

# New York City Atheists Inc.

Serving the Tri-State area

An affiliate of American Atheists & Center For Atheism

WEB: NYC-ATHEISTS.ORG

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KENNETH BRONSTEIN

PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"

## What Religionists Don't 'Get'-- Atheists Just Want Their Civil Rights

It has become the hottest, most controversial debate in the Atheist community lately: Shouldn't we be nicer to religionists in order to win them over to our cause? Shouldn't we be striving to show the Fundamentalists and Evangelicals how ethical, how moral, how smart we are, so they will accept us?

I've heard an additional argument over and over from my fellow Atheists: There are more of "them" than there are of us, they note. Therefore, wouldn't it be smarter of us to work with "them" to accomplish our goals?

In fact, the Atheists who put forth this position now have a name: "accommodationists." It's a mouthful, and I don't think the word is a happy addition to the English language; it's cumbersome and, for me, has undertones of capitulation, placating, retreat, surrender, submission, giving in, eating humble pie. "Accommodationists" maintain that the Atheist community should focus on trying to bring the religionists into our camp.

I say, that is wishful thinking. I think I can say unequivocally: **Accommodation does not work.** The Fundies and the Evangelicals will never come into our camp, never accommodate us, never welcome us; they think we are misled, stubborn, malevolent, misguided, intractable. To think that religious citizens would ever voluntarily, of their own free will, grant us any civil rights concessions that might neutralize us in their eyes or the eyes of

society is sheer folly, the dreamwork of those who have not paid attention to history.

The reason that religious citizens will not grant us any concessions lies in the nature of our cause: The Atheist struggle is, in essence, a fight for our civil rights as nonbelievers in a country that is predominantly religious. In the history of our nation, those who have sought their rights have had to battle every inch of the way for the smallest consideration. For those who fought for their rights, it's been a long history of marches, demonstrations, water hoses, jailings, law suits and court battles. Do the "accommodationists" really believe that the Atheist struggle for rights is going to be any easier?

### Fight for Atheist Rights

Among the rights we are seeking as citizens is the right to come out publicly as a nonbeliever; the right to hold a job or a public office as a nonbeliever; the right to not be coerced into prayers or religious invocations in schools, jobs or the court system; the right to not have religious symbols pushed into our faces in public places, parks, school grounds; the right to engage in scientific research without religious prohibitions; the right to make decisions about our bodies or medical treatment; the right not to be judged as unethical or immoral, incompetent or dangerous, just because we do not worship any god. Any Atheist who thinks we will be granted those rights as soon as the religionists find out how nice we are, is sadly deluded and

naïve. We have the history of the civil rights battles of Blacks, women and gays as beacons of what we must expect.

Blacks, for instance, may have won their freedom with the Civil War, but not their rights. For some 100 years after the war, Blacks had to fight Jim Crow laws, segregation, being denied the right to vote and the KKK. It took a Supreme Court decision in 1954 to declare the “Separate but Equal” segregated school laws illegal. Who can forget the photo of a little Black girl being escorted into a white school by the U.S. militia? Who can forget the deaths of four little Black girls in a church bombed by white supremacists? Who can forget the murders of Cheney, Goodman and Schwerner, three students who went South to sign up Black voters? Not an inch, not one iota of human rights, was given to the Blacks voluntarily. There is blood on every one of their hard-won rights.

### **Other Civil Rights Struggles**

For women, the struggle for rights may have been less bloody but the opposition just as reluctant to give an inch. Still, who can forget the photos of women slaughtered by illegal abortionists? Who can look away from the photos of suffragists being force-fed after being jailed for marching for their right to vote? Who can forget the photos of women in white dresses chaining themselves to the White House fence?

For gays, whose fight for recognition and rights was exacerbated by the AIDS epidemic, it meant being beaten up by cops wielding Billy clubs, it meant fighting for health insurance in courts, it meant demonstrating in St. Patrick’s cathedral and confronting the Pope, it meant publicly mourning their dead. And it meant, too, a sometimes wrenching act: coming out as gay to the public, families and employers. What makes Atheists think that our struggle will be less bloody, less traumatic, less emotional or that we will not have to march or

demonstrate in the streets or chain ourselves to fences? That is sheer unadulterated naiveté. What if Blacks were told after the Civil War that if they were “accommodating” about segregation, they might not be lynched? Actually, some Blacks were indeed convinced that they needed to be accommodating because, it was said, the White south was not “ready” for racial equality. The result was 100 more years of Black suffering. It wasn’t until the Black activists of the 1960s raised the consciousness of the world by marching in the streets, defying water hoses and attack dogs, that American justice reluctantly bestowed some civil rights on our Black citizens.

