

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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KENNETH BRONSTEIN

PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"

Some Compelling Reasons Why You Should Be an Active Atheist

And Why We've Burgeoned in 2008

Someone once said, and it's gone down in the annals of atheist folklore, that organizing atheists is like herding cats. That's because atheists have historically been independent thinkers, loners and rebels going against the mob mentality, refusing to accept conventional thinking and, instead, questioning and seeking concrete evidence for every notion perpetrated upon us. To the theological and philosophical status-quo society, we're a royal pain in the butt. And they're not exactly unhappy about the fact that we're hard to organize. I suspect they're rubbing their hands with glee right now, glad they can pick us off one by one.

But the times they are a-changing, as Bob Dylan said. There is something new in the air. Obama, who was once thought a long shot, has been elected president. Books like Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and Chris Hitchens' *God Is Not Great* exploded onto the best-seller lists, outselling tomes on how to get to heaven or how to live the life that Jesus planned for you. Movies like "Religulous" by Bill Maher have pulled people in by the carload. Plays about atheists proliferate; we even saw one about Darwin last year.

What's more, we at New York City Atheists get calls every day from the media seeking to interview us, sometimes plying us with questions like, how do atheists celebrate the holidays? This year alone we at New York City Atheists been approached, questioned and interviewed by CBS-TV, Channel 1, National Public Radio, WNYC, Air America (twice), Time Out magazine (six times!), New York magazine, NBC and The New York Times.

Each Atheist Counts

The media's attention to us, and their curiosity about us, is not something we take lightly-- but bear in mind, the media is primarily interested in us as a group, as an

organization. They want to know what we are doing. They want to know, is there actually an atheist movement, how pervasive is it, how strong is it, are we a voting block yet, and what we offer people that religion doesn't.

That's why, friends, we need to act in concert. That's why we need each atheist to be counted, to join us in public events and protests, to constitute our voting block, to strengthen our voice in the Congressional houses and in state and local legislatures. In numbers there is strength. In numbers there is power.

The time is over for atheists to be lone alley-cats satisfied with a morsel thrown at them here and there. It is time now for individual atheists to come together, join with us and become not a lone voice but a united *magnum opus* that can help move our society from its reliance on medieval religious superstitions to the brave new world of science, technology and a democracy unhampered by the silly superstitions of celestial monarchs.

Brotherhood of Atheists

There are other reasons for becoming a member of an atheist organization besides the power of numbers as a force for progress. There is also a personal, private, life-enrichment "plus" for those who join us in our work. In our meetings, our brunches, our lectures, our protests, you can experience social interaction and a feeling of connectiveness to people who are atheists too. There are opportunities to form friendships, there is an emotional connection with fellow atheists. You don't feel like an outsider in these surroundings. You don't feel you are "different."

When you join with us, you become part of what I call the brotherhood of Atheists—(OK, I know that's politically incorrect and I also mean the sisterhood of

Atheists, but at this point in history our American syntax is miserably inept and there's no word that refers to the close camaraderie of both men and women with sibling-like loyalty). I know of at least three couples within our group that have become Significant Others to each other this year and numerous others who have become BFFs (Best Friends Forever), and this is important in a city that routinely isolates humans. We've visited our sick Atheist friends in hospitals, we've even buried a few over the years, and we've followed them in their life changes.

Contributing Brings Personal Growth

We have also provided personal growth opportunities for our members. Many of us have had to devote our careers to income-producing jobs that did not contribute to the development of our talents or interests. As members of NYCA, many have been able to exercise their talents and abilities not only to advance the cause of atheism but also to develop their skills in a particular field or art. For example, our newsletter editor JANE EVERHART discovered her talent in a different writing milieu when she was encouraged by NYCA to write a play about the life of Madalyn Murray O'Hair. The first act of her play, *The Most Hated Woman in America*, was performed onstage to acclaim last year at Joe Franklin's Dinner Theatre in Manhattan.

Other members have also had the opportunity to develop their talents in NYCA. ERIC STUNZI was encouraged to develop an atheist Cable TV news show under NYCA auspices. This year, he won a grant to continue his TV work for atheism and get it on the air. MICHAEL DORIAN, until recently our blogmaster, where he undoubtedly practiced his natural talent for writing and observing, also won a grant recently to write a play. NATHANIEL "NATTY" ADAMS, the charismatic young man who leads our monthly Meetups, has had the opportunity to hone his leadership qualities in that capacity.

