

Excitement In the Air

Even the old-timers seemed to feel the excitement: Atheists are crawling out of the woodwork! We are on the ascendancy, we are happening! So what if we were snowed in for three days? Here was Dawkins with his cheery British accent and his own camera crew, 10 young technicians videotaping His Royal Authorship's every move for posterity. (Ah, would they had done that for Bertrand Russell. What memories we'd have now of the old atheist philosopher.)

Here was Ellen Johnson, AA's president, blonde and spritlike, popping up everywhere, lending a bit of glamour to Atheism and—surprise!--letting us in on her secret mission (and some felt, a dangerous one) to honor one legendary atheist.

Johnson's opening-the-convention speech focused on a new imperative for atheists: running for office. It is time, she said, for atheists to jump into the mainstream of the American political process and

exert some influence. Start at the bottom, she advised the assembled atheists, run for school board or other local seat. Gradually, more atheists will rise in governmental roles, run for city and state offices, and then--the U.S. Senate and Congress! Take back the political power, she urged, that religionists have stolen from us!

Defending the Jewish god

There was also burly, white-haired, California radio talk show host Dennis Prager, here to defend his Jewish god against AA's Frank Zindler, biblical scholar and longtime Atheist spokesman

Here was the feisty California lawyer Eddie Tabash, who brings warnings wherever he goes that another conservative justice on the Supreme Court will sound the death knell for separation of church and state—and with Justice Stevens hitting age 88 this year, the future is shaky.

From Denver came the elegant, lanky Dr. Jack David Eller, champion of bringing an atheist sensibility to everyday life, urging us to eschew copying religious customs, rituals and institutions: "We Atheists must have our own institutions and celebrations!"

Professor of physics Lawrence M. Kraus, author of *The Physics of Star Trek*, famous for his stand against intelligent design before the state school board of Ohio, demystified the cosmos for us. And Lois Uttley, of MergerWatch Project, a national group whose goal is to keep religion out of hospitals, gave a ringing expose' of how religion is infiltrating our medical institutions and sabotaging our health care.

And what is an Atheist conference without humor? Robert Lanham, author of *The Sinner's Guide to the Evangelical Right*, raised by fundamentalist Baptist parents in Virginia, brought guffaws to the conference when he told how he was doomed to fall from fundamentalist grace when, as a teenager, he tried to speak in tongues but failed.

"Fundamentalists are people who are convinced they have a personal relationship with god and think the bible is factual," he explained. "Colorado Springs is the evangelical Vatican, and they have their own

Yellow Pages.” Lanham also brought us the perplexing statistic that that 62 percent of U.S. citizens think that the assault on the Twin Towers on 9/11 was predicted in the bible.

But the biggest emotional charge of the conference was introduced by Ellen Johnson when she told the story of Bill Moore. Bill Moore was a white Atheist U.S. Post Office mail carrier and close friend of Madalyn Murray O’Hair. Back in early 1960s, in the days of the civil rights movement in the deep South, Moore, an ardent integrationist, decided that, as a mail carrier, it was his right and duty to carry a letter that contained a plea for racial tolerance from Chattanooga, TN to segregationist governor Ross Barnett in Jackson, Mississippi. On the third day of his walk to deliver the letter, Moore was ambushed, shot in the head and killed, near Gadsden, Alabama.

Madalyn Grieved

Murray O’Hair tells in her book, *An Atheist Epic*, (1970), her shock and grief at hearing about Moore’s murder. Shortly after Moore’s death, some 10 young civil rights workers, many from the North, took up Moore’s walk where he left off and tried to continue his mission of delivering the letter. Alas, after being accosted by angry crowds, all ten were arrested and sent to jail for 30 days.

In one of the biggest surprises of the convention, Ellen Johnson announced that she had tried to contact the 10 civil rights workers and managed to get three of them to come to Minneapolis, as well as two daughters of one of the civil rights workers who had died.

Ellen To Complete Moore’s March

Up to the podium, one by one, came Dr. Robert Zellner, now retired, who had been in his 20s in 1963 when he was one of the 10 who had been jailed for trying to continue Bill Moore’s walk. Then Winston Lockett, a African-American from Connecticut; the retired lawyer Zev Aclony; and the two daughters of Sam Schirra, who had recently died. After hugs and tears, the three veterans of the civil rights marches, who had not seen each other for 45 years, told of their 30 days in prison in the deep American South and their hunger in jail (fed only hard biscuits, “we used them as missiles to throw at the rats,” Zellner said.) Aclony told of recounting to his teenage son about his imprisonment for trying to finish Bill Moore’s march to Jackson, only to find that the boy

could not bring himself to believe that such a thing could happen in America.

But the *coup de grace* came at the end, when Ellen Johnson announced to the convention that in April on the anniversary of Bill Moore’s murder, she herself was going to attempt to finish his march and deliver his letter to the governor in Jackson, Mississippi. Despite gasps from the audience and objections from many of her staff who feared for her safety, Johnson insisted that, against all odds, she is going to carry out Bill Moore’s mission.

