

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

APRIL 2009

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KENNETH BRONSTEIN

PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"

Is America Ready for The New Atheists?

Our Opportunity is Now: America is Ready for Change

Last November, Americans voted for change and a new direction for the country. In a voice that rang out across ballot boxes from California to Maine, American citizens let it be known that our political leadership was failing us in economics, foreign policy, ethics and even culture. One poll worker in Colorado told me during the last election that she had never before seen so many people registering to vote as in November 2008: "They came in wheelchairs, on crutches, they got out of their hospital beds and nursing homes to vote this time," she said. The country needed new leadership, new voices; our citizens wanted to be heard, to be paid attention to, to be a part of the decision making.

As atheists, we were among the citizens who had not been heard or even acknowledged. We were an invisible minority: forgotten, even discredited. Then, on Inauguration Day, something unexpected happened: Our new President with one word acknowledged us in his inaugural speech—a shocking new word that rang out across the nation and recognized, even embraced, a whole segment of the American population: "nonbelievers."

We Are Americans

The President, with that one word in a list describing the composition of the population in the U.S., gave us back our honor and credibility. It was one brave word that reverberated worldwide via satellites and sound waves and brought us, at last, a tiny bit of the respectability and acceptance that we deserve. With that word, the President established, at last, that we atheists, nonbelievers, secularists,

and freethinkers are a part of America and America's heritage.

We cannot let it stop there. We must catch the wave and ride it into full participation in our democracy as Atheists. Not only have new, sensible and progressive voices prevailed across the nation but right-wing religious conservatives are faltering. There is not much leadership left in the religious right or the ultraconservative political fringe. Their best representatives to date, Rush Limbaugh and Newt Gingrich, must each battle the unflattering images they represent of multiple marriages and drug dependence. This is our opportunity to jump into the void. The time is ripe for us to come out of our closets and become what I would designate the conscience of America.

Stand for Something Positive

The first thing we must do is, I think, to go beyond that word "nonbeliever," which in my mind represents only what we are not; it is tantamount to another group identifying themselves as Nonbaptists or Noncatholics. We must establish what we are *for* rather than what we are against. That doesn't mean that I am eschewing the word "Atheist," which has been in use too long for us to abandon. It means that in terms of semantics, we must make "Atheist" stand for something positive.

Semantics refers to the study, or science, of the meanings of words. We all know that words have significant, fluid and changeable meanings. For example, the word "Hitler" has become

synonymous with evil. The word Guantanamo is associated with the practice of torture, and the name Mother Theresa instantly summons an image of selfless devotion, whether it was true or not. When we think of the Quakers, we think of their devotion to peace; when we think of Jews or Asians, we are reminded of their dedication to learning. In the same way, I would like the word “Atheist” to symbolize the very best in our society.

We Are Everywhere

I would like the word “Atheist” to stand for an enlightened person—a Renaissance man or woman, so to speak. I would like Atheists to be known for our dedication to science, reality, education, quality. When one thinks of Atheist, I want the image to be of Nobel Prize winners or Einstein, Mark Twain or Victor Hugo. It’s a reasonable image: a perusal of our roster of members indicates that most atheists are educated, continue to educate themselves all their lives, are highly represented in the professions, are readers, writers and literary mavens, and highly ethical in their personal lives. We atheists are a miniscule percentage of the prison population in this country, and only among atheists would you find a discussion about Sophocles or Nietzsche touted as highly as a Rolling Stones concert. We are writers, scientists, professors, inventors, doctors and, yes, even police officers and firefighters. We are everywhere and we are smart, we are movers and shakers, we are achievers.

But we must do more. We must come forward and make the word “Atheist” as easy to roll off our tongues as “African-American” is to our nation’s black population or “Native American” is to what were previously known as Indians. We must be leaders; we can’t let the religious community hold us back. We must think positively about ourselves—“I am an ‘A!’”—and celebrate our dedication to reality. We must be people of integrity who don’t need prompting from a berobed know-it-all guy in the sky. All we need is the knowledge and education to become what I call the Four R’s: Realistic, Rational, Refined and Responsible.

