



KENNETH BRONSTEIN

PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"

Religion is the Problem, Not the Solution For our Economic Survival

Our country is facing its most serious financial problems since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Never mind the eight-year profligacy and spending spree by the Bush regime that led us to this debacle and left our new president with the task of mopping up. Though I'm convinced we will eventually climb our way out of this economic quagmire, I'd like to put forth a premise that no one else is going to be bold enough or contentious enough to risk putting on the nation's editorial pages: that our economic survival is going to be based, to a large extent, on how we handle the separation of church and state.

I do not make this statement lightly or frivolously or without due diligence. All of my life experience in the financial, corporate and educational sectors, all of my lifelong absorption in the interaction of the economics sector with other aspects of our society, including religion, has led me to two observations about our economy: (1) that the religious influence in our society has never been referenced to the financial woes of our society; and (2) that if we don't achieve separation of church and state, our economic problems are going to get worse, not better. Here's why:

The underlying problem here is religion's mission to discredit anything that challenges the faith of their adherents. Religious leaders are defensive about any concept, any new idea or discovery that nibbles away at the rules, regulations and disciplines of their faith. They fear that if even one plank of their religious doctrine breaks down, the whole structure of their religion will fall apart.

Religion's Protective Shield

And so, religion has developed a profound protective shield against criticism. For example, it is generally considered, in polite American society, that to question the logic of anyone's faith is to be gauche, rude,

insensitive and represents an encroachment into their religious freedom. Everyone in America learns, practically in kindergarten, that you are not supposed to attack someone else's faith. "It's no one's business," religionists insist. And how many times have you heard, "I don't care what your religion is as long as you have some religion?" Think about the intent of that statement: Isn't it one religion defending others—in order to uphold the necessity of religion in general in society?

Religion Resists Advances

And yet, technology and science move on in the world, creating new questions to eat away at the monolithic foundations of religion. In its resistance to these new ideas, religion has used what I call the "wedge" method. That is, religion summons massive resistance to smaller issues—like same-sex marriage, abortion and stem cell research—before these issues open up larger questions that might destroy faith. The churches use their massive resources—financial, political, legal, influential—to oppose each and every idea they see as having the potential to destroy religion's values and principles. That, in a nutshell, is why you see this vast, profound resistance to advances in our society by the huge, oppressive specter that is religion today. And what is that resistance to advances doing to our economy? Consider these destructive effects:

1) EDUCATION. We are living today in a technology-and-information dominated era. In the old days, when the U.S. was a manufacturing nation, we simply needed able bodies. But as the world is soaring into the tech/info era, we need educated people—Silicon Valley types, you might say. And yet, I fear religion is hindering our economic advances in this kind of society by trying to destroy our public school system. For example, religion is "wedging" itself into our public schools through creationism and historical bias. It seeks to corrupt science education by foisting on our school systems the

notion that evolution is just another theory and creationism should rank up there with it. Moreover, religion is tainting our teaching of history by insisting that we were founded as a Christian nation when, truth be told, we were not.

Most recently, religion has escalated its influence on U.S. education by the large-scale fostering of home schooling, religious charter schools, and its own network of religious school systems—all, I believe, in a concerted effort to bypass and destroy our historically fought-for public school system.

U.S. Needs Science

We must realize that this kind of influence on our national educational system will have a profound influence on our economy. In the most recent United Nations tests of skill levels of students worldwide, the U.S. ranks 29th in science and math. China and India are educating and developing five to 10 times more engineers than the U.S. Yet most economists agree: Education is the very real foundation for our economic growth in the near and distant future. We cannot have an economic future if we don't have decent, truth-based education. And unless we have genuine, prevailing separation of the church from the public school system, we cannot hope to compete economically worldwide.

2. ENVIRONMENT. The church has carried on a campaign discrediting, for example, global warming as a man-made phenomenon, implying that if it is happening, it is god's will. It has also insinuated that concern about global warming is really a conspiracy of Liberals. Unless we protect our resources, our competitiveness in the financial arena will be hindered. But then, I suppose religionists will also blame our subsequent financial distress on god's will.

3. TAX-FREE STATUS OF RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS. Our nation is losing more than a trillion dollars annually in revenue because of the tax exemptions of churches. On top of that, the steering of our tax money into Faith-Based Initiatives (which fund some welfare services administered by churches to needy people) represents an egregious violation of the separation of the church and state as envisioned by our founders. What makes any

government official think that churches can better serve our needy than, say, a trained social worker? We need cost/benefit analyses to see if we are getting our money's worth by having churches do this work. Frankly, I would call Faith-Based Initiatives political payola: The churches endorse certain candidates and, in return, the churches count on getting their Faith-Based Initiative financing passed by the candidate.