### **Atheist Fights No Less Bloody?**

Yes, we are going to have to raise the consciousness of the world about the rights of Atheists. We are going to have to fight and sue and march and demonstrate. And as we undertake these challenges, we must keep in mind that our work and our struggle is about our civil rights as Atheists. At the same time, we must continue trying to counter the influence of religion in government, in politics, in our schools. This is our job, our role—to advance the impact of science and reason.

Which brings me back to the “accommodationists,” that 50-cent word that refers to Atheists who delude themselves that we can collaborate with religionists to achieve our goals. I believe we absolutely cannot work with religionists on anything relating to our nonbelief because religion’s goals are not our goals. Religion’s goals are to suppress any deviation from religious thinking and promote adherence to established religion. Our goals are to rise above religious thinking and to free ourselves—and others—from established religion. Any “accommodation” of these two opposing goals smacks of dissemblance on the parts of both parties. It can only become a farcical pirouette of posturing enemies destined to sabotage each other’s goals. □

**“Nothing could be more dangerous to the existence of this Republic  
than to introduce religion into politics”**

Robert Green Ingersoll  
1833 – 1899

## Editor's Q and A

### My Favorite NYCA Movers and Shakers



By Jane Everhart

Dear Editor,

In the March 2010 NYC Atheists' newsletter, you wrote about your "favorite Atheist Heroes." All of them were national figures except for New York's Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who really does not claim to be an Atheist—though he has done some good things for us. It seems to me there are plenty of hard-working, talented Atheist heroes right here in New York City. How about letting us know a little about them too?

--Susan from Sunnyside

Dear Susan,

You are absolutely right. I do have a number of favorite local Atheist "heroes." They are some of the dedicated NYCA members who have given their talent, time and excellent minds to further the cause of Atheism. I've asked many of them why they do this and, basically, they have told me that it is because they believe in reason, science and social justice, and they feel that NYCA gives them a way to contribute to posterity. This is their legacy to the rational world that they believe in and a form of immortality through good works. We all want to leave our mark on the world, and this is their way. You may know some of them, but if you don't, here are just a few of my favorite movers and shakers. I'll introduce you to others in the future:



**LINDA BLAIKIE**

Linda is a practicing licensed psychotherapist who runs our Living Without Religion support-group meetings. In her private practice, Linda works with patients who suffer from depression, anxiety, relationship problems, work problems, phobias and such. Linda was raised Catholic, and in her unhappy New York childhood, "religion became an enormous comfort to me," she says. "I took it very seriously. I wanted to be a nun, I read *The Lives of the Saints*." It wasn't until she moved to San Francisco and got away from her childhood home that she was able, with some difficulty,

to disengage from her religion. "It felt like a divorce. I would forget that I didn't believe in god anymore and I'd pray and I'd cry. I missed god and I missed the Virgin Mary."

Her wrenching separation from religion led her, many years later, to identify with others who were in the process of leaving religion. When she moved back to New York and discovered that New York City Atheists had a "Recovery from Religion" workshop, "I felt I could lead this group because I know both the upside and the downside of religion." She feels that "there are people who are intellectually Atheists but need to mourn the *emotional* loss of religion." Linda's workshop style is laid-back, nonjudgmental; she has a quiet, motherly, not overbearing, presence. There is no issuing of dictums; you feel acceptance, you feel you can say anything in Linda's workshop and she will understand and defend your right to say it. Bravo to our supportive, accepting, group leader!



**MICHAEL DORIAN**

Michael Dorian is a multi-talented person: playwright, documentary filmmaker and a teacher. His award-winning documentary film, "Pizza! The Movie" aired on New York's Channel 31, the documentary channel. This year, he won a grant to write a play, and he is also finishing up in the NYC Teaching Fellows graduate program. Michael--handsome, outspoken, confident, scrappy--runs our third-Tuesday of the month Discussion Meetup along with co-leader Alexandra Sidiropoulos. Michael has the remarkable ability of remembering what everybody at the Discussion Meetup has said (and sometimes there are as many as 50 people), summing everything up at the end.