What We Need to Do

We have a lot of work to do, my fellow Atheists: We have books to write, lectures to give. We must run for government offices and school boards. We must start think tanks. We must establish charter schools, start a secular television network, teach courses on atheism in colleges, become Supreme Court justices. There is so much to be done, I can’t wait for the rest of my life to unwind. Nor should you. The next century belongs to us!

Above all, we must identify ourselves as Atheists wherever we go and whatever we do. It is not a crime to be an atheist; it is no longer considered even far-out or antisocial to be an atheist: we can thank Obama for that. We shall become the builders of the new America, we will be its new leaders, its voice and most of all, we shall become its conscience. □

**ATHEISM IS A CONCLUSION
NOT A BELIEF**

**ATHEISTS ARE SIMPLY NOT “NON BELIEVERS”
WE ARE “REALISTS”**

PROUD TO BE AN ATHEIST

Editor's Q & A

Is Charity a Bad Thing?



By Jane Everhart

Dear Editor,

I have heard you say in public that you do not approve of charity. As someone who has grown up with the words Faith, Hope and Charity emblazoned on my psyche, both within and outside of the religious institutions I was forced to attend as a child, I find it hard to eradicate all three of those things, though I have certainly dispensed with Faith. What is so wrong with being charitable?

--Linda from Lynhurst

Dear Linda,

I remember well the NYCA Meetup in which I mentioned that I “don’t believe in charity.” One young African-American woman was visibly shocked, and I can understand why. I think I made the statement in the context of churches dispensing charity, but I also said that I disapprove of all charity in general. I spoke to the young woman afterwards outside the Stone Creek bar and tried to explain why I disapprove of charity, but I don’t think I succeeded in consoling her. I think she felt that giving to others is a good, unselfish thing and that my disapproval of this “noble” gesture was not a generous outlook.

Quite the contrary. What I meant was that all those who need help should be given it—without charity and without any strings attached. They should receive the help they need simply because they are human, because they are alive, because they are in need, because our society is responsible for all of us and for the very least of us. Moreover, no one should sit in judgment of how much aid is needed by any one or whether those who need our help deserve it; nor should any private person dole out what they think is “appropriate” or what they feel the person in need is worthy of.

At the Mercy of Giver

When charity is doled out by a church or by private individuals, you are beholden to some religion or to

some person. You are at the mercy of someone or some sect; you are in their debt, you are expected to be grateful. In that way, they have power over you. You are supposed to cringe in fear that they may not give you what you need next time, so you feel you must accept their beliefs or their superiority over you. You are obligated to them; you are supposed to get on your knees in thanks and gratitude and supplication. Thus, the person who gives charity has power over you. If you accept the food or clothing they give you, you have not only acceded to their power and their superiority, you have lost your human dignity.

But the giver of charity gains dignity and superiority and power. He or she feels good to have shared their largesse with someone who has contracted to be an inferior, or at least acceded to a role of grateful supplicant. Moreover, by acceding to be a needy dependent, the supplicant affirms the superiority of the giver. Charity denigrates the receiver but gives satisfaction and superiority to the giver.

I say no to all this. I say: if a person needs something—a job, food, shelter clothing—it should be provided by our society on the basis of need and given anonymously, by nonsectarian institutions, to all, from all. Everyone should know that help is available to them at no cost in dignity nor should it require the grateful supplicant role.

Charity Demands Piety

In his biography, *Angela's Ashes*, author Frank McCourt gives a good example of how, in dispensing charity, the catholic church in Limerick, Ireland, destroyed the dignity of his mother when she went to ask for a bed for a new baby. The family was poor and hungry; their father was out of work or drunk, their shambles of a home in Limerick’s shantytown constantly had a foot of stagnant water on its ground floor. First the church made Frank’s mother wait in line for hours along with other women seeking items of charity. When her turn came, she was forced to justify to the nuns and priest why she needed the bed, then to be lectured on the sinfulness of

the sex that had produced the baby. Not only was she chastised for having sex with her husband, but made to feel sinful for getting pregnant. Evidently only the pious and sexless deserved catholic charity in Limerick.

