

# 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"

### New Trends in American Religion

#### *The Focus on Jesus as Guru Calls for a Challenge to His Credibility*

New things are happening in America's religious institutions. They are slowly—well, *evolving*, if you will—though they would certainly hate that word. We're hearing everywhere that churches are trying to adapt to the 21st century, changing their marketing tactics and paying more attention to their parishioners' personal needs. Or, as they say in corporate-speak, religion is "repackaging its product mix" and "updating its marketing plan."

Today's churches are de-emphasizing heaven, hell and damnation. Instead, they are using their congregations as networking hubs, focusing on "prosperity" as a perk for their followers and promoting a vision of Jesus as a leader like Gandhi whose teachings point the way to the good life. It's the same old snake oil but in a brand-new bottle and a figurehead who says it takes faith to make you prosperous.

There are a variety of reasons for the movement of religious institutions into today's tempo and concerns. Some of these reasons reflect serious issues that are confronting religion today, such as:

1. More than 50 percent of American citizens have left their birth religion and transferred to another one.  
*Individuals are shopping religions.*

2. The increase of non-believers, non-affiliated, agnostics, seculars and Atheists is approaching 25 percent, with 18-to-29-year olds leading the charge.  
*There is an epidemic of Americans questioning and doubting their faith.*

3. Individuals are not accepting "the whole package."  
*Some 90 percent of Catholics practice birth control.*

4. The sexual abuse scandals shocked the nation.  
*Denial or covering up the scandals caused widespread disillusionment.*

5. There has been a dramatic decrease in individuals selecting careers in organized religion. *Not only are there fewer candidates for the ministry and priesthood but fewer clergy of the same ethnicity as their congregation are available.*

6. Science as an explanation for natural phenomena is gaining over faith-based explanations.  
*Proof that the earth is not 5-7,000 years old has made the Bible less respected as a source of reliable information.*

7. Studies show that more than 50 percent of Americans agree that you do not have to believe in god to be a moral or ethical person. *Evidently Atheist publicity, such as the American Atheists billboards that say "You KNOW it's a Myth" and "You KNOW they're all SCAMS" is affecting the American psyche.*

In short, religion as an institution senses it is in trouble. And like all big business, it needs a CEO (Chief Executive Officer) who projects a positive image to the consumer. Who else is up for this job but Jesus! Quite creatively, evidently with some Madison-Avenue smarts, religious leaders have "re-branded" Jesus, from messiah—"our savior who died for our sins"—to a Guru figure with a public image to rival Confucius, Gandhi, Mao, Martin-Luther King or Mandela.

#### **Show us the birth certificate!**

With Christ's projected new role, I feel it is important to question His credibility for this new mission, using as a source the New Testament, which is an anthology of works, or Gospels, written at different times of history, by the apostles Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Was there such a person as Jesus or has he been made up? Consider these contradictions, straight from the Bible:

1) Because the New Testament offers no "day" date for

Jesus' birth, Church leaders decided, in the early fourth century, that they needed a Christian alternative to rival the popular solstice celebrations of the day. They chose December 25 as the date of Christ's birth. We don't know whether they were also deliberately challenging an upstart religion of the time, inasmuch as The Cult of Mithras celebrated the birth of their god of light on the very same day. *Not a good beginning.*

2) Where was Jesus born? Apostle Luke describes Joseph and Mary as residents of Nazareth in the Galilee. They would have had to travel for a week to cover the 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Aviram Oshri, an archaeologist with the Israeli Antiquities Authority, says, "Basic medical knowledge tells you that a heavily pregnant woman could not ride a donkey that distance without losing her baby."

3) Where, how, when did Jesus die? All four Gospels say that Jesus was crucified on a cross at Golgotha (also called Calvary) outside the wall of Old Jerusalem, sometime between 29 CE to 36 CE by the occupying Roman army at the time of Passover. Muslims believe that the crucifixion of Jesus never happened; they claim another person was executed in the place of Jesus. Muslims feel that such a great prophet of god would not suffer such a humiliating death.

4) Is there any proof for the so-called "resurrection" of Christ? None of the alleged eyewitnesses wrote down anything. All we have is Apostle Paul's word, and he admits he just had a "revelation." No evidence has ever been produced--not even any coins, inscriptions, documents. At that time in history, crucifixion was used by the Roman army as a terror weapon against rebellious slaves and insurrectionists. The custom was for the bodies of executed persons to be thrown into a pit for scavengers to eat. Today, many suspect that Christ's reappearances to his followers after his death were a form of individual and mass hallucination.