Michael was on his honeymoon in Istanbul as this report was being written, but he took time out to email us that he leads the NYCA Meetups because "I like the invigorating discussions with the intelligent and thought-provoking folks who attend the Meetups.

I am generally not political; my one cause is that of spreading the word of Atheism and trying to cripple the irrational and dangerous voices of the 'religiots' in this country." For Atheists like me who like Michael's compelling intensity, long may he spread the word!



**ALEXANDRA SIDIROPOULOS**

I have always felt that Alexandra is wise beyond her 26 years. Poised, very "together," the attractive Alex is originally from the St. Louis, MO, area, where she graduated from St. Louis University. She now works for a law firm in New York that specializes in intellectual property, and somehow that seems appropriate, given her smarts. Alex became an Atheist after a frightening experience as a child at a religious summer camp that was somewhat like the one in the movie "Jesus Camp." The camp leaders told the unbaptized Alex that if she didn't get baptized, she would go to hell. "All that summer I was terrified and I kept trying to baptize myself because I was scared that I was going to hell," she says. The grownup Alex read Carl Sagan's book, "The Demon Haunted World," and decided that religion can be detrimental. These days, Alex co-leads NYCA's Discussion Meetup with Michael Dorian, and her cool, confident and courteous leadership style is a pleasure to experience.



**ROGER SMITH**

Roger Smith, who leads NYCA's Philosophy Club, is modest, unassuming and affable--attributes that don't readily reveal how knowledgeable he is about philosophy. Roger, who worked for Merrill Lynch as a computer programmer for 26 years, has always had a secret passion (my apologies to Mrs. Roger Smith): Philosophy. Roger has been taking philosophy classes at Hunter College at night since the 1970s "and every single term for the last decade." In fact, he confesses, "I'm running out of classes to take."

Roger agreed to lead NYCA'S Philosophy Club because he feels that "it gives people an opportunity to listen

to the lectures of professionals who try to give an overview of a great thinker in half an hour." Atheism has an unusual problem, Roger notes: "When we remove god from the equation, we have to have some way of explaining what morality is. The burden is upon us to explain what it is that makes a person moral."

That's where studying philosophy helps us to become better Atheists, Roger believes. All philosophers have some guiding principles around which they organize their thoughts. In fact, each philosopher organizes his entire world view around his principles. "So, many Atheists look to philosophy to learn the principles of great thinkers on the subject of morality." Roger, a kind and gentle man of honor and integrity, demonstrates much depth and profundity on a subject so seminal for Atheists.



**JOHN WAGNER**

John Wagner, NYCA's street tabler exemplar, is really a university professor in real life. He teaches medical students in the Department of Neurology and Neuroscience at Weill-Cornell Medical College. But on Saturdays when NYCA president Ken Bronstein isn't in town, John puts on his NYCA baseball cap, loads the NYCA tabling tent into his car and sets it up at Columbus Circle, where he switches from his Dr. Jekyll-who-teaches-neurology persona into the (albeit charming and benign) Mr. Hyde who reaches out to the masses about his second most favorite subject, Atheism.

John, an Iowan by birth, was raised Catholic and was an altar boy for many years. (It appears, from all the ex-Catholics in this article, that a Catholic education is a sure way to become an Atheist.) John has studied at Princeton and the University of California and has taught at Harvard Medical School. But Atheism is his avocation, and what inspired him to embrace it publicly, he says, was his realization somewhere along the line that the tax-exempt status of churches meant that religion was being privileged in our society and his tax money was supporting it. His outrage at this violation of the American Constitution's First Amendment has had the upside of giving NYCA one of the most prestigious street tablers in the nation. Your fellow Atheists salute you, John! □

# Atheists and Family Dynamics



**By Jeanean Hollen**

Having issues with your family and your Atheism? No worries. Follow the simple guidelines below for handling those annoying situations.

## How do I reveal my Atheism to my family?

Greeting cards are a good ice breaker. Consider creating your own poem to express your message. Something along these lines should work.