I suspect that most welfare recipients are well aware of this dichotomy—of givers’ satisfaction and the indebtedness of the receiver of charity to his or her benefactor. Most people would do anything to not be on welfare. I am reminded of the part in George Bernard Shaw’s play, *Pygmalion*, in which the colonel asks Liza’s father, a shabby ne’er do well and unemployed alcoholic, why he doesn’t apply for support from the charities.

“Well, sir,” he replies. “I ain’t the *deserving* poor.”

A Different Community Outlook

But I think I was unable to explain to the young woman in our Meetup group about the maliciousness of charity because things are slightly different in the African-American community. Over generations, African-American churches have become communities within a larger community, a family of sorts for their members, which may explain the large number of flourishing churches in most African-American enclaves today. (There is an apocryphal saying that there are three churches on every street in Harlem.) These African-American church communities help each other when necessary—not as superiors doling out charity but more as family members helping each other. There is a shared history of common oppression and an understanding of the unfairness of the larger society. Those who work and have, give to their brethren.

Interestingly, there are white fundamentalist churches that have tried to adapt this same concept but I have heard that it does not quite work the same. What’s apparently lacking is the common experience of oppression. There may also be the inhibiting factor of the Protestant ethic of being responsible mainly, or only, for oneself—an attitude that was not, and could not be possible, or commendable, in the survival of slave families in U.S. history.

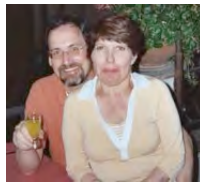
Subtle Coercion

But when I speak of charities, I do not mean families helping each other get ahead in a competitive society. I mean charity doled out by religious institutions or individuals as a kind of *noblesse oblige*. I hold that this is subtle but effective coercion on the part of churches and others who would extract a payback from the needy in the form of submissive or obsequious behavior.

When religion promulgates the Faith, Hope and Charity slogan, I believe it is really using Charity to inspire false Hope and using both to inculcate Faith in their victims. That is, I think the words are in the wrong order in that biblical slogan of Faith, Hope and Charity: What they really mean is that giving Hope and Charity to the needy will result in the recipients’ ultimately succumbing to religious Faith in the same way that rats in laboratory experiments learn by rote to press a lever to get pellets of food.

I would suggest a different slogan for us Atheists: ”Science, Logic and Fulfilling the Basic Needs of All Humans.” True, it doesn’t have quite the same ring to it as the religious slogan. But it’s a lot more practical and honest. □

NYCA Members Engaged



Maria Astifidis and Dr. Harry Graber, both members of New York City Atheists Inc., have announced their engagement. Ms. Astifidis is the director of the Health Sciences Library at Beth Israel Medical Center. Born and raised in Queens, she received her undergraduate degree from Long Island University and her master’s degree in Library Science from Queen’s College.

Dr. Graber is a research assistant professor in the College of Medicine at Downstate Medical Center at the SUNY campus in Brooklyn. He received his doctorate in a combined Physiology and Biophysics program at SUNY Downstate Medical Center. Dr. Graber, who grew up Farmingdale, Long Island, did his undergraduate work at Washington University in St. Louis, MO.

The couple met at an NYCA Brunch meeting when it was being held at the Garden Restaurant on the Upper East Side. They became engaged on Valentine’s Day this year.

In His Own Words...

John Rafferty, Host of New Cable TV Show, Talks with NYCA



John Rafferty, president of New York's Secular Humanists, was recently selected by NYCA to produce and host a new Cable TV show because of his knowledge, his articulateness, his ability to communicate and his personal style. His show runs every Wednesday at 5:30 p.m. on MNN Channel 57, or on RNN, Channel 110. It can also be seen anywhere in the world (even in Hong Kong, Rafferty points out) via simultaneous live streaming on your computer at www.MNN.org. Rafferty was recently interviewed by our editor, Jane Everhart. Below are excerpts from the interview.

Jane Everhart: What is your new TV show about?

John Rafferty: The concept of my half-hour show is to celebrate famous atheists now and in the past—anyone who has had the nerve to stand up in public and say, “I’m an atheist.” I base it on the month of their birth. This month, I’ve got Thomas Jefferson, Anatole France, Marlon Brando, Emile Zola, Mary Wollstonecraft, Christopher Hitchens, Charlie Chaplin, Clarence Darrow, Jack Nicholson—and Tom Lehrer singing his famous song, *The Vatican Rag*, to name a few. I tell a little about each person, quote them, and give my own opinions.