5) Jesus is said to have supported everything in the Old Testament, including the offensive parts that support slavery, keeping women in their place and killing homosexuals. According to Matthew, Jesus said "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill..."

6) Jesus in the Bible is painfully and regressively lacking today's morality. He is quoted by Mark as chastising the Jews for not killing their disobedient children, saying to them: "Whoever curses father or mother shall die." The punishment for adultery under Jesus is an eternity in Hell. As for slavery, according to Apostle Peter, Jesus said slaves should "be subject to their masters with all fear" and that applies to the "bad

and cruel master" as well as the good and gentle. According to the New Testament, Jesus believed that women should be under the control of their men and enemies should be killed. So much for women's rights, diplomacy and peace!

7) Did Jesus ever exist or was he invented? Because the stories about Jesus were written long after his lifetime, critics argue that Biblical scribes have created the historical Jesus. Some scholars believe the Gospel accounts are so mythical in nature that nothing, not even the existence of Jesus, can be determined from them.

#### **Jesus Fails as Guru**

So what does this all mean? Well, it becomes obvious that we should not get our morality from the Bible, because the teachings of Jesus would regress us some 2,000 years--and democracy, freedom from slavery and women's rights would disappear. (Which, it appears, is what some of the reactionary fundamentalist evangelicals want.)

But more to the point, the Jesus described by his Apostles pales beside real-life moral leaders such as Gandhi or Mandela: Besides espousing some bad things, like slavery and war, Jesus turns out to be a mythical figure like Santa Claus or Rumpelstiltskin. He appears to be a composite, pieced together by four scribes who contradict each other in every chapter of the New Testament. And yet the fundamentalists are planning to use him as the trailblazer for their modern vision of prosperity and positive thinking!

Church think-tank leaders may feel that by modernizing their services and recruitment strategies they can stop the seepage of followers from their institutions and continue to recruit members despite an increasingly more-educated American public. Church strategists may even feel that an image-makeover for a more "hip" Jesus, attuned to positive thinking and togetherness, will bring the customers in. As for their Bible, whose contradictions, they admit, can sometimes be a confusing embarrassment, they will no doubt cherry-pick from this supposedly Last-Word-From-Heaven, embracing the good in it and pretending the horrible parts don't exist.

But the bottom-line is, religion cannot keep up with the honesty of Science, which is already, tsunami-like, wiping out religion in Europe. Only in America, once the frontrunner in industrial and economic innovation, are the churches hanging on for dear life; in fact, they are holding on quite nicely in the Deep South and the Midwest. But is that a rumbling I hear in the distance, somewhat like a big wave, coming from Europe and parts East? ☐

## Editor's Q and A

### Learning The Church's Secrets From My Born-Again Christian Daughter



By Jane Everhart

Dear Editor,

You seem to have accepted with grace your daughter's becoming a Born-Again Evangelical Christian [See "*Dialogue Between an Atheist Mother and Her Born-Again Christian Daughter*," March 2011 newsletter]. But to be honest, I wanted you to fight harder for her mind and—for lack of a better word—her soul. You raised her, and to lose her to what is nothing short of a cult, must be devastating.

--Peggy in Park Slope

Dear Peggy,

Actually, I am proud of my daughter for being a problem solver in her own way. In a time of need, she reached out to what was available. She found a solution to her problems and an answer to her needs. Her solution may not be what *I* would have chosen but I learned a long time ago that our children must someday become their own people.

My daughter Brook was alone in a strange city, Colorado Springs, when she elected to join an evangelical Christian church. She needed a family. She needed people to aid her in a time of loneliness and crisis. She told me that she had asked her Dad to help her financially—and he offered only to send her a plane ticket home. But she wanted to stay in her beloved Colorado with its snow-capped mountains, skiing, John Denver music and wide open spaces. That was where she felt she belonged, just as had I felt, years earlier, that New York City was where I belonged.

#### Keeping Communication Lines Open

To accept that plane ticket to go back to New York would have been failure for her. Intelligent humans seek out answers to their dilemmas. But besides that, I think she was seeking goodness, friendship and people who cared about her. That she found it in a place called "The Radiant Assembly of God" may not be so far-out in Colorado Springs, where the major industry is publishing Bibles and the second biggest industry is the military.