Anyone Seen the Jewish god?

But perhaps the most intriguing—and amusing—event of the convention was the final debate between radio talk show host Dennis Prager of California and AA’s Frank Zindler on “Resolved: The Jewish god Exists.”

Prager, a man accustomed to dominating the air waves, elicited titters from the mostly atheist audience when he began by saying, “I can’t offer proofs of god. Most important things are not definable, scientific or measurable -- such as happiness or love for your child.” And, he added with a lyrical but somewhat confused logic: “god transcends nature. If god were recognizable, he would not be god.”

Zindler responded, “I don’t hear any arguments for the Jewish god. You gave no definition of your god, no way to detect this god. Undetectable and nonexistent are similar.” What’s more, Zindler pointed out, you don’t need a god to be “good.” “If morality comes from god, if morality is just the whim of god, then you don’t know what’s really good or bad.”

Prager countered with “I detect god every day. Proof is a scientific term; god is not provable.” To which Zindler replied, “If you detect god, tell us how to test it.” Retorted Prager angrily, “That is worship of science!”

In the end, Zindler declared himself winner of the debate, insisting that Prager hadn’t succeeded in defining the Jewish god. This reporter’s evaluation? Prager deserved a “Nice Try” award for a sonorous attempt at defending something that is basically indefensible—a belief in something you can’t see, hear or even, it appears, define. And Zindler deserved a “Dawkins” for coolness in the presence of absurdity. □

Editor's Q and A

Are Atheists Too Nice to 'Faithheads?'

Dear Editor,

I was at the Minneapolis American Atheist Convention and was dismayed to hear Richard Dawkins, in his presentation, urge Atheists to use ridicule as a tool against "faithheads." True, he did add that "in America, you can't ridicule faithheads," (where can you? In Britain?) but he went on to say: "Don't flinch from offending religious people. They need offending! Don't hesitate to say to them, 'that crèche on the lawn offends me.'"

Do you think that we Atheists are much too nice to religious people for fear of hurting their feelings?

--Sensitive in Schenectady

Dear Sensitive,

Of course we are too nice. (Except for our fearless leader, Ken Bronstein, who regularly offends faithheads while street tabling.) It's hard to have a "god loves you" or a "god bless you" flung at you without wanting to expose the malice and the smug self-righteousness behind those phrases. Because what they are really saying, of course, is: "We-know-you-aren't-smart-enough-or-good-enough-to-be-a-godlover-but-we-want-to-show-you-that-we-are-above-that-and-can-include-you-in-our [prayers, wishes, whatever], you piece of secular dirt."

But notice how sanctimoniously they put us down. And politely. At least on the surface. I think what Dawkins is saying is that we shouldn't let them get away with that. I haven't quite figured out how to do this. I have said on occasion, when a "god-bless-you" has come my way, "There is no god, so how can he bless me?" or "Can He fit me into his busy schedule?" but these seem inadequate to the malice of the insult.

I think what Dawkins was referring to, more than ridicule, is humor. Comedy is uncannily precise in skewering some religious and political inanities—

that's why Jon Stewart, Jay Leno and David Letterman are so often quoted as pundits on, say, the George Stephanopoulos Sunday morning show. Comedian George Carlin is a master at puncturing the absurdity of faithheads. I will never forget his classic line about god being this person in the sky who knows everything, sees everything and controls everything—but he still needs money.

South Park Sleaze

But comedy can also be used against us. I recently went to an allegedly Atheist Meetup in Manhattan that featured, of all things, a South Park cartoon of Richard Dawkins in *flagrante delicto* with a transsexual. I was, of course, appalled and insulted. The South Park cartoon continued into a futuristic plot where atheist factions take over the world and war with each other. I complained to the Meetup organizer about what I called the "sleaze factor" of the program but after further thought about the message of these South Park cartoons, I realized how subtly (apart from the *flagrante delicto*, which was not subtle) these cartoons had put down atheism. The final message of the cartoons was: "See, things will not be any better if Atheists are in charge; they will just war with each other like the religious sects."

We must be on guard not only for this kind of gratuitous denigration of our very few Atheist heroes but also be alert to the negative subliminal messages about atheism that some reactionary elements are sending into the world. Those who wish we Atheists would just evaporate are sometimes not as obvious or definable as the faithhead who simply tosses a "god loves you!" your way.

In short, continue to be nice, Sensitive, but wary, and beware of Meetup organizers bearing free cartoon viewings.

--Jane Everhart, Editor

ATHEISM IS THE RIGHT STUFF

UPCOMING APRIL EVENTS

APRIL 7, 2008 (Monday)
Atheists' Lifestyle Discussion Group

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.