Churches Sabotage Recovery

The strange part of all this is that some churches actually back the separation of church and state—for their own reasons. To them separation means, “We don't have to tell you what we're doing,” and “Don't question me, don't look at my books.” Churches want it both ways. They don't want to be interfered with by government agencies but they do want to implant their faith into public policy.

The bottom line is that the strategies of the church, which are designed to perpetuate a mostly defunct medieval idea, are not good for the U.S. economy. These strategies are sabotaging our financial recovery by decimating the number of scientists and hi-tech workers America produces; by restricting what we do about natural phenomena in our world on the grounds that everything is god's decision; by shortchanging our nation of revenue by not paying taxes; and by absorbing tax gifts that should rightfully go to the needy via nonsectarian agencies.

Changing Perceptions

Think of it this way: What if we had a monarch who was single-handedly holding back our country's economic progress through his or her erroneous policies? Would we allow that? Am I suggesting that religious institutions are despotic and holding back economic progress in the U.S.? Strong words but a concept worth considering.

We can't dethrone religion in our time but we can try to change our citizens' perception of it through honesty and forthright exposure of the far-flung effects of this particular despot. In fact, that is indeed what we are trying to do in NYCA.. □

**ATHEISM IS A CONCLUSION
NOT A BELIEF**

Editor's Q & A

Are We Serious or Are We Social?



By Jane Everhart

Dear Editor,

I have been searching my psyche to find out whether I joined New York City Atheists for social reasons or because I want to work seriously for the advancement of atheism as a viable alternative to religion. Is it politically incorrect to join for social reasons? Must I be a gung-ho atheist militant or is it okay to be in NYCA to meet and socialize with other atheists?

--Terri from Tribeca

Dear Terri,

It doesn't matter why you joined NYC Atheists. You will find, as you keep going to our meetings and lectures, that you begin to see, more and more, how important it is for atheism to become a respectable and accepted alternative to religion. Chances are, you'll soon find yourself defending atheism vociferously to your friends and then one day you may even find yourself picketing the Pope and relishing every minute of it. What we are not, at NYCA, is matchmakers. This is a change of viewpoint for me. When I first joined NYCA some five years ago, I felt we should emulate the churches, who hold regular Singles events in different age groups, with the avowed purpose of matching up couples within that church's particular denomination. My philosophy was: So why not match up Atheists? Perhaps they will marry and have families and then we will have even more Atheists. It seems to work for Catholics and Orthodox Jews.

Best Way to Meet

But what I discovered over the years is that social events by themselves don't really stimulate the brain. There is one group that broke off from us because they felt socializing was the most important thing. They met frequently in bars to drink and chat. That seemed all right for a while, but the group seems to have lost momentum. What's missing, I think, is a cause, a *raison d'être*, an overriding passion to work and fight for something bigger than yourself.

The odd thing is, that's really how you meet the best people. I don't think you can possibly get to know someone by chatting them up in a darkened bar. You get to know a person in the process of working, planning, discussing, sharing. For example, I know someone who met his Significant Other at the Pope picket last year. Yes, amid the placards, street shouts, press interviews and hordes of passersby, two people's eyes met and chimes rang. Go figure.

I also know some people who were active in the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, signing up voters in the Deep South. There were no arranged social events down there, they tell me; it was hard, dangerous work. And yet, romance blossomed, there were lasting relationships and marriages among the civil rights workers. They were people dedicated to a cause they loved and apparently in some cases, it carried over into love for a colleague within that cause.

Energizing a Meetup

About a year ago, we at NYCA discovered that our once-a-month NYCA Meetups were fading. At those events, our Meetup leader would introduce himself, say a few required words, and then invite everyone to "mingle" in a dimly lit back-of-the-bar room, among strangers whom we had to judge by the way they looked rather than the content of their character. To anyone who was a thinker and a doer, it was an awkward and strained "social event." One evening I had a brainstorm: Why not bring meaningful discussions to these Meetups?

Luckily, I found a talented young Meetup leader, Nathaniel (Natty) Adams, who is laden with wit and charm. I suggested some controversial topics for heated discussions and to my surprise, the Meetups revived and grew and have become a hot item in the city's Atheist movement. February's meeting had people lined up at the door chomping at the bit to get in. What was different from the earlier meetups? Just this: We added significance, excitement and a larger meaning to the Meetup.

Cont. next page ...

