

New York City Atheists Inc.

Serving the Tri-State area

An affiliate of American Atheists & Center For Atheism

WEB: NYC-ATHEISTS.ORG

Box 20100, NY, NY 10021-0061

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KENNETH BRONSTEIN

The year 2009 was a tough, exhilarating, productive and ground-breaking year for New York City Atheists. It was a year in which we filed our first pro se (without a lawyer) law suit, were formally welcomed by the Mayor of New York, ran a highly publicized bus-poster ad program, conducted two successful outdoor press conferences, started a Spanish-language division of NYCA, a Philosophy Club and a Living Without Religion workshop.

At the same time, we continued our regular programs, including 24 lectures a year (two a month), 12 Discussion Meetups, 12 Brunches with a speaker, two Solstice parties, a Halloween party, an Election Night party, a New Year's Eve party and street tabling every Saturday, weather permitting. Not tired yet? Wait, there's more.



FRED FISCHER

Sadly, we lost two good friends of NYC Atheists in 2009. **Fred Fischer**, a retired police officer, had helped us initiate a lawsuit that would seek to remove the religious chaplains from agencies in the city government such as the Police Department, Fire Department and Sanitation Dept. Fred passed away in May. We have vowed to continue his fight to get religion out of our civic agencies. **Sibanye**, dynamic leader of the Harlem CFI Atheist group, came to speak to us in July wearing traditional African attire, a tribute to his time spent in South Africa to help Mandela's nation pull itself

PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"

2009 –NYCA's Year of Living Intensely

together. Sibanye lost his courageous fight against a rare blood disease in September.



SIBANYE

January

NYCA held an **Election Night party** in November, 2008, and hot on the heels of that celebration, we held an Inauguration Day event, a Meetup presided over by our own **Nathaniel "Natty" Adams**, who helped us give a cheery farewell to George W. Bush. Our annual **Open House and Town Meeting** in January celebrated famous Atheists and honored a number of our own members, including **Jane Everhart**, our Director of Communications, who was named "NYC Atheist of the Year" for her unstinting work for NYCA.



NATTY ADAMS

February

Blasphemy expert Professor **Sarah Barringer Gordon** of the University of Pennsylvania told us at our monthly Brunch that though blasphemy is still on the books of many states, it is no longer being punished in

the U.S., an important bit of information for Atheists, who are wary of offending people just by stating our views. **Dr. Nando Pelusi**, the psychologist who previously ran our Lifestyle Support Group, spoke at our monthly meeting on how to cope with stress without resorting to “magical” things like prayer.

March

Dr. Ed Buckner, the new president of American Atheists (AA) replacing the deposed Ellen Johnson, came up from Atlanta to visit us and tell us all about his plans for the national organization. **Professor Alan Gabbay** of Barnard College continued our immersion in philosophy this month by telling all about Spinoza, who was kicked out of his synagogue for his non-belief.

Meanwhile, the charismatic discussion leader **Natty Adams** fired up our Meetup in March by asking, Should Atheists have Bar Mitzvahs, Communions, Baptisms or Circumcisions? The answer, for those who missed the fascinating arguments and the repartee, was: No, but maybe we should have something similar to those rituals. Meanwhile, “Nietzsche! Neeeet-chee!” was the cry in the new Philosophy group organized by our member from Atlanta, **Charles Lantz** and later continued by local member, **Roger Smith**.



ED BUCKNER

April

Madalyn Murray O’Hair’s birthday is in April, so at our Sunday Brunch, we viewed videos of this fascinating woman when she appeared on the Johnny Carson and Phil Donohue shows. Madalyn took the brunt of the invective thrown at Atheists back in the 1970s and was dubbed “The Most Hated Woman in America.” At our monthly meeting, we welcomed **Dr. Darrel W. Ray**, author of “The God Virus” and founder of the nationwide “Recovering From Religion” support groups, who was to inspire member **Linda Blaikie** to start our new group, **Living Without Religion**, in November.



LINDA BLAIKIE

May

In May, we published, in our newsletter, my article, “How the god Business Gets Away with Being Tax Free,” which created quite a stir and drew dozens of new members into our fold. We learned that if there is anything that will get a taxpayer mad, it’s hearing about how we involuntarily subsidize churches through our taxes.

A delegation of members who attended the **American Atheists convention** in Atlanta, got “de-baptized” by a hair blower. We countered the nation’s “Prayer Day” by our **“Gift of Life” Blood Donation program**.