I am a young lady with style  
Who has just come out of denial  
To say there's no god  
I've given the nod  
Said goodbye to an idol most vile

## My family is very upset with me because I am an Atheist, what do I do?

Food is always a good pacifier. Cook a meal for them. Try out that exotic new recipe you found on the Internet. If it makes them sick, they'll have other things to worry about. You might follow up dinner with an offer to wash the family minivan.

## My family thinks I'll be a bad influence on family members.

Remind them of your embarrassing uncle. You know, the one who always gets drunk at holiday gatherings, has been married six times or was featured last week on America's Most Wanted...you get the idea. Then ask, "Who exactly is the bad influence here?"

## My family wants me to hide my Atheism from others.

Although you may want to shout your Atheism from the rooftops, this might be a good opportunity to work out a trade. If you keep your nonbelief to yourself, what will they do in return? The possibilities are endless. Use this leverage to your advantage and who knows, that all-expense paid trip to Europe may be a reality after all.

## My family says that I am "just going through a phase."

Remind them that becoming an Atheist was not a choice. You came to the conclusion that there are no gods based on the evidence at hand, just as you disbelieve that there are elves, Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy. It's perfectly all right to let them know that if you did believe in the power of prayer, you would certainly pray for the end of the reality TV "phase." □

*Ed note: This article is dedicated to Linda Blaikie, who runs NYCA's "Living Without Religion" support group.*

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*Author Jeanean Hollen lives in California and is a member of Atheists United. She writes frequently for its newsletter, Rational Alternative.*

## How to Use the Enclosed Candidate Questionnaire

Here's how to use the enclosed NYC Atheists Candidate Questionnaire for the November 2010 election: Contact your candidate. It's best to hand the questionnaire to him or her. Mailing or emailing it is second best. Tell the candidates you give it to that you would like them to return it before the election.

Please share with NYCA the response you get. We want to know: The names of the candidates to whom you attempted to give it. Did the candidate accept it or reject it? Did they fill it out? If so, please submit your results to NYC Atheists. While we cannot endorse any candidate, we are free to share information with our members on how each candidate would vote on important issues.

## Truth About Mother Teresa Exposed In Letter to Brooklyn Boro Prez



**DENNIS MIDDLEBROOKS**

*NYCA member and longtime Atheist activist Dennis Middlebrooks was one of the many people offended by the lighting up of Brooklyn's Boro Hall in blue and white in honor of the 100th anniversary of Mother Teresa's birth. But Middlebrooks is a prolific and formidable letter writer. His frequently published letters-to-the-editor are succinct, to the point and always on-target. This letter, sent out August 24 to the Brooklyn Boro president, is particularly interesting, we felt, because it sets out the reasons, in no uncertain terms, that we do not consider Mother Teresa a hero or "saint."*

To: [askmarty@brooklynbp.nyc.gov](mailto:askmarty@brooklynbp.nyc.gov),  
[ekoch@brooklynbp.nyc.gov](mailto:ekoch@brooklynbp.nyc.gov),  
[csissra@brooklynbp.nyc.gov](mailto:csissra@brooklynbp.nyc.gov)

Subject: Boro Hall and Mother Teresa

Dear Mr. Markowitz,

As a former president of the Secular Humanist Society of New York and a life-long Brooklynite, I protest the fact that Boro Hall will be illuminated blue and white on Thursday in honor of the 100th anniversary of Mother Teresa's birth. Your office has apparently capitulated to pressure from William Donohue's bogus "Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights," as this organization has launched a massive campaign to force public officials to pay homage to this "Catholic icon."

The woman you will honor denounced birth control and contraception (not hunger, disease and ignorance) as the world's greatest evil, and was opposed to abortion for any reason, even in the case of incest, rape and to save the life of the woman. She was a staunch supporter and friend of Baby Doc Duvalier, the thuggish dictator of Haiti, who

gave her millions of dollars while his own people starved. She denounced Hinduism, the religion of her host country, India, as a pagan heresy, and openly claimed that the Catholic church was the sole path to salvation. She claimed that rationalism and skepticism were modern diseases and great evils that had to be eliminated (most of our Founding Fathers were rationalists and skeptics). Her homophobia was intense and often inflammatory. Worst of all, although her organization, the Carmelite Sisters, took in an estimated \$500 million in donations, her "hospices" were devoid of any anesthesia to alleviate the pain of the wretches under her care. The money was diverted for other purposes. She would actually tell her charges that their suffering brought them closer to Jesus and was a sign of his love. However, when it came to her own heart problems, she did not rely on "Jesus's love" but flew first class to the finest medical facilities in Europe for treatment.