Everhart: What are you trying to get across to viewers?

Rafferty: Something akin to the London bus sign: “You don’t believe in god? You are not alone.” I want to tell viewers that there are a lot of people, many of whom you know, who don’t believe in god, or didn’t when they were alive, and you should know that you’re not alone.

Everhart: And they were successful people who led good lives. How long have you been an atheist?

Rafferty: Since I was a teenager. I left the catholic church, like so many others, because I thought it was a lot of c**p. When I was in public elementary school, you were excused from school every Wednesday at 2 o’clock instead of 3 o’clock; the nuns met everybody right outside the door of the public school and marched

us off three blocks to the local catholic school where we sat for two hours to get tutored in catholic catechism. That was legal back then. It wasn’t really legal because the Supreme Court ruled years later that it is an enhancement of religion in public schools to excuse a bunch of kids from schools so they can go to religious instruction. But in those days, everybody was frightened of Francis Cardinal Spellman so nobody would stand up and say this is unconstitutional. My parents they were told you’ve got to send your kids to religious instruction or they’ll all fry in hell.

Everhart: How did you get disenchanted with Catholicism?

Rafferty: I had a bad experience in a catholic summer camp. Some boys played a prank and I got accused of doing it. I denied it, but the nuns didn’t believe me. The next day I got yanked out of line and told that because I lied, I needed to go to confession. I thought OK, this is it, now I can tell the truth. I’m an 11-year-old boy; I think nobody lies in confession. I told the priest I didn’t do it. He said, confess! I said, but I didn’t do it. After being yelled at for a couple minutes, I gave him what he wanted. And I went up to the altar and said my act of contrition...

Everhart: You made a false confession!

Rafferty: The priest forced me to make a false confession. And the entire camp was waiting for me to come out of the confessional, When finally we were dismissed, I went straight over to the pay phone, called my parents, burst out crying and said, get me out of here. I will never forget that my father came up to the wilds of Westchester County, went to see the priest and the Mother Superior, who recounted my sins to him. Then he came to my dormitory, where I was waiting for him and said to me, “Did you do it?” I said No. He said, “Are you telling me the truth?” I said yes. He said, “Pack, let’s go.”

Fast forward about 40 years. My Dad and I are in a bar. I said, “You believed me and you took me home.” I said I was grateful for that. “Then you owe me the next beer,” my Dad said. I walked out of that camp a non-

Catholic. After that, religion didn't matter in my life. It just didn't mean anything.

Everhart: So why did you become president of the Secular Humanists?

Rafferty: Religion played no part in my life until the early 90s when the religious right came to power in America by controlling one party over the other and they started dictating laws. I said, what the hell is going on? Then, when people like Jerry Falwell and Newt Gingrich said that the problem with America is Secular Humanism—they actually used those two words—I felt I ought to find out what that was. I got interested and got involved. I am an atheist Secular Humanist. You can be an agnostic Secular Humanist, even a believing Secular Humanist.

Everhart: What do you hope to accomplish with your new show?

Rafferty: Help spread the word. Talking about celebrity atheists takes it out of the realm of dry discussion. I'm presenting real people, some of whom, after intense scrutiny and soul searching, others after switching from one religion to another and then realizing that all religion is a lot of c**p, stood up and became atheists. William James called his famous book, *Varieties of Religious Experience*—well, there are just as many varieties of atheist experience and I will be talking about them on my show.

Everhart: What's coming up on future shows?

Rafferty: Brando refused to swear on a bible at his son's murder trial, Ulysses S. Grant made many speeches, including some in Congress, about protecting the first amendment and keeping the separation of church and state. **Tune in Wednesday at 5:30 PM on Channel 57 for other interesting stories.** I think you'll enjoy it. ☐

Letter to the Editor

Appreciation

Dear Ken,

Just opened your [2009] holiday greetings. It was a really warm and prescient outreach. Thanks. I read the newsletter faithfully and want to express my appreciation for your hard work, the clarity of thought in your articles and your leadership.