There is so much to do in NYCA, Terri. There are two lectures a month with speakers that you will hear no where else, to get you thinking. There's our Lifestyle Support group, run by the gentle Dr. Nando Pelusi to help you iron out social woes. We run four Cable TV shows a week—you can take part in one of them if you're loquacious or a diva type (and if you are, we love you) or you can work behind the scenes as a producer. We put out a monthly newsletter, run a book club. We do street tabling when the weather is good (where you can meet everyone in New York).

We donate blood to the Blood Bank each year on the so-called "National Day of Prayer," ("Get off your knees," we say) We lobby in Albany and Washington. We party

on the Solstice, on Halloween and New Year's Eve, on Darwin Day and Fourth of July. We advocate for Atheists in job disputes about religion; and we're planning to sue to get religious chaplains out of city agencies. And this month, we're trying something entirely new—a philosophy study group twice a month. Nietzsche, anyone?

So Terri, if your goal is to socialize with other atheists, you've got ample opportunity to do just that in NYCA while you're also doing something for yourself, for atheism and for humanity. One does not negate the other.

Call it multi-tasking. ☐

In His Own Words...

The New President of American Atheists Talks with NYCA

In September, 2008, Dr. Ed Buckner, an educator from Atlanta, was chosen by the Board of Directors of American Atheists (AA) to replace Ellen Johnson, the president of AA. Johnson had held the job for 13 years after the disappearance and death of the founder of AA, Madalyn Murray O'Hair, but Johnson's long-term differences with her Board led to her abrupt dismissal last year.



Johnson's successor, Dr. Buckner, holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Rice University in Houston, TX, and a Master's and Ph.D. in education from Georgia State University in Atlanta. He has worked in academia, teaching at both Georgia State University and Atlanta Technical College. After he left teaching, he was executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism, in Amherst, NY, for nearly three years. Dr. Buckner was recently interviewed by our editor, Jane Everhart. Below are excerpts from the interview.

JANE EVERHART: As you know, Dr. Buckner, Madalyn Murray O'Hair experienced a lot of discrimination as an atheist. She was beaten by the police, bricks were thrown through her windows, her pets were killed, she got tons of hate mail, the air was let out of her car tires.

Are you up for that kind of treatment by religious fanatics during your tenure as president of AA?

DR. BUCKNER: I'm acutely aware that atheists in this country are still at risk—more in some parts of the country than in others, more in some jobs than in others. But I think our lot has improved over the past decade or two both because our numbers have gone up and because we're being seen as the "New Atheists" as characterized by authors Richard Dawkins and Chris Hitchens. I think we've made great strides and have much better social, political and legal status than we did when Madalyn Murray first sued to get prayer out of public schools. If she were alive today, she'd be delighted that a president of the U.S. has acknowledged nonbelievers in his inauguration speech. As you may know, President Obama was raised by a Secular Humanist mother and his father, who started out as a Muslim, eventually became an atheist. These are all good things.

On the other hand, President Obama is now a professed Christian, and he's still doing some stupid things with Faith-Based Initiatives, he's still giving too many privileges to religion and having public ceremonies dominated by idiots like Rick Warren. So it's a mixed lot but it is better than it used to be.

EVERHART: Ellen Johnson is a hard act to follow. She was much admired, especially by women, who saw her as representing atheists as smart, beautiful and confident.

BUCKNER: I was not part of the management of AA when Ellen Johnson was president. I met her and have

respect for her. I think an organization's internal control and frustrations are probably impossible to understand from the outside and I was on the outside at the time of her departure.

EVERHART: What do you hope to do for American Atheists?

BUCKNER: Our finances have not been in good order, and I'm not saying there's anything illegal about what's happened but we have not been well managed. And we have not gotten enough clarity about division of responsibilities and who is responsible for what. AA is five or six corporations right now and we're trying to do something about that. We're going to consolidate into just one, possibly two. The Library may remain a separate corporation. There's no point in having that many corporations; it's too complicated and adds to our disarray, so were working to consolidate in the next year or so.

I don't think American Atheists needs revolutionary changes; I think we need evolutionary changes. But I think it's more than just replacing the person at the top. I'm not the kind of person who wants to come in and shake everything up, reorganize everything and start from scratch. I believe in making slow, steady, strong progress. And for me, progress means more members, stronger finances, better financial clarity and open communication.

EVERHART: What is your relationship with the Board of Directors of AA?

BUCKNER: American Atheists is a corporation—five or six of them, as I mentioned—and all employees are 'at will,' which means the president of AA can be dismissed for any reason or no reason at all. It's the Board that has the ultimate control. That doesn't mean they have day to day control. It makes no sense for a Board or a committee to try to run an organization. But they do set the policies and they do make the ultimate decisions.