At brunch, we heard **Attorney Geoff Henley**, author of “Beyond Reasonable Doubt: A Lawyer’s Case for Disbelief in God” tell us how, as a lawyer, he discovered that the Bible advocates things that are today illegal. And our coup d'état of the month was having Emeritus Professor of Classics at Cornell University, **Dr. John Coleman**, tell what it was like to shake up the ivy halls by being the first professor to teach a course in Atheism in a major U.S. university. And also in May, we had our first woman Meetup Discussion Leader, **Jo Bernard**—a milestone for NYCA and for women. Jo opened up the discussion leader ranks to another woman, **Alexandra Sidiropoulos**, a few months later.

June



BUS PRESS CONFERENCE

CBS. NBC. CNN. FOX. ABC. WPIX. MSNBC. NY Times, Daily News, NY Post, Village Voice, AM-NY, METRO, Independent News, Independent Film Producers.



NYCA BUS POSTER

The NYCA Bus Poster Ads swept the City in June with the 12-foot long, 3-foot high message **“You Don’t Have to Believe in God to Be a Moral or Ethical**

Person." Buses carrying our message rolled uptown, downtown and cross-town and our phones started ringing off the hook. On June 27th we held a press conference about our bus campaign that attracted reporters and cameramen from television and print publications, including **Channel 11, Fox News, CNN, WCBS and the Daily News**. The **New York Times** ran a photo of our bus and an article.

At Brunch in June, **Dr. William Jungers** of Stony Brook University told us about an new human species discovered on an Indonesian Island, extinct little people nicknamed **Hobbits**. And at our monthly meeting **Warren Allen Smith**, author of "**Who's Who in Hell**," an international directory for Atheists, told us about the Stonewall riots and what we can learn from the Gay Civil Rights movement in our fight to win parity for Atheists in our society.



WARREN SMITH

July/August

Amid elation over our successful bus-poster program, **Sibanye**, leader of the Harlem CFI group came to speak to our Brunch in July on "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly of Harlem's Religions." It's going to be a tough struggle to introduce Atheism into Harlem, he told us, because the churches are still the main source of community for America's African-American population.

At our July monthly meeting, the "**Final Exit**" physician **Dr. Larry Egbert**, came from Baltimore to tell us his courageous story: how the police raided the 81-year-old doctor's office and arrested him for allegedly assisting the suicide of a terminally ill patient. The Final Exit group, based in Baltimore, is dedicated to helping terminally ill patients achieve the peaceful farewell they yearn for.

In July, our Meetup discussion group was led by **Dr. John A. Wagner**, professor of neurology and neuroscience at Weill Cornell Medical College, who threw out the provocative question, "How do Atheists Know if We're Being Good?" How, indeed.



JOHN WAGNER

September

Dr. Fred Walter, professor of astronomy at Stony Brook University, stretched our minds at September's Brunch by bringing us up to date on what we know so far about our galaxy and where life might be viable up there in the heavens. **Dr. Lucy L. Brown**, professor of neurology & neuroscience at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, told us good news about a more down-to-earth topic: Love. Romantic love, the good doctor's research found, provides a better "high" than psychedelic drugs. Hmmm.

In our Meetup discussion group, a scintillating new duo rocked the room: lovely, smart **Alexandra Sidiropoulas** and talented young film director **Michael Dorian** took over the leadership of this discussion meetup and were so good as a team, we decided to extend their dual-leadership role indefinitely.



ALEXANDRA SIDIROPOULAS

MICHAEL DORIAN

October

Who doesn't love dinosaurs? The personable **Dr. Bret Bennington**, a professor of geology at Hofstra University captured us with his talk about dinosaurs lumbering through—New York? Yes indeed, we learned that prehistoric dinosaurs once roamed on what is now Park Avenue. Who knew?

Our October Brunch was a tribute to **Sibanye**, the beloved leader of the Harlem Atheist group, who died in September. We showed a videotape of his July talk to us. The video was a revelation to those who had not seen it and a vivid remembrance for those who had heard Sibanye speak eloquently about the need for African Americans to replace religious community with a community based on reality.



JUAN CASTRO

Our **Spanish-speaking Meetup** group debuted, organized by **Juan Castro**, a member from New Jersey who has written a book about Atheism in Spanish. And a second new NYCA group surfaced: The **Living**

Without Religion support workshop, led by psychotherapist **Linda Blaikie**. These smaller offshoots of our group are often started under the impetus of one person, who comes up with the idea and comes to us to get it started. Both of these new groups were instigated by their leader.