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

APRIL 13, 2008 (Sunday) 12:00 PM
NYC Atheists Brunch & Madalyn Murray O'Hair Birthday Party

WHERE: To Be Announced
COST: To Be Announced

ACT I: Professional reading of play-in-progress about Ms. O'Hair.
ACT II: Pot Luck Brunch

Book Club postponed to next month.

April 15, 2008 (Tuesday) 7:00 PM
NYC Atheists Meetup discussion
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>

APRIL 19, 2008 (Saturday) 8:30 A.M.
NYC Atheists' Pope Protest

Where: St. Patrick's Cathedral
5th Ave. / 45th Street

The Pope is Coming! The Pope is Coming!
Do we care? You bet we do!

The Pope's visit on April 18-20 will give us an opportunity to let him and the world know that Atheists are here to stay, that we're visible, that we don't appreciate him blaming us for all the world's problems and that the Catholic Church must bear responsibility for its share of the world's woes.

So we are going to hold a demonstration—our first since the Republican Convention in 2004 -- in coordination with American Atheists (who will be demonstrating against the Pope near the White House while he is in Washington). NYC Atheists will hold a peaceful demonstration near St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Please contact Ken Bronstein at nycatheists@aol.com or at 212-535-7425 if you plan to participate.

April 24, 2008 (Thursday) 6:30 PM
NYCA MONTHLY MEETING

WHAT: NYC Atheists Monthly Meeting
WHERE: SLC Conference Center
352 Seventh Ave. (Bet. 29th & 30th St.) 16th Floor
COST: We would appreciate a \$5 contribution toward room rental cost.

SUBJECT: "The Four Horsemen of Atheism"
 A video of a round table discussion with Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens. They talk about the public reaction to their recent books, their unexpected successes, criticisms and common misrepresentations of their work. They also discuss the tough questions about religion that face the world today and propose new strategies for the going forward.

May 1, 2008 (Thursday) 4:00 – 7:00 P.M.
NYC Atheists' "Gift of Life" Blood Donation Action

**Location: New York Blood Bank
 Citigroup Center
 Lower Level**

**Entrance: On 54th street-100 feet west of 3rd Ave.
 When inside -Walk straight to down escalator,
 NY Blood Bank straight ahead.**

Time: 4:00 – 7:00 P.M.
Reservation: Not Needed

Join

**NYC Atheists to Counter 'National Day of Prayer'
 with Blood Donations**

**Life-Saving Action,
 Not Passive Prayer, Is the Message**

What do you do on May 1, 2008, the "National Day of Prayer," if you are an Atheist, do not believe in prayer and are opposed to a prayer day being imposed on all American citizens?

NYC Atheists have come up with an answer: Do something positive, something active, something that may save lives and point out to the nation that there are alternatives to silently beseeching a deity to perform miracles.

"We want to make a public statement about how nonreligious people can observe that day, which we have re-named The Day of Reason, and at the same time, let America know that there are millions of us who think that prayer does not work—but medical science does," says Bronstein. "We are offering a positive alternative to prayer, something that will reflect the life-affirming ideas of nonbelievers."

Thus, on May 1st, NYC Atheists members will go to the NYC Blood Bank to donate blood—a tradition that Atheists in Manhattan have observed for three years.



**L-R: Matt LaClair (NYC Atheist
 Of the Year), Ken Bronstein
 January 2008 Annual Meeting.**

NYC ATHEISTS STREET TABLING

WILL BEGIN: May 10, 2008

**Location: Columbus Circle
 Front of Time Warner Building
 Broadway / 60th Street**

Time: 10:00 AM – 6:00 PM

First Shift: 10:00 AM – 1:00 PM

Second Shift: 1:00 PM – 6:00 PM

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)**

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



**March 2008 Sunday Brunch
 Another standing-room-only event**

UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

APRIL 2008

Apr. 7* **Mon. 7:00 PM NYCA Lifestyle Discussion Group**
Apr. 13* **Sun. 12:00 PM NYCA Brunch / Madalyn Murray O'Hair
 Birthday Party**
Apr. 15**** **Tue. 7:00 PM NYCA Meet-Up Discussion**
Apr. 19***** **Sat. 8:30 AM NYCA Pope's Protest**
Apr. 24***** **Thu. 6:30 PM NYCA Monthly Meeting**

MAY 2008

May 1***** **Thu. 4-7:00 PM NYCA "Gift To Life" Blood Donation**
May 5* **Mon. 7:00 PM NYCA Lifestyle Discussion Group**
May 10 **Sat. 10AM-6PM NYCA Street Tabling**
May 11** **Sun. 12:00 PM NYCA Brunch / Book Club / Library**
May 20*** **Tue. 7:00 PM NYCA Meetup Discussion**
May 29**** **Thu. 6:30 PM NYCA Monthly Meeting**

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 * **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.)**
 ***** **St. Patrick's Church – 5th Ave. / 45th St,**
 ***** **NY Blood Center–54th St.–100 feet in from 3rd Ave.–Lower Level**

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