EVERHART: Do you have a dream for atheism that you would like to fulfill under the aegis of American Atheists?

BUCKNER: I'd like to keep religion from having such a privileged position in our society. Also, I'd like to see much greater respect and understanding of atheism in this country and much less of this unthinking, unreflective notion that religion and morality are related to each other. Even more important is getting people to understand that religion is destructive—that it is not a positive force—and that the net effect of it is that it makes us irrational, destroys our sense of responsibility and keeps us from making progress as human beings and developing a better, stronger society. □

Dr. Ed Buckner will be the guest speaker at our March 26 NYC Atheists meeting. Please come equipped with questions for him. NYC Atheists Inc. is an affiliate of American Atheists.

Secular Coalition For America's
2009 Resolutions for Secular Citizens:

1. Speak out and speak up about your beliefs and values.
2. Join a local group -- it always starts at the grassroots.
3. Become a walking, talking billboard for your beliefs.
4. Help build the secular constituency in your own political party.
5. Do your homework and keep up with issues affecting you.
6. Become a super e-activist.
7. Become a citizen lobbyist.
8. Write letters to the editor and call radio shows.
9. Give your time or money to groups that represent your values.

**ATHEISM:
A NON-PROPHET ORGANIZATION**

**ATHEISTS ARE NOT SIMPLY
"NON BELIEVERS," WE ARE REALISTS**

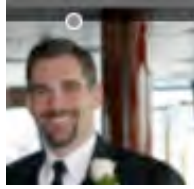
**MAN CREATED GOD
GOD DID NOT CREATE MAN**

**FAITH:
STOPS YOU FROM ASKING QUESTIONS**

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

NYC ATHEISTS BLOG: www.nyc-atheists.org/blog/

Square Peg, Round Whole: Or, Why the Church's Bigotry Will Be Its Downfall



By Ron Widelec

A recent article in the Los Angeles Times reported on a discrimination lawsuit in San Francisco brought by a pair of students who were expelled from a Lutheran private school for having a "bond of intimacy characteristic of a lesbian relationship." The court found that the Lutheran school was not in violation of the law. Almost immediately, people began to post their sharp disagreement with this decision on blogs nationwide.

Unfortunately, the court was almost certainly correct in its decision. Religious organizations do indeed have the right to discriminate in order to follow their religious ideals. You cannot force a Lutheran school to admit students who participate in behavior that the Lutheran Church considers an abomination any more than you can force the Catholic Church to allow female priests even though not doing so is seen by many as discrimination against women.

Immoral and Unethical

The Lutheran school's action, while it may not be illegal, is clearly immoral and unethical. It should be a glaring example to Americans of everything that is wrong with religious thinking and the distress that this can lead to in our society. It should also be a wake-up call to parents who want to raise their children to be compassionate, tolerant and ethical. The school's action in expelling the allegedly lesbian girls, and the court's backing of that action, should convince parents not to send their children to schools that base their teachings on ideas developed when people still thought the Earth was the center of the solar system and that there are only four elements (none of which are real elements). It was also a time when burnings at the stake were a common punishment and a fine night out for spectators from the local village.

The court's decision in this case clearly demonstrates the importance of not giving public funds to Faith-Based Initiatives. The intertwining of the two institutions, church and state, will undoubtedly lead to the state

getting involved in illegal and unethical bigotry--or it will force churches to adopt policies contrary to their beliefs. In other words, once our government provides money to churches (and the schools connected with them) under Faith Based Initiatives (which funds programs for the needy under church-based administration), the state becomes complicit in the churches' bigotry.

Churches' Bigotry Distasteful

Under our current laws, churches are allowed to continue discriminatory practices because religions have first amendment protection under freedom of religion. But the legal protection of institutions that espouse values and standards that are not in synch with today's ideas of morality will not, in my opinion, accrue to the church's favor.

In the end, it will very likely make churches seem less relevant to consumers in the free market of ideas. As the nation becomes more progressive, as it surely will under the new political ambience in Washington, and as the nation extends equal rights to more minorities of all kinds--including lesbians--the discriminatory behavior of churches will undoubtedly prove to be distasteful to the rest of the populace.

You simply cannot apply 21st Century morality to a 2000-year-old belief system. It is like trying to fit a square peg into a round whole. ☐

Ron Widelec is an educator who lives on Long Island. He has written articles for NYCA's newsletter since its very inception.