My attitude was then, and still is, to let my daughter

know that I love her no matter what. And to keep the lines of communication open.

I feel that Brook is heading in the right direction these days: She has left The Radiant Assembly of God and is looking for a more politically liberal church. It was her idea that she write an article for our NYC Atheists newsletter on "How to Beat Religion at Its Own Game." The title alone disclosed to me that on some level, my daughter is aware that religion is a "game." And the fact that she was willing to tell Atheists how to compete with religion by describing the tactics used by evangelical churches, is quite revealing.

I learned much more from some of the things Brook said in that interview published in our March newsletter than she will ever know. Fundamentalist religions should be wary of the children of Atheists who convert to religion: It appears, bottom-line, that they never let go of the logic and reason they grew up with.

#### Church a Safe Harbor?

What I gleaned from my taped interview with my Born-Again daughter is that the church offers a safe harbor within our complicated society. What my daughter is saying is: Religion provides a whole way of life. It offers a mini-socialist community, if you will, and the callousness of competitive corporate life is not allowed to enter its portals. In a dog-eat-dog society, the church provides a calm, caring oasis. It holds out a hand to believers in their times of crisis. The church says you are important to god. God cares about you. How can we Atheists possibly compete with *that*?

Atheism does not provide a safe harbor—yet. In our major missions of disproving the supernatural and keeping the almighty out of government, we have forgotten that people are multi-faceted, multi-purposed and multi-needy.

And yes, I am aware of the cult-like aspects of evangelist religions. Even the name of my daughter's church—The Radiant Assemblies of God—has a cult-like ring to it. My Webster's dictionary says "radiant" is defined as: 1) emitting heat or light, 2) consisting of or emitted as radiation: *radiant heat*, 3) Filled with light:

bright. Glowing, beaming. Hmmm. Perhaps, to compete, we Atheists should call ourselves the Shimmering Secularists Society?

### Truths I Learned From My Daughter

Here are some of the deeper, more hidden, things I learned, or had reinforced, from my taped interview with my daughter:

**Religion has become more flexible. Today's churches have evolved and become more "user friendly."** No more fire and brimstone! There is less emphasis on the afterlife, more on dealing with today's social needs. To reel in members, religion has apparently adopted modern-day psychological methods. Now they say: How can we help you find a job, pay your rent, find a spouse, help you in an illness? There is lots of talk about church members helping each other like family with togetherness, joyfulness, positive thinking. On the face of it, how can anyone object to this?

What I find objectionable is that all this positive thinking is being propped up by the Bible and supernatural beliefs. If you buy into the joyfulness, then sooner or later, you must also buy into the Jesus-is-your-savior bit. It is positively Pavlovian, when you think about it. Instead of salivating to the sound of a bell, as Pavlov's experimental dogs did, you thank the Lord whenever you feel joy. The psychological mechanisms are the same. Today's religions have managed to very cleverly connect the feelings of joy and togetherness to a belief in the supernatural.

**Churches are blatantly pushing conservative right-wing politics.** I find this puzzling. If you remember the myths about Jesus, you know that He was a working man, a carpenter, who was trying to help the poor. Or as my daughter put it, "If Jesus walked the earth today, He would not be a Republican." Plus, there's all that Biblical stuff about how it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. So why would churches today be touting the ultra-right-wing Tea Party conservative politics of the rich?

My considered opinion is that the answer to this conundrum harks back to the so-called "Robin Hood priests" of my great-grandfathers' Polish village—the priests who defended the peasants against the ruling aristocracy. But when push came to shove, and the East-European revolutions of the early 20th century

threatened to bring "godless Atheism" to Poland along with freedom from the czars, kings and aristocracy, the Robin Hood priests realized that they could become obsolete under this new-fangled Atheism.

So the entire church did a turnabout and joined forces with those who had replaced the aristocracy: the rich bourgeoisie. I think, today, churches seek that same protection from the rich and politically conservative—who have become our modern day aristocracy with their privileges, power and elitism.

### Religious leaders have become semanticists.

Semantics is the study of the meaning of words and how words affect and inspire actions. Religion is particularly adept at hijacking our language and using colorful words in an array of rewards for adherence to religion. For example, my daughter Brook brought up the evangelical Christian catchphrase "Fruits of the Spirit," which turns out to be the qualities of love, joy, peace, kindness, friendliness, helpfulness, humility, politeness and happiness.

