



KENNETH BRONSTEIN

PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"

The Atheist 'Renaissance' Was a Long Time Coming

Some people think that Atheism burst onto the American scene sometime around 2004 when Atheist books blazed a trail on the best seller lists, or in the fall of 2007 when the "Woodstock" of Atheism took place in Washington D.C. under the auspices of the Atheist Alliance International's convention.

But the truth is, events that took place long before these were the underpinnings of the so-called "renaissance of atheism" and gradually led up to it. The renaissance of atheism was, in effect, a slow evolution, if you will, of individual events and cultural changes that in themselves may not have seemed significant, but when added up, led to the explosion of today's atheist sensibility onto the American scene.

Did god Create Disease?

Perhaps the most important foundation of atheism's rebirth is the gradual unfolding of scientific discoveries in the last few centuries—not just Darwin, but also, for example, the discovery of the microscope and the identification of germs as the causes of disease. Such scientific discoveries eroded established faith-based superstitions. For example, the belief that illness was god's punishment lost some favor when scientists showed that bacteria and viruses caused disease. And the religious retort that, well, god created bacteria and viruses to punish us also met its demise when scientists discovered antibiotics.

In more recent times, other farfetched claims by religionists have sullied the reputation of the religious community. One such claim was that the tsunami in the South Pacific and Hurricane Katrina were caused by god's displeasure with homosexuals. (Strange, when a religious person such as Ted Haggard strays into the homosexual mode, it does not seem to affect the weather.)

A third cultural phenomenon that has chipped away at the credibility of religion is the moral corruption within the church itself, such as sexual abuse of children by priests and the church's subsequent cover-ups; the corruption of "big-tent" ministers such as Ted Haggard himself; TV evangelists Tammy Faye and Jim Bakker and others who, through their hypocrisy and financial exploitation of church donors, shocked even the most trusting believers.

Backlash Against the Church

But perhaps some of the most corrosive precepts perpetrated by religion—and most instrumental in creating a backlash—are those that affect the general welfare, such as the church's stance against condom use and stem cell research. With huge segments of the population dying of AIDS in Africa, even Catholics themselves have decried the Vatican's opposition to condom use. And when Nancy Reagan, a Republican churchgoing ex-first-lady, turned against the church's policy on stem cell research on the grounds that such research might have saved the life of her husband Ronald, the world became acutely aware of the reactionary attitude of the church toward scientific progress.

The Terry Schiavo case, too, created a schism within religion itself when it turned believer against believer in the disagreement about end-of-life choices and whether to keep hopeless cases alive. Almost nobody, it seemed, wanted to live as a vegetable, except for a few diehard fundamentalists. And their detractors accused them of already living as vegetables.

Last, but not least, is the terrible disillusionment disseminated throughout the land by a president who was elected virtually on a religious ticket and who then turned out to be the worst president in American history—even by

religionists' standards. With the war in Iraq going badly, most people now believe that the president lied to them. Whole sects of fundamentalist religions have washed their hands of Bush, some accusing him of being a fake "born again" Christian. Some note the famous line attributed to Bush: "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and those are the ones you want to concentrate on."

All of these factors chipping away at religion's foundations have led to a crumbling, stagnating religious system in our country and prepared the groundwork for the rise of the Four Horsemen of Atheism. It is time now, my friends, to grab the reins of the renaissance, come out of the Dark Age of the Supernatural and into the Age of Truth and Science. Join me in that courageous new world that is out there on the horizon. □

Letters-to-Editor

To the Editor:

While of course I agree with Ken Bronstein's April sermon, *Religious Beliefs Do Not Give You Special Rights or Privileges*, that we must constantly (probably never-endingly) fight against the encroachment of religious trappings and symbols in our public lives, his judicious argument nevertheless made me think of how far we have come in my lifetime.

I attended public school right here in secular New York in the WW2 years, when the most powerful man in the city was not the mayor or some crime boss, but Francis Cardinal Spellman, who with a few words from his office in St. Patrick's Cathedral could ban books and movies, close theaters and nightclubs, control newspapers and ruin lives. And did.

Every Friday in our state-funded public school was "Assembly Day," and we gathered in the auditorium in our white shirts or blouses and red neckties or bows, and lowered our heads while Principal Jacob Greenberg read from the Old Testament, usually Psalms. Then we all sang "The Lord's Prayer" and perhaps the basically un-singable "The Lord is My Shepherd." On Wednesdays at 2 P.M., all the Roman Catholic kids were "excused" (fat lot of choice I had in the matter) from class to attend "religious instruction" until 4:00 p.m. at St. Gabriel's school three blocks away. I hated Wednesdays, not only because the nuns at St Gabriel's treated public school

kids like apostate lepers, but also because the kids left behind at J.H.S. 127 did no work. So when you consider that we came back from lunch at 12:40 and started gathering our coats and books to leave at about 1:40, little or no instruction happened on Wednesday afternoons for anybody – half a public school day sacrificed to "religious instruction" every week.