When I addressed the tri State (regional) meeting of American Atheists in the 1980's, I emphasized that atheism is a hard sell against religion and belief. It still feels to me that this is the central problem--marketing. I think there is enough education around so that millions of Americans understand the fundamental questions

leading to rationality but the question is, how to package reasonableness so that it is prized above belief...

Perhaps [you have] the answer to the question of marketing: a non theistic, naturalistic understanding of the world and the idea that our place in it is EXCITING!

Thanks for your efforts.

Warm regards,

Ed Stephens MD
White Plains, N.Y.
Past President - NYC Atheists (1980s) - Life Member

NYC ATHEISTS "GIFT TO LIFE" – BLOOD DONATION EVENT MAY 7, 2009 (THURSDAY) 5:00 – 7:00 PM

NYCA to Counter 'National Day of Prayer' with Blood Donations Lifesaving Action, Not Passive Prayer.

"While religious people are on their knees, we atheists will be on our feet, giving a part of ourselves for the benefit of humanity. We Atheists know that prayer does not work--but medical science does."

LOCATION: NY Blood Bank - Citigroup Building - LOWER LEVEL

ENTRANCE: Southside of East 54th Street - 100 feet west of Third Ave.

ENTER: Straight ahead to down escalator

BOTTOM OF ESCALATOR - NY BLOOD CENTER STRAIGHT AHEAD

RESERVATIONS: NOT REQUIRED

UPCOMING APRIL EVENTS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

APRIL 19, 2009 12:00 PM
NYC Atheists Madalyn Murray O'Hair
Birthday Brunch

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

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

SUBJECT: The Life and Accomplishments of Madalyn Murray O'Hair



We will also have videos of Ms. O'Hair in action

APRIL 21, 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: Participants are expected to purchase a drink or food.

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

April 22, 2009 (Wed.) 7:00 PM
NYCA Philosophy Discussion Group

NYCA's Philosophy Club Goes Back to Square One: The Greeks

In The Beginning, There was Socrates!

Here's what our Philosophy Club mavens will probe at our next meeting:

- What is philosophy? What kinds of questions does philosophy ask? What kinds of answers (if any) does philosophy offer?
- Why study the earliest attempts to answer these questions? Don't we know more today or is

there a perennial quality to fundamental questions that still remains unanswered despite the passage of 2500 years?

Join us as we pursue these questions by going back to the beginnings of Western philosophy (600 B.C.E.) to find out how philosophy differs from all previous approaches to the great questions--approaches which, at that time, were primarily mythological or supernatural.

We will be engaging in the great philosophical conversation that began with the pre-Socratic Greeks and continues to this day as modern thinkers struggle with these same fundamental issues. (What is the nature of existence? What should we do about it? What is the best way to live with our fellow human beings?)

Nietzsche said about the pre-Socratic Greeks that "they discovered the typical philosopher's genius, and the inventions of posterity have added nothing essential."

CALL / EMAIL KEN BRONSTEIN
 (212-535-7425) / INFO@NYCATHEISTS.ORG
 TO REGISTER AND LOCATION

MEETING LIMITED TO 15 – CALL EARLY
 MUST BE NYCA MEMBER TO PARTICIPATE
 CAN JOIN AT MEETING

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

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

Speaker: Darrel W. Ray, Ed.D



Subject: *The god Virus: How Religion Infects Our Lives and Culture*

A ground-breaking study of religion and its practical effects. Why are people so clear about the faults and failures of other religions and so blind to those of their own? Learn how religion impacts and influences your life and what you can do about it.

UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

APRIL 2009

Apr. 10-12	Fri. – Sun.		American Atheists Convention – Atlanta, Ga.
Apr. 19**	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch/Book Club/Library
Apr. 21***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up and Discussion
Apr. 22*	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Philosophy Club
Apr. 30****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

MAY 2009

May 4*	Mon.	7:00 PM	NYCA Lifestyle Discussion Group
May 7	Thur.	5 – 7:00 PM	NYCA “Gift of Life” Blood Donation
Mar 4*	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Philosophy Discussion Group
May 10**	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch/Book Club/Library
May 19***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up and Discussion
May 28****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

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- * **Location: Call 212-535-7425**
 ** **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.)**
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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)

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