November

Dr. J. Anderson ("Andy") Thomson Jr. a psychiatrist at the University of Virginia, revealed how the church exploits human emotional needs to seduce people into its flock. And our all-time favorite debunker of the Bible, **Dr. Peter Brancazio**, author of "**The Bible From Cover to Cover**," drew a full house once more with his talk, intriguingly titled "Was Jesus Invented by a Committee?" (Yes. And was anything good ever invented by a committee?)

December

Sean Faircloth, new executive director of the Secular Coalition of America, came from Washington to tell us his future plans for this leading Atheist lobbying group. On December 19, we held our annual **Solstice Party** at the Les Sans Culottes French restaurant, where the piece de resistance is the edible sausage trees on every table. It was an Open Mike party and we had performances from a number of members who unveiled some hitherto hidden talents.

December was laden with exciting action for us. On December 17, we **filed suit against the Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn** for making Robocalls during the last election that tried to sway voters in favor of candidates who had done favors for the church (including blocking good legislation that would have made it easier for victims of priest sex abuse to file suit against the church). Afterwards, we held a press conference outside the State Supreme Court in Brooklyn. Despite the freezing cold, about a dozen reporters and cameramen attended our press conference to hear our

side of the story.

The year ended with a coup d'état for us on the City political scene: For the first time in the history of **Mayor Michael Bloomberg's** annual Interfaith Breakfast, we Atheists were invited to attend. Six NYCA members broke bread with the Mayor, and our breakthrough appearance at this event was written up in the **New York Times**.

* * *

Thus, 2009 was an intense but productive year in which we in NYCA succeeded in helping to improve the image of Atheism; used our court system to make sure that religion does not influence our elections; made Atheist inroads into the Spanish community and started a number of new, smaller, specialized groups.

We brought topnotch speakers and educators to our members, kept members up to date on Atheist issues through our newsletter and continued hitting the public with our message through Cable TV shows, street tabling and our bombardment of the media with our press releases.

In 2010, we're planning to add a weekly Cable TV show in Spanish to reach Latino Atheists; accelerate our suit to get chaplains out of the City agencies (where their salaries are paid by our tax money); start a Secular Voters bloc and produce a Voters Guide. But we're sure the year will bring some startling surprises too.

If you are with us, if you approve of the advances we've made, if you want to jump on board and do what you can to help the cause, why not fill out the enclosed membership form, send it in with your \$25 annual membership dues and become a proud, active, bona fide New York City Atheists member.

Happy New Year!
Your president, Ken Bronstein.

NYC ATHEISTS FORUM

NYC Atheists has established a "forum" section on our website www.nyc-atheists.org

LIVING W/O RELIGION GROUP
Meets the second Wednesday of the month

Linda Blaikie (LBLAIKIE@aol.com)

NYC ATHEISTS

TWITTER & FACEBOOK

NYC Atheists has established Twitter and Facebook accounts.

http://twitter.com/nyc_atheists

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/New-York-City-Atheists/187304681037>

ALEXANDRA.SIDIROPOULOS@GMAIL.COM

NYCA Launches City's First Spanish-Speaking Atheist Meetup
The group, led by NYCA member Juan Castro, (JRCASTRO608@yahoo.com)
meets on the last Tuesday of the month.

NYCA Sues Catholic Church for ‘Robocalls’ During Election



By Jane Everhart

In a ground-breaking legal action that will undoubtedly mark New York City Atheists as the foremost advocate of separation-of-church-and-state issues in the metro area, NYCA has filed a suit against the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn charging its Bishop, Nicholas DiMarzio, with sending “robocalls,” or pre-recorded messages, to every registered voter in the district during the last election, aimed at influencing voters in a tight City Council race.



Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio

On December 17, 2009, Ken Bronstein, president of NYCA and I, NYCA’s director of communications, went down into the marble-floored basement of State Supreme Court in Brooklyn at about 10 a.m. on that cold December day and, clutching our bulky coats against the winter’s first big chill outside, paid \$230 in cash (a good use of your dues money) to the disinterested clerk and got an Index number for our suit. That number will track our suit for the duration of the trial.