**Obama's Inauguration Speech:
"We are a nation of Christians and Muslims
and Jews and Hindus
and Nonbelievers..."**

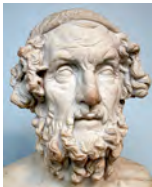
PROUD TO BE AN ATHEIST

UPCOMING MARCH EVENTS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

March 4 & 18, 2009 (Wed.) 7:00 PM NYCA Philosophy Discussion Group

Subject: The Great Ideas of Philosophy:



Homer



Nietzsche

We will listen to a half-hour lecture philosophy courses produced by the Teaching Company (www.Teach12.com), then discuss the material.

Location: Call Jane Everhart 212-879-2697

**Limited attendance: 15 – Call early
MUST BE NYCA MEMBER TO ATTEND.
CAN JOIN AT MEETING**

March 8, 2009 12:00 PM NYC Atheists Brunch / Speaker / Book Club

Location: Press Box Restaurant & Pub
932 Second Ave. (bet. 49th & 50th Streets)

Cost: Brunch, \$20 (includes Buffet entrees, one drink, coffee, tax, tip.)

SPEAKER: Professor Alan Gabbey
Philosophy; Barnard College

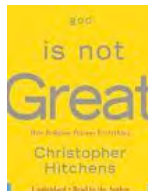
Famous Einstein Quote:

“I believe in Spinoza's god who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a god who concerns himself with fates and actions of human beings”

Subject: Who is Baruch Spinoza?



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 14: *There is no “Eastern” Solution.*

Need not have read the assignment to participate.

March 10, 2009 (Tuesday) 7:00 PM NYCA Meetup

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

Group Leader: Natty Adams



Exciting discussions with fellow freethinkers! This popular Atheist Meetup is led by the charismatic young man-about-town, Nathaniel “Natty” Adams.

Cost: Free (cash food and bar)

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

March 26, 2008 (Thursday) 6:30 PM NYCA MONTHLY MEETING

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

Speaker: Ed Buckner



Dr. Buckner is the newly elected president of American Atheists. He was also executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism, in Amherst, NY, for nearly three years.

Subject: “The New American Atheist”

Dr. Buckner will discuss his plans and the future of the American Atheists organization.

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UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

MARCH 2009

Mar. 2*	Mon.	7:00 PM	NYCA Lifestyle Discussion Group
Mar. 4*	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Philosophy Discussion Group
Mar. 8**	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch/Book Club/Library
Mar. 10***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up and Discussion
Mar. 18*	Wed,	7:00 PM	NYCA Philosophy Discussion Group
Mar. 26****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

APRIL 2009

Apr. 6*	Mon.	7:00 PM	NYCA Lifestyle Discussion Group
Apr. 12**	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch/Book Club/Library
Apr. 21***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up and Discussion
Apr. 30****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

- * **Location: Call Jane Everhart 212-879-2687**
 ** **Press Box Restaurant & Pub – 932 Second Ave. (49/50th 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.)**

NYCA CABLE SHOWS

Wednesdays:	5:30 PM	Atheism in History	(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)

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

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RENEW / JOIN NYC ATHEISTS

Through our programs and activities, we have worked to bring awareness of our principles, our vision and, above all, of our existence as atheists. We have done it through our Website, our Meetups, our Cable Shows, our Library and Book Club, our Street Tabling and our Newsletter to enhance our visibility--all of which are funded by your membership.

With the continued growth of our membership, we gather strength in numbers and will more effectively counteract the threat of a looming theocracy.

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NYC ATHEISTS — 2009 MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION FORM

First Name: _____ Last Name _____

Street Address: _____ Apt No.: _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Email: _____ @ _____ Phone: (____) _____ - _____

NYC Atheists Inc. is a non-profit (501c) non-partisan, educational association with these purposes and goals:

1. To promote the total and absolute separation of church and state
2. To educate and inform the public about Atheism
3. To provide a forum for discussion about Atheism
4. To develop and engage in educational, cultural, charitable and social activities that are beneficial to the members of the NYC Atheists Inc., the Atheist community and the community at large.

YOUR 2009 MEMBERSHIP DUES ARE TAX DEDUCTIBLE

Basic __ \$ 25 Friend __ \$ 100 Sustainer __ \$ 250 Patron __ \$ 500 Benefactor __ \$ 1000

Signature: _____ Date: _____

CHECK PAYABLE TO: NYC ATHEISTS INC. SEND APPLICATION TO:

**NYC ATHEISTS INC. – MEMBERSHIP
COOPER STATION P.O. Box 93
NY, NY 10276-0093**