Use Your Talent

Our longtime Cable TV show host, DENNIS HORVITZ, has become an expert in comedic introductions and incisive discussions via his three-times a week atheist Cable TV shows for NYCA. RON WIDELEC, a Long Island teacher, sharpens his writing talent by writing think pieces for our newsletter. Our "party animal" HARVEY OSGOOD, a retired engineer, contributes his lovely home and his hosting talents to give our annual Halloween and New Year's Eve parties. DR. NANDO PELUSI, a clinical psychologist in his professional life, contributes his analytical talents to helping NYCA members with their societal and lifestyle problems in our once-a-month Lifestyle Support Group. DAVID BIRNKRANT combines his editing and computer talents

for us by compiling and editing our weekly FOCUS, an Atheist service that alerts members to news articles about atheism nationwide. MARTIN HEINSDORF uses his artistic and Web talents to design and manage our Web site. Members ELAINE AND ERIC STONE do their Perle Mesta caper every year for NYCA by hosting our annual Fourth of July Barbecue in their beautiful suburban home in Chappaqua, N.Y.

Teamwork With Humanists

Recently, JOHN RAFFERTY, the president of New York's Secular Humanists, and longtime atheist activist WARREN ALLEN SMITH, author of *Who's Who in Hell*, have joined forces to star in NYCA's newest (and fourth) Cable TV show, which will be focused on historical figures in atheism. And NYCA's Book Discussion Club on Cable, until recently ably presented by ELAINE LYNN of the Secular Humanists, will be continued in the new year by host ROBERT MURTHA, who when not hosting the show, works as an attorney. These collaborations with Secular Humanists are an example of our work to reach out to other atheist groups in friendship and collaboration.

Do you have an underused talent? Join us and let your talent grow and develop while working for the atheist cause. It may lead to a whole new career for you but at the very least, you will gain the satisfaction of using your special abilities for what you really believe in.

Speakers You Won't Hear Anywhere Else

Last, but not least, NYC Atheists brings to its members, at a very low cost, primetime speakers and lecturers that bolster your knowledge about atheism's past and keep you abreast of new developments in atheism and science. In 2008, we presented a remarkable 25 lectures (or more than two a month) featuring topnotch speakers, and some 150 Cable TV shows—or three a week—featuring discussions and interviews with atheist celebrities and top atheist thinkers.

Is the mere number of our educational offerings overwhelming? More important is the caliber of the speakers, many of whom you will not hear anywhere else. A number of our speakers were so intriguing or controversial that we often had standing-room only at our venues. For example, last January we hosted two ex-Jehovah witnesses, a young married couple who spoke to us about their experiences in the cult on the condition that we not reveal their real names. Their topic: "Our Road to Atheism."

But if we thought that was controversial, it took even more courage for us to present our August speaker, ROOK HAWKINS of Philadelphia's young atheist activist group, the RATIONAL RESPONDERS, because of the

opposition of a web-based group of atheists—or people who said they are atheists—who were opposed to Rook because they said he has no academic credentials to speak about the Bible. The Web group harassed us via email, phone and fax in an effort to prevent Rook from presenting his talk. Our director of communications, Jane Everhart, was harassed all night long by phone calls from the group. Nevertheless, we chose to have Rook, unanointed by any academic authorities, present his paper to us and he was an inspiring revelation of how far one can go with autodidacticism (or self-education).

'Atheist of the Year'

Other exciting speakers in 2008 included MATT LACLAIR, the young man who took down a fundamentalist public high school teacher in Kearny, N.J. who was secretly preaching religion in class. Matt was presented NYCA's "Atheist of the Year" award. And Manhattan attorney JOHN ARETAKIS, who is suing the Catholic church on behalf of victims of pedophilic priests, surprised us at his lecture by bringing with him a priest who had himself been molested as a child.

DR. PETER BRANCAZIO, who exposed the truth about the Bible (it's basically hot air, people) proved so popular, we had to invite him back for a second lecture, in which he exposed the New Testament too. PAUL GROSSWALD, a former Scientology member, drew a standing-room only crowd when members of Anonymous, an online anti-Scientology group, showed up in the audience incognito.

DR. SETH ASSER came from Rhode Island to tell us how religion prevents some parents from calling the doctor when their children are sick--and children die unnecessarily. And DR. RICHARD SLOAN, a professor at Columbia University, told us how physicians in the U.S. are influenced by their religion when dealing with patients—i.e., if your physician is a catholic or Muslim and you are not, beware.

We Work Behind the Scenes

Many people are not aware that we often work behind the scenes to help our Atheist members. We have been advocates for a number of people who complained about religion being foisted on them in the workplace but who didn't want to risk their jobs by complaining. In those cases I, or our legal representative, called up the company and relayed the complaint without naming the employee who was complaining. That way, no employer can retaliate. We have resolved a good half dozen workplace disputes this way.