This woman was a consummate fraud. There is no way she should be honored by the diverse borough of Brooklyn, most of whose residents she would have considered heathens. Whatever happened to the separation of church and state?

Dennis Middlebrooks  
Brooklyn, N.Y.

## UPCOMING SEPTEMBER EVENTS

### CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

**SEPT. 8, 2010 (WED.) 7:00 PM NYCA  
Living Without Religion Group**

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



**SUBJECT: How Do I Convince My Family That Atheism Is Respectable?**

How do you handle the disapproval of loved ones when you come out as an Atheist? Is the lack of support from your family or from the greater society getting you down? Feeling misunderstood, excluded, pitied or 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.

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

**COST:** Free to members (can join at meeting if desired), but participants are expected to purchase a drink or food to compensate Moonstruck for use of their space.

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**SEPT. 12, 2010 (SUN.) 12:00 PM  
NYC Atheists Brunch / Speaker**

**SPEAKER:** Dr. MICHAEL NEWDOW



**SUBJECT: Update: The Pledge Of Allegiance Case.**

Dr. Michael Newdow is an Atheist, Emergency Room physician, lawyer and an ordained minister of the Universal Life Church. He is best known for his efforts to have the Pledge of Allegiance declared unconstitutional because of its inclusion of the phrase "under god." He has also filed a lawsuit against government-paid chaplains and to stop the invocation prayer at President Bush's second inauguration. Most recently, he filed a lawsuit to prevent references to god and religion from being part of President Obama's inauguration. He has also started a tongue-in-cheek organization called FACTS (First Atheist Church of True Science) which advocates separation of church and state in public institutions.

**LOCATION:** Press Box Restaurant & Pub  
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.

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**SEPT. 21, 2010 (TUE.) 7:00 PM  
NYC Atheists Meetup**  
**GROUP LEADER:** Michael Dorian



**SUBJECT:** Michael tackles subjects as diverse and controversial as blasphemy and suing the Catholic church. What will he challenge this month? It's a surprise, but rest assured that it will be fascinating, audacious and provocative. Come on Tuesday, September 21, and join the enthusiastic participants!

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

**COST:** Free. Participants are expected to purchase a drink or food to compensate Stone Creek for use of their space.

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**SEPT. 30, 2010 (THUR.) 6:30 PM  
NYCA MONTHLY MEETING**

**SPEAKER:** JASON HAGEN



**SUBJECT: ATHEISTS' POCKET DEBATER**

Jason Hagen created an I-Phone application, the ATHEIST POCKET DEBATER, which contains old and new arguments against the existence of god. The DEBATER gives many ways to argue against Christians, Creationists, and Bible thumpers. It is set up for very quick reference and memorization, yet contains full arguments as well as different ways to argue the same topics. Examples include "Lack of Historical Evidence for Jesus," "America Was NOT Created as a Christian Nation," and "god Is Too Hidden to Be Real" Come, hear how you can arm yourself with very powerful and logical arguments against religious zealots.

**LOCATION:** SLC Conference Center–352 Seventh Ave./16<sup>th</sup> Floor-(29/30<sup>th</sup> 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**

### **SEPTEMBER 2010**

Sept.	8*	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living Without Religion Group
Sept.	12*	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
Sept.	21***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up
Sept.	30****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

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### **OCTOBER 2010**

Oct.	10**	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
Oct.	13*	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living Without Religion Group
Oct.	19***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up
Oct.	28****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

\* Moonstruck Diner – 449 Third Ave. (31<sup>st</sup>) – 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor

\*\* Press Box Restaurant & Pub – 932 Second Ave. (49/50<sup>th</sup> St.) – 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor

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

\*\*\*\* SLC Conference Center–352 Seventh Ave./16<sup>th</sup> Floor-(29/30<sup>th</sup> St.)

\*\*\*\*\* Columbus Circle – Broadway (59/60) – In front of Time Warner Building

### **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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