John Aretakis

We didn’t have an attorney (it is called suing pro se—without a lawyer) but we did have a volunteer, John Aretakis of New York City and Albany, who explained the process to us. Aretakis, a lawyer who had previously represented victims of sex abuse by priests, had recently been suspended from practicing law for a year because, he said, he had been short-tempered with a judge whom he accused of shielding the church. So our volunteer counselor was well motivated to advise us on how to sue a Catholic Diocese.

Priest Also Files Suit

We had something else that turned out to be reassuring: A second complainant, a Catholic priest, the Rev. Robert

Hoatson, simultaneously filed a suit against Bishop DiMarzio and the Brooklyn Diocese for the robocalls. Rev. Hoatson was right behind us in the filing line to get his Index Number. Hoatson, a bona fide Catholic priest on leave from his parish, had been introduced to us by Attorney Aretakis. Hoatson now runs a home in New Jersey for victims of sexual abuse. Wearing a baseball cap and no priestly collar, the Reverend, or Father Bob, as we called him, seemed more at home with us Atheists than with his church.



Father Bob Hoatson

Father Bob charged in his suit that in making the robocalls, Bishop DiMarzio was doing a favor for a Brooklyn Democratic boss who had helped protect the church from law suits by victims of sexual abuse.

Press Conference Outside

After filing our suits, it was on with the coats and to the outdoors, where we had scheduled a press conference for 11 a.m. in front of the courthouse. Despite the freezing cold, about a dozen reporters and cameramen showed up, mostly from the Brooklyn area, though we were later to find that the most comprehensive report of our case was written by New York City’s *Daily News*. The Catholic press, who brought their own sound truck and lots of equipment, were the first on the scene. We weren’t sure if they were scouting us for the Diocese or interested in the story.

At the press conference, Aretakis gave a little background to our dual suit-filing that morning. Then he introduced Ken Bronstein to the gathered reporters, who had formed a tight semi-circle around us. Bronstein gave a short, tart summary of NYCA’s charges, pointing out that the Catholic church receives tax-exempt status as a non-profit and thus must follow the terms and conditions of the U.S. Constitution and the Internal Revenue laws, which prohibit a 501C non-profit organization to advocate, promote, advertise or endorse any particular candidate.

NYCA is asking the court to compel the Brooklyn

Diocese to surrender its tax exempt status, pay property taxes and income taxes, lose its ability for contributors to claim a tax exemption and be required to pay taxes retroactively for an unspecified period of time.

A Carom-Shot of Influence

A reporter asked if we knew that Bishop DiMarzio had praised, in his robocalls, not the candidate who was running in the election from the district, but rather, Vito Lopez, the Democratic party boss. Father Bob explained to the reporters that the subtle, circuitous route that the Bishop took in the robocall message did indeed praise Lopez, but it's important to note that the Bushwick district of Brooklyn is where Lopez's handpicked candidate, Maritza Davila, was challenging the incumbent.

Thus, in a sort-of carom shot, every voter who heard the Bishop's recorded voice endorsing Lopez—and the message went only to registered voters in the Bushwick district, Father Bob emphasized, *not* to everybody in the district—was sure to recognize that the church backed Davila, Lopez's choice for Council member.

A church spokesman had already issued a denial that the robocalls were meant as an endorsement of candidate Davila. The Bishop's "intent was to thank Vito, who has

taken the greatest grief for helping us," the church spokesman said.

Aretakis said the Bishop had thanked Lopez "because Lopez had effectively killed the clergy abuse legislation here in New York, saving the Catholic church billions of dollars. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to see that there was a quid pro quo."

Father Bob was quick to note that the Bishop's robocalls were targeted at *registered* voters in the district. "If the Bishop's intent was true, then why not robocall *all* the Catholics in the diocese, not just the registered voters?" he asked. "And why not do it after the election? There's no doubt that these calls were done to affect an election."

We in NYCA have decided that this is the first pro se legal suit of many we will pursue. There are other causes for the Atheist community to litigate and not enough lawyers. But there are self-help Web sites, online assistance programs and court self-help centers. We believe that it is better to sue imperfectly than not to sue at all. The justice system in our country is there for us; it is incumbent upon us to use it to the hilt to let those who would defy our Constitution's imperatives know that we are strong enough, and willful enough, to bring action to enforce our nation's Constitutional principles. □

For the First Time in Its History,

Mayor Invites Atheists to Interfaith Breakfast

On December 31, 2009, for the first time in the history of the event, six members of New York City Atheists joined 400 of the City's most important religious leaders at Mayor Michael Bloomberg's annual Interfaith Breakfast.