We are also preparing to wage legal suits on behalf of members in separation of church and state disputes. We are close to completion of the process of discovery in one case concerning the presence of religious chaplains in the City's police and fire departments. Look for this exciting suit to hit the courts in the future.

We Party, Convene & Do Good, Too

We Atheists have our fun side too. Each month, we have a Meetup, mostly for Singles, at the Stone Creek Bar in Manhattan, generally led by our handsome man-about-town, Nathaniel "Natty" Adams. We also hold a Halloween party, a New Year's Eve party and this year, for the first time, we held an Election Night party that proved to be a raucous celebration of the democratic electoral process, with much revelry, tears of celebration and over-imbibing.

NYCA goes nationwide too. As affiliates of both AMERICAN ATHEISTS and the ATHEIST ALLIANCE INTERNATIONAL, we send delegates to at least two conventions per year and report on them extensively for our members. Our reports, usually written by our newsletter editor, Jane Everhart, are generally picked up and reprinted in other atheist publications nationwide.

'Get Off Your Knees'

NYCA has also initiated and regularly conducts its Blood Bank program twice a year, once on the so-called "National Day of Prayer," where our message is, "Get off your knees and instead of praying, donate a pint of blood as a gift to humanity," and once more on Election Day. This year, at the AAI national convention in Long Beach, CA, we conducted a Blood Bank program to teach other groups how to join us in our "positive protest" on the next National Day of Prayer.

Have I convinced you yet that NYCA is an active, high-achiever group and we deserve your support? But don't just listen to us: Recently NYCA was lauded by American Atheists for being "the most active Atheist affiliate in the nation."

Come, join us in our work to make this country a better place for atheists and freethinkers of all stripes. It may very well change your life. Or at the very least, it may just bring us all a little closer to the atheist goal of bringing a heaven-on-earth to reality. □

To support our work to advance the cause of atheism, fill out the enclosed separate membership application and send in your tax-deductible dues.

**ATHEISM IS A CONCLUSION
NOT A BELIEF**

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Religion and Civil Rights in America



By Ron Widelec

America took a huge step in electing the first African American president of the United States. Regardless of one's political beliefs or affiliations, for a member of a group so mistreated throughout our history to be elected to our highest office is a clear example of civil progress in America.

However, the significance of the election overshadowed another important vote that took place on November 4th, which illustrated that oppression and reactionary thinking still have a place in the America political landscape. In a huge setback for the Gay Rights Movement, which promises to dominate the civil rights discourse for the 21st century, California (that bastion of liberal thinking) voted to deny the right of marriage to same-sex couples.

In an ironic move, yet one deeply rooted in the American narrative, even the newly celebrating African American population weighed in negatively on the topic of gay rights. Like the Puritans who came to these shores in search of religious freedom and then created laws that denied that very right to those of other faiths, those who fight for freedom in America often do so from the limited perspective of "freedom for us" and not "freedom for all."

Marriage: Religious or Civil Concept?

In an equally ironic move, a religious organization that pushed heavily for this rejection of gay rights was the Mormon Church. Mormons have a past riddled with persecution due to their (now defunct) idea of polygamy. After being forced to accept the concept of one man-one woman monogamy, they apparently now feel entitled to push this idea on others.

Once again, the debate comes down to the separation of Church and State. Either marriage is a

religious concept or a civil one. If religious, it can be defined by each religious group to mean whatever they wish. If civil, then it must be defined in a way consistent with the U.S. Constitution and our founding principles. It cannot be both without forcing one religion's definition of marriage on the followers of other religions and therefore likely to give "adherents of the controlling denominations as an endorsement, and by the non-adherents as a disapproval, of their individual religious choice" (Allegheny Supreme Court Case).

Hypocrisy Rules

To avoid this problem, a clear division must be made between a civil, government marriage and a religious marriage. The civil type would be legally recognized by all government agencies, and entitle full legal rights to couples. The religious would be recognized only within the church or religious body through which the joining takes place and in accordance with the rules and regulations of that organization. Couples could seek either or both when deciding on their future.

This is not very likely to happen any time soon in America, a nation where hypocrisy is often the rule and not the exception. Ironically, as a people, most Americans seem fine with the idea of an inebriated pair, who just met and can barely stand, getting married by man dressed as Elvis only to be annulled or divorced shortly thereafter. But a dedicated couple that is committed to one another, and wishes to be officially joined, can be denied due to religious disagreements over internal plumbing. American progress, it seems, takes one baby step at a time. □

Ron Widelec is an educator who lives on Long Island. He has been a longtime contributor of articles to NYCA's newsletter.