But most poignantly, I remember a Christmas season in the seventh or eighth grade, when I happened to look around at tall, gangly Hermione Friedman, while our class rehearsed some Christmas carol. I don't remember which one it was, but it was certainly not of the later "chestnuts-roasting" ecumenical sort, but one of the old "Look-out-Jewboy, Christ-is-born-in-Bethlehem" standards. I have never forgotten the look on Hermione's face as she mouthed the words she was being forced to learn and sing.

Twelve years after I graduated from J.H.S. 127 in East Elmhurst, I was teaching at J.H.S. 126, Astoria, and on the first day I pulled Assembly Day duty I noticed that the invocation and the hymns were gone. I also noticed a girl not reciting the Pledge. What about that? I asked old-pro Bob Kelly. "Jehovah's Witness," he said, "she doesn't have to." Hm, things have changed. And they have, a lot.

John Rafferty
President/Secular Humanist Society of New York

<p>ATHEISM IS A CONCLUSION NOT A BELIEF</p>
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The Strange, Exhilarating Experience of Picketing the Pope

Caged in by Cops, We Are an Oasis of Common Sense In a Day of Rampant Pope Worship

By Jane Everhart

NEW YORK—Okay, let's admit it: April 19-20 was the weekend that New York City canonized the catholic Pope. Everywhere in town, it was Pope this and Pope that, with thousands of tourists inundating the city, overhead shots of the Popemobile on TV, photo ops with the Pope going as briskly as indulgences (Mayor Bloomberg, a grinning accomplice), Pope t-shirts, Pope statuettes, Pope coffee cups, whole days on Channel 9 devoted to Pope activities and full Page-One photos of the pontiff in the Daily News, beanie not quite snug enough on his head but grinning ear to ear—and why wouldn't he grin, hadn't he already apologized for the priests' child rapes aboard the plane that brought him here? Apparently that "little unpleasantness" had been taken care of.

I arrived at nine a.m. on Saturday morning at our small piece of allotted turf on Fifth Avenue near 47th Street to take part in New York City Atheists' Pope picket. Our "bin"-- the area we were assigned by the cops, marked off by orange barricades (all day, I persisted in calling it the "pen") -- was already full of Atheist protesters, shoulder to shoulder. Everyone was milling around, not quite knowing what to do, hoisting placards that said: PROUD TO BE AN ATHEIST! POPE, MY TAXES ARE PAYING FOR YOUR VISIT! POPE, DON'T BLAME ATHEISTS FOR YOUR SINS (A somewhat arcane reference to the Pope blaming atheists, in his latest encyclical, for all the ills of the world.) And of course there was our old classic, SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE.

Manning the Barricades

Of course the Pope would never see us; he arrived in his Popemobile via 51st Street, three blocks north, to conduct Mass at St. Patrick's cathedral—and all three blocks were filled four and five deep by Pope worshippers who had actually purchased tickets to stand on the streets near the Cathedral hoping to catch a glimpse of the Pope. From 42nd Street north, Fifth Avenue was closed to automobile traffic; by nine a.m., it was filled with crowds of pedestrians and cops on horseback.

NYCA president Ken Bronstein had arrived at our bin at 7 a.m. to unload placards and set things up. Elaine and Eric Stone arrived at 8 a.m. all the way from Chappaqua, NY. Members Dennis Horvitz, Peter Kramer, Giddian Beer, Helen Kashis, Shirley Sacks, Mario Oliviera, among many, many others, were manning the barricades, waving placards, handing out flyers. (We discovered later that 51 people had signed in at our bin that day but with turnover and those who--like me--in all the excitement forgot to sign in, the number of Atheists who came to protest the Pope with us was more like 75.) I took a placard and found a spot on the barricade facing 47th St. beside Dave Silverman and his 11-year-old daughter Rayanne, who had come from New Jersey to represent AMERICAN ATHEISTS at our demonstration. After that, the morning became a blur of handing out our flyers to the crowds in the street, waving my placard, talking to passersby, half of whom seemed to be French, German or Irish tourists.



At one point in the morning, when some passersby refused to take one of Dave Silverman's flyers telling why Atheists are opposed to the Pope, little Rayanne shouted out at them, "god wants you to take our flyer!" To everyone's surprise, it worked. Passersby who heard her, grabbed for the flyers.