It was a historic moment for Atheists because it marked our acceptance as a legitimate part of the City's community. It was also precedent-setting for the Mayor, who publicly and officially recognized Atheists as a rightful part of New York's population.

In his opening statements at the breakfast, which took place in the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building of the New York Public Library at 9 a.m. on the last day of 2009, the Mayor recognized the Atheists in attendance, saying "I also want to welcome for the first time those who don't profess a faith but who do love our city." He went on to say that New Yorkers should have tolerance for all sorts of viewpoints because the City is a melting pot of ethnicities, religious beliefs and viewpoints.

New York City Atheists were invited to the breakfast by the Mayor's Commissioner of Community Affairs, Nazli Parvizi, who told *The New York Times*, for an article about the event that appeared on January 7, that she herself is an Atheist and wanted to reach out to those who represented her beliefs. □



NYCA members at the Mayor's Interfaith Breakfast (L. to R.) Maria Astifidis, Jane Everhart, Bill Chapman, Dennis Horvitz, Harry Gruber and Juan Castro.

UPCOMING JANUARY EVENTS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

JAN. 10, 2010 (SUNDAY) 12:00 PM
NYC Atheists Brunch / Speaker

Speaker: Robert Costa
 Master's degree from Oxford University in the Classics and Ancient History.



SUBJECT: The Influence of Religious Ideas on Sex And Displays of the Human Body. *Or, How Our Attitudes Toward Sexuality Have Evolved Throughout History.*

LOCATION: Press Box Restaurant / 932 Second Avenue (49/50th) / 2nd Floor

COST: Brunch is \$20, which includes a selection of Buffet entrees and salad, one soft drink, coffee, tax, tip. Going back for seconds on the delicious Eggs Benedict is expected.

JAN. 13, 2010 (WEDNESDAY) 7:00 PM
NYCA Living Without Religion Group

SUBJECT: The Fountain of Atheist Anger and Where to Direct the Flow

Being dismissed, excluded, pitied and blamed for not joining in the "God Delusion" causes emotional and social challenges for all Atheists. Sharing our experiences and feelings with each other is one way to become stronger.

GROUP LEADER: Linda Blaikie, L.C.S.W.



LOCATION: MOONSTRUCK DINER – 449 THIRD AVE. /31ST) -2ND FLOOR

COST: Free to members (Must be member - can join at meeting) but participants are expected to purchase a drink or food to compensate Moonstruck for use of their room.

JAN. 19, 2010 (TUESDAY) 7:00 PM
NYC Atheists Meetup

Group Leaders: Alexandra Sidiropoulos
 Michael Dorian



Subject: To be announced

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

Cost: Free, but participants are expected to purchase a drink or food to compensate Stone Creek for use of their room.

JAN. 26, 2010 (TUESDAY) 7:00 PM
NYCA "SPANISH SPEAKING" GROUP

Subject: How do we get someone to come out as an Atheist?

Group Leader: Juan Castro



Location: Moonstruck Diner
 449 Third Ave. (31st) - 2nd floor

Cost: Free - but participants are expected to purchase a drink or food to compensate Moonstruck for use of their room.

JAN. 28, 2010 (THURSDAY) 6:30 PM
NYCA ANNUAL MEETING

SUBJECT: 2009 Review / 2010 Plans

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

COST: We ask for a donation of \$5 to help cover the cost of room rental.

UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

JANUARY 2010

Jan.	10*	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
Jan.	13 **	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living Without Religion Group
Jan.	19***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up
Jan.	26**	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA "Spanish Speaking" Meetup
Jan.	28****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Annual Meeting

FEBRUARY 2010

Feb.	1*****	Mon.	7:00 PM	NYCA Philosophy Club
Feb.	10**	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living Without Religion Group
Feb.	14*	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
Feb.	16***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up
Feb.	23**	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA "Spanish Speaking" Meetup
Feb.	25****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

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- * Press Box Restaurant & Pub – 932 Second Ave. (49/50th St.) – 2nd Floor
 ** Moonstruck Diner – 449 Third Ave. (31st) – 2nd Floor
 *** Stone Creek Bar and Lounge – 140 East 27th St. (3rd/Lex)
 **** SLC Conference Center–352 Seventh Ave./16th Floor-(29/30th St.)
 ***** Contact Roger Smith (917-363-7470) for details
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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)

NYCA
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