Circumcision: Barbaric Stone Age Ritual?

By Amy Cools

I'm totally creeped out by the fact that so many people all over the world elect for cosmetic surgery to be performed on their newborn infant's genitals. Someone tell me: Why? I asked my aunt (a kind, lovely woman whom I'm very fond of), a mother of four children, two of whom are boys. She replied, as if I had asked a silly question, "Well, of course it's a preference." I'm sorry, that's a terribly inadequate answer. I'm giving in to the temptation to be sarcastic for a second: "Well, if it wasn't your preference you wouldn't do it. That doesn't consider whether your sons would prefer it. That answer was no answer at all." (Sorry, auntie, no disrespect intended.)

Why do so many parents take that first loving look at their child, exclaiming at the beauty and perfection of this life that they've brought into the world, only to decide not long afterward, "Well, my kid's pretty cool, but I think there's something wrong with his genitals, let's just chop part of them off."

In the Western world, this happens mostly to infant boys, but in other parts of the world, it's happening to girls and, more cruelly, it's happening to these girls when they're old enough to remember the pain for the rest of their lives. Yet most people in the Western world who react with shock and horror at stories of female circumcision are the very people who do the same sort of thing to their own male children.

How are male and female circumcision so different from each other in the minds of these those who object to female circumcision? They are both forms of cosmetic surgery that alter the physical appearance of the genitals, while dulling sensation in the most sensitive region of the body and permanently altering sexual performance.

No Longer for Hygiene

And this cosmetic surgery is done before the age of consent. I don't see how it's logically any different than performing a nose job or doing a tummy tuck on your baby. Cosmetic surgery, other than rehabilitative, is a procedure that is morally performed only on those who are old enough and informed enough to make such a decision for themselves.

And why do people still use the hygiene argument? This excuse is so ridiculous I'll barely touch on it. We have no problem teaching children to wash themselves or to wipe their bottoms after they've used the toilet. To cut

off the foreskin for hygienic reasons is logically no different than cutting off the child's outer ear to keep it from getting dirty with earwax and dead skin buildup instead of teaching the child the proper use of a Q-Tip. It's no longer the medical dark ages before Pasteur, people. Teach the child to use soap. And if you are so freakishly prudish that you can't bring yourself to show the child proper personal hygiene, I'm sure your child's pediatrician would oblige.

Fixing god's Screw-up?

Why do so many parents circumcise their kid for religious reasons? They believe god created this child in his image and likeness, but they must also think he screwed up a bit, so they need to "fix" the child before he's really good enough for god to be pleased. How is correcting god's work a sign of devotion and religious dedication? To me, it seems that according to their own Judeo-Christian beliefs (since the greatest number of circumcisers are practicing one of the three major religions that have this tradition), and since the body is the "temple of the holy spirit," it would logically follow that mutilating the body would be sacrilege.

So I don't get it. If it's to modulate the sexual impulses and assist the child in leading a more 'pure' life, well, that implies that god didn't get it right, that god either mistakenly designed the body so that one is more likely to break his laws (which implies a lack of foresight on his part), or that god purposely created the human body in a way that one is more likely to break his laws (which implies that god played a cruel joke, or he is malevolent or dishonest). It is true, according to the Old Testament, god commands his followers to be circumcised, but in this, he seems to contradict himself.

Traditions Fade Away

However, most people, even the very religious, don't follow many of the Old Testament commandments anyway, because many of the commandments are cruel or nonsensical by today's standards, such as stoning disobedient children or killing someone for gathering firewood on the Sabbath. So tell me: Why is it your job, if you're religious, to "fix" god's work, when he "saw what he had made, and it was good?"

Why do people perform circumcisions merely for tradition's sake? And if you object to the word 'merely' because you think tradition is very important, well, there

are many traditions that were once important, but which we've rightly discarded because we know better now. We don't hang witches. We don't brand adulterers with the letter "A." We don't stone women for wanting to marry someone of a different religion....Oh, wait, well, some of us still do, but that illustrates my point: These people who are stoning women for the sake of tradition have decided to live according to ancient, barbaric codes of morality and behavior instead of maturing into a more humane and enlightened way of living. They're robotically copying their forbearers' habits instead of thinking about what they're actually doing. And I can't think of another, better example of stone-age barbarism than ritually mutilating our innocent children's genitals. □

Amy Cools, who lives in Oakland, CA, is a professional designer and an atheist. She frequently writes articles for the Atheists United newsletter.