What Rayanne Learned

Rayanne's Dad, Dave Silverman, later told me, "Rayanne learned something important that day. She learned how easy it is to manipulate people into doing what you want them to do simply by saying 'god wants it.'"

There were some half-hearted attempts among our protesters to chant, started by yours truly, but chanting turned out not to be an Atheist strong point, with at least one Atheist member scorning it as "too much like summer camp." A pity, because some members had thought up some interesting rhymes, including "The Pope offers empty hope, not effective ways to cope!"

I felt that some of our best ideas were thus lost to history -- including some rather outré and amusing (but unused) placard messages such as: "Mother Theresa Dark Nights Club, Sign Up Here," "If the Pope Isn't Lying, He's Delusional," and my all-time favorite: "We Prefer Eggs Benedict to Pope Benedict."

Parents of Abused Picket

Toward noon, after the Pope's mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral let out, thousands of Catholics passed by our bin, wandering about, apparently hoping for another glimpse of the Pope. We passed out so many of our flyers that Ken and Giddian had to rush to Kinko's to xerox more. Some of our Atheist demonstrators complained that the flyer didn't represent our topnotch prose, but that didn't stop most passersby from grabbing it and reading it, sometimes with shock.

Just south of us, barricaded in another bin, was another group of picketers who attracted much more press attention than we Atheists did. They were the parents of children who had been sexually molested by priests, and they carried placards with large, blown-up photos of their molested children. One woman carried a placard displaying the blown-up photo of a beautiful blonde little girl, about seven years old, who had been abused by a priest. It was heart-wrenching to me, as someone who had been raised Catholic, to see this woman holding up the photo of her abused child. Whatever doubts or discomfort I had about publicly protesting the Pope vanished in the face of the horror of the church's cover-up of the crime of child rape.

Shame, Shame

At one point, emboldened by being surrounded by my fellow Atheists, I called out to a priest passing by, "Father, how many children have your priests raped

today?" He came over to our barricade, took one of my flyers, and said, "How many children have been raped by people in the whole of society?"

"That's no excuse, Father!" I shouted as he melted back into the crowd. "Shame, shame!"

Some passersby, seeing our placards, expressed anger. A woman took one of my flyers and snarled at me, "I'll see you burn in hell!" (Ken Bronstein pointed out, she'd have to be there, too, for that to happen.)

Send in the Clowns

The evening before we picketed the Pope, several of us went to a panel discussion in Greenwich Village given by Act-Up, the gay organization that has held demonstrations nationwide to get help for AIDS victims. We went to learn from these veteran demonstrators and picketers what we should be doing. We learned from the panelists about the value of chants, of media contact and of expecting the unexpected. We also met a professor of media studies at New York University, one of the panelists actually, who told us that, inspired by NYCA's decision to picket the Pope, he was going to lead a group of Act-Up activists to picket the Pope on bicycles in clown gear. "We will welcome the biggest clown of all, Pope Ratzinger!" he said.

It was noon on Saturday when the clowns rode by us on their bicycles, protected by cops on horseback. There were just four or five of them in wigs and costumes and big red noses (more clowns may have gone to other areas) but it seemed to me that they were wary of the crowds. It occurred to me that, maybe, being on a bike was not a good way to protest. Anyone who didn't agree with you could easily knock your bike over and hurt you bad. It was the one time that I was glad the cops were there.

Missionaries Target Us

It was also near noon when a fresh-faced young woman, about 18 years old, came over to me at the barricade and said that she was a Catholic missionary who had come to help me see the light. She was with a young man who also turned out to be a Catholic missionary. Both had an apple-cheeked look, like they'd just stepped off a Kansas farm. I tried to disabuse them of the idea that I was a possible convert. "Look, I don't believe in god," I said. "There is not a scintilla of proof that god exists."

"He exists," the girl declared, smiling at me beatifically like someone who has a secret. "Can you prove it?" I said. "I feel him inside me," she responded.

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Editor's Q and A

Why Are So Many Seniors Attracted to Atheist Organizations?

Dear Editor,

I enjoyed the performance of your play about Madalyn Murray O'Hair, *The Most Hated Woman in America*, on April 13 at Joe Franklin's Comedy Club but I wondered why there were only a few people there my age. I'm 27. Everybody in the audience seemed older than me.

--Julie from Brooklyn

Dear Julie,

I remember you, Julie. You asked this question after the performance. At the time, the only answer I had was that if Madalyn had lived, she would have been 89 years old now, and perhaps those who remembered her and admired her are also getting older. One of my goals in writing the play was to keep alive the memory of this vibrant, pioneering Atheist leader that the religious community wants us to forget.