**NYCA Fourth Cable Show
Atheist History Club
Wednesdays: 5:30PM (MNN # 57)**

Do You Have a Talent for Blogging?

NYCA Needs a Blogmaster

New York City Atheists has an opportunity for one or more people to try out as volunteer Blogmasters on the NYCA Blog.

The requirements for Blogmaster are: You should be aware of what's happening in the Atheist world, you must enjoy writing your opinions about it and you don't mind discussing, debating or arguing about it in writing with fellow Atheists. A sense of humor is a plus. □

ATHEISTS ARE NOT "NON BELIEVERS,"

WE ARE REALISTS

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

NYCA Members at American Atheists Solstice Party (12/13/2008)



**L-R: Front row: Jackson, Gordon, Everhart, Stone, Sorteberg.
Middle row: Rothman, Horvitz, Stone, Lee, Schweitzer.
Back row: Bronstein, Stunzi, Olivieri.**

UPCOMING JANUARY EVENTS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

January 11, 2009 (Sunday) 12:00 PM
NYCA Brunch, Speaker, Book Club

WHERE: **Press Box Restaurant & Pub**
932 Second Ave. (29/30th St.) – 2nd Floor

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

SPEAKER: Alex S. Key, Author

SUBJECT: *The Third Basic Instinct:
 How Religion Doesn't Get You*

Alex S. Key was born in Liverpool, England. He wrote *The Third Basic Instinct* after researching belief systems around the world—while using the latest research on understanding of human emotions—and intensified his work following the September 11th attacks.

In the days following the World Trade Center attacks, Mr. Key led a team responsible for bringing the financial systems back online. As vice president of technology at a leading Wall Street firm, he helped fix the tremendous problems but regretted not being able to prevent them. He decided he would help prevent the false beliefs behind terrorist attacks—and other unproductive behavior—by providing a deeper understanding of human emotions and motivation.

As a child raised Greek Orthodox in a harsh Northern mining town in England, he was unable to embrace the idea of a benevolent god in the face of human suffering and prejudice.

Following his graduation from the University of Manchester, England, Mr. Key spent the next 20 years researching belief systems and human motivation. Separately, he pursued a career on Wall Street, and today manages a global team of technologists based in New York, Chicago, London, and Asia, using technology to handle billions of dollars each day.

His unique approach to religion and society involves a combination of news, anecdotes, science, and humor.

Mr. Key has researched and drawn heavily on works by Daniel Goleman (*Emotional Intelligence*), Dale Peterson (*Demonic Males*), Bernard Lewis (*The Crisis of Islam*), Richard Dawkins (*The Selfish Gene*), and in his book has cited over one hundred scientists, authors, comedians, politicians, forefathers, priests, and even terrorists.

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 13: "*Does Religion Make People Behave Better?*"

Need not have read the assignment to participate.

January 20, 2009 (Tuesday) 7:00 PM
NYCA Meetup

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

Exciting discussions with fellow freethinkers!

Cost: Free (cash food and bar)

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

January 29, 2008 (Thursday) 6:30 PM
NYCA ANNUAL MEETING

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

Program: Open House and Town Meeting.
 Review of 2008 activities, 2009 plans,
 election of Board of Directors, NYCA Cable
 show videos, general discussion.

Come equipped with your ideas for us!

UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

JANUARY 2009

Jan.	11*	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch/Book Club/Library
Jan.	20**	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up and Discussion
Jan.	29***	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Annual Meeting

FEBRUARY 2009

Feb.	2****	Mon.	7:00 PM	NYCA Atheists Lifestyle Discussion Group
Feb.	8*	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch/Book Club/Library
Feb.	12****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Charles Darwin's 200 th Birthday Party
Feb.	17**	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up and Discussion
Feb.	26***	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

* **Press Box Restaurant & Pub – 932 Second Ave. (29/30th St.) – 2nd Floor**
 ** **Stone Creek Bar and Lounge – 140 East 27th St. (3rd/Lex)**
 *** **SLC Conference Center–352 Seventh Ave./16th Floor-(29/30th St.)**
 * *** **Location: Call Ken Bronstein 212-535-7425**

NYCA CABLE SHOWS

Wednesdays:	5:30 PM	Atheists History Club	(Manhattan Cable	# 57)
	6:30 PM	This Week in Atheism	(Manhattan Cable	# 57)
Thursdays:	7:00 PM	NYC Atheists	(Manhattan Cable	# 67)
	7:30 PM	Atheists Book Club	(Manhattan Cable	# 67)

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