But after the performance, other answers occurred to me. Why, for instance, would you even care about the age of people in the audience? People of vintage have been a source of wisdom and progress in the Atheist movement since time immemorial. There are two venues (at least two) in which one's "ripeness" truly does not matter: Congress and Atheism. Well, maybe religion too: the Pope and his Cardinals never retire; they just die off; or, as the church's spokesmen put it, "are called back home by the savior." But since we Atheists don't believe in that nebulous "home" after

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"Well, that's not proof," I said.
"It's all the proof I need," she said.

I stared at her, perplexed. How does one counter that? In the end, I passed her on to my fellow Atheist, Helen Kashis, who has dealt with a lot of kooks during street tabling. There are some irrational beliefs, I realized, that I will never be able to deal with, and having god inside you is one of them.

We Critique Ourselves

After the picket, our whole Atheist troupe, or whoever remained after the tiring morning, went to a restaurant nearby for lunch and critiqued our experience. Most participants said it had been a positive experience for them. Ken Bronstein reported

death, or in a savior, we encourage our seniors to contribute on earth as long as they can and give us the benefit of their lives and experience.

Two of the most influential Atheist philosophers in the world, George Bernard Shaw and Bertrand Russell, did their most creative philosophical writing in their 90s. Mark Twain, another atheist elder, was our national wit at 75. Of the Four Horsemen of Atheism, three are over 60. (The only one who isn't is Sam Harris, my least favorite.) Other senior Atheists whom I admire are: Andy Rooney, my favorite curmudgeon; Paul Newman, retired from one successful profession only to make a huge success in another, the food business; the artist Georgia O'Keefe, who in her 90s had a live-in lover who was in his 20s; feisty Katherine Hepburn, cantankerously outspoken in her 90s; Joe Franklyn and Madalyn's TV mentor Phil Donahue, both of whom keep on ticking; Jane Fonda, still a knockout in her 70s. Tell me, wouldn't you rather converse with Jane Fonda, who has really *lived*, than, say, a Britney Spears?

Notables in Audience

You didn't realize, either, that there were some notable seniors in the audience at the Madalyn play. Sitting up front was a retired NYC police detective who is spearheading NYCA's investigation of religious intrusion into government agencies. At the table with Joe Franklin was a glamorous lady travel
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that there had been 15 media interviews of our people, one documentary firm company videotaping us and one movie company from California filming archive material of us for a film.

Most of our press coverage was from media in other cities (Chicago was prominent among them) and the foreign press. Channel 1 was one of the few local TV stations to film us, and some viewers may have caught Ken Bronstein on the news later that day, being interviewed by the Channel 1 reporter.

Would I do it again? Without a moment's hesitation. They say that it is on the barricades, when you have to defend your position, that you discover how strongly you hold it. ☐

agent, just back from China. Over on the left was a retired college professor and his social-worker wife. Up front was a woman who had served on Madalyn's Board of Directors. On stage, playing one detective, was another college professor. There were at least three millionaires that I know of in that audience. I suggest you consider the possibility that it might have been more stimulating to talk to these people than to some recent grad on his first entry-level job.

Influence of 1960s

You may well ask, but why are so many seniors attracted to Atheism as a cause? One of my theories is, these are people who remember the 1960s and the joy, the freedom and the successes of that significant decade. They were young then, and if they were activists, they remember the peace marches, the flower children, Woodstock, the Columbia University riots, Janis Joplin, folk music—and yes, Madalyn Murray on the Johnny Carson show. If they weren't activists then, they probably wish they had been. Now many of them are retired, families grown, mortgages paid, they have the time and the good health, and I think they want to recapture that time of freedom and joy.

And these seniors know something you don't know: the 1960s worked! The 60s were propelled by the Vietnam war, civil rights protests and women's liberation. It may have taken some 45 years, but in the end, the 1960s resulted in historic changes in our culture. The Vietnam war is long gone, a shameful memory in our history. As for civil rights and women's lib, who would have guessed, back in 1968, that a Black man and a woman would be running neck and neck for president in 2008!

So, by and large, the activists and marchers succeeded in the 1960s. They made noise and changed the world. Look around you, Julie, at one of our events, and you will see the veterans of street marches, of the levitation of the Pentagon, the marches on the White house, of voter-rights work in the deep South, of Sit-Ins and Sing-Outs.

The activists are back. They know they are needed now. There may be snow on the roof, but there's fire in their hearts.

Youth Letting Us Down

What's different now, what's wrong with American society now, is the jadedness, the pseudo-sophistication, the confusion of young people. They are too urbane to chant on a picket line, too embarrassed to march, too duped and bamboozled by TV and greed and false authorities to even figure out how a George W. Bush got into the White House, never mind how to get him out.

There is much confusion in the land right now:

- The country that values self-determination is imposing its will on Iraq.
- The country that spouts freedom is cutting down on all our freedoms.
- The country that purports to care denies health care to 40 million citizens.
- The country that has said, "give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses" is keeping out the tired, the poor, the huddled masses with an electric fence.
- The country that promises religious freedom is sneaking religion into schools, workplaces, politics, government, the armed forces.
- The country that promises religious freedom hates those who have no religion.

Today's issues are subtler than they were in the 1960s. Religious totalitarianism is a drumbeat on the horizon. The natives are restless but they aren't burning down the huts yet. The economy is rolling along, inflationary but not yet down and out. The mood in the air for young people today is just to "get ahead."

Perhaps our seniors are with us because they have heard the drumbeat and they know what it means. They aren't going to go quietly into the night. I'm sure if Madalyn Murray O'Hair were alive, she'd be fighting with us tooth and nail even at age 89. □

NYC Atheists Blog

<http://nyc-atheists.org/blog/>

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New York City Atheists Inc.
Publisher – Kenneth Bronstein
Editor – Jane Everhart

UPCOMING MAY EVENTS

MAY 10, 2008 (Saturday) 10AM-6PM
NYC Atheists Street Tabling

WHERE: Columbus Circle
Front of Time Warner Building-Broadway (59/60)

Shift one: 10:00 A.M. - 1:00 P.M.
Shift two: 1:00 P/M. - 6:00 P.M.

Great time to meet the public - Wonderful experience

MAY 11, 2008 (Sunday) 12:00 PM
NYC Atheists Brunch, Speaker, Book Club, Library

WHERE: Kennedy's Restaurant
327 West 57th St. (8th/9th Ave.)

COST: \$20 (includes brunch, one drink, tax, tip)

Subject: *Judging god*
Speaker: John A. Henderson MD

Dr. Henderson is a retired United States Air Force flight surgeon and general surgeon. He and his wife, Ruth, live in Asheville, North Carolina.

Henderson graduated with honors from the University of Illinois College of Medicine. His surgical residency was at the Scott and White Clinic, Temple, Texas. During his Air Force career he was a flight surgeon and general surgeon serving in England, Spain, and Japan.

Henderson practiced general surgery in Asheville, North Carolina following retirement from the Air Force in 1972. He is the author of three books: *god.com: A Deity for the New Millennium*, *FEAR FAITH FACT FANTASY*, and *Judging god*, that discuss some of the harmful effects of religion and illogical beliefs in an all-knowing, all-powerful, supernatural being.

Book Club / Library

After brunch, we move to the NYCA Library located on East 79th Street.

We continue discussing Christopher Hitchens' *god is not Great*. Chapter 7: Revelation: *The Nightmare of the "Old" Testament* and Chapter 8: *The "New Testament Exceeds the Evil of the "Old One*.

Need have not read the assignment to participate.

MAY 20, 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>

MAY 29, 2008 (Thursday) 6:30 PM
NYCA MONTHLY MEETING

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

Subject: *The Truth About the Bible*
Speaker: Peter J. Brancazio, Phd.

Prof. Brancazio has had a long and distinguished career as an educator, researcher, writer and scholar. He received a Ph.D. in astrophysics from New York University and joined the Physics Department at Brooklyn College. There he created and taught undergraduate courses in physics and astronomy for liberal arts students. During his 35 years at Brooklyn College he won recognition as a gifted, innovative, and popular teacher. In 1990 he was chosen by *Newsday*, as one of six "Great Teachers in New York." In 1992 he took up a new area of scholarly study -- namely, the relationship between science and religion. He developed and taught a highly regarded course on this subject in Brooklyn College's Program in Religious Studies. He subsequently won an award from the John Templeton Foundation in a nationwide competition for the development of courses in science and religion. After his retirement, Prof. Brancazio devoted all his intellectual efforts to the study of the Bible. His love for teaching inspired him to create a series of courses on the Bible and critical Bible scholarship designed for adult education programs. During this time he has led several groups of retired professionals through an in-depth reading of every book of the Bible. *The Bible From Cover to Cover* represents his effort to put the content of these courses into writing.

UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

MAY 2008

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

JUNE 2008

June	2*	Mon.	7:00 PM	NYCA Lifestyle Discussion Group
June	8***	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Book Club / Library
June	17***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up Discussion
June	26****	Thu.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

* **Location: Call Ken Bronstein 212-535-7425**

** **Columbus Circle – Front of Time Warner Building – Broadway (59/60)**

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

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

***** **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

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