None of these qualities are exclusively the low-hanging fruit, ready for the plucking, from the church's spirituality tree. I know many nonbelievers who are kind, friendly, polite, happy, etc. You don't have to be religious to incorporate these qualities into your life. They are not up for grabs from a fruit tree only if you join the church. And yet, the church has commandeered ownership of love and joy and kindness, and they are offered as perks to the born-again believer.

We Atheists counter all these mutations of the church with the bare, unvarnished fact that the church's way of life is based on a false premise of god, heaven and hell. But what can we Atheists offer in the way of community and a safe harbor? For me, it has taken my daughter's conversion to evangelical Christianity to alert me to the urgent need to reach out to those in need in the community.

The church should not be the only source of aid for our citizens. And that is reason enough to fight the federal government's so-called "Faith-Based Initiatives" that started under former President George W. Bush and which finance church-based charity work. Help to our citizens should not be contingent on their going to a church. My daughter was vulnerable when she walked into The Radiant Assembly of God. That should not happen to anybody else's child. □

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

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

# Come to an Exciting American Atheists Convention!

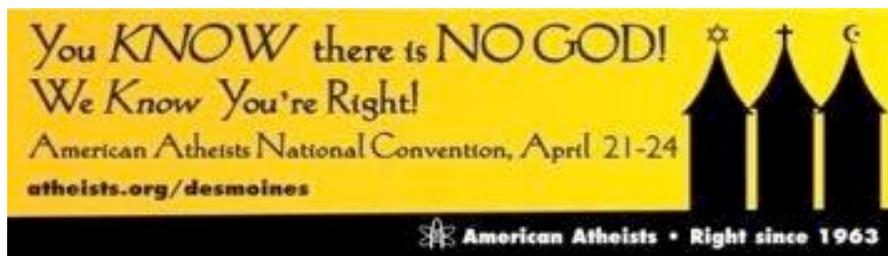
## AMERICAN ATHEISTS BILLBOARDS



AMERICAN ATHEISTS – NEAR HOLLAND TUNNEL – DECEMBER 2010



ALABAMA ATHEISTS – JANUARY 2011



AMERICAN ATHEISTS CONVENTION – DES MOINES, IOWA – APRIL 21-24

LINK: [http://www.atheists.org/events/National\\_Convention](http://www.atheists.org/events/National_Convention)

## SPEAKERS

HECTOR AVALOS  
 JAMILA BEY  
 MATTHEW CHAPMAN  
 GRETA CHRISTINA  
 TROY CONRAD  
 DR. ELIZABETH CORNWELL  
 MATT DILLAHUNTY  
 JT EBERHART

TOM FLYNN  
 DAVID GOZLAN  
 CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS  
 (LIVE VIA SKYPE)  
 KATHLEEN JOHNSON  
 EDWIN KAGIN  
 LAWRENCE KRAUSS

P.Z. MYERS:  
 PAUL PROVENZA  
 JEFF SHARLET  
 EDDIE TABASH  
 J ANDERSON THOMSON  
 INDRA ZUNO

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Atheist Mom, Born-Again Daughter

Dear Editor,

(Re *Dialogue Between an Atheist Mother and Her Born-Again Christian Daughter*, March 2011 newsletter) Who are these children we raise who see the world from a different vantage point? It was a wonderful conversation between both of you, each allowing the other to be what they are. I realize you are more confrontational than I am and it may be that you are disappointed in the outcome, but your daughter is her own person and that says to me that you gave her wings to fly.

I, like you, raised my children without religion, giving them the ability to choose. My daughter married a Jew. She did not convert, but agreed to raise her children within the Jewish religion, albeit very liberal. My grandchildren received the usual religious training for Bar and Bat Mitzvahs and it seems that is that. I personally had no problem with that since, when I was her age and throughout my life, no one could tell me how to raise my children or what to believe in. As a parent, I am grateful that my children are good people. How they choose to live their lives is their own business. I respect that.

--Joanne Sutera  
Hamilton, N.J.

Dear Editor,

Interesting interview with your Born Again offspring in the March issue of the newsletter. I notice she asked you whether there were any Atheist groups supporting the arts. Well, there are no religious groups supporting the arts either, as far as I know. Furthermore, there is Carnegie Hall, which exists

Religion has actually convinced people that there's an invisible man -- living in the sky -- who watches everything you do, every minute of every day. And the invisible man has a special list of ten things he does not want you to do.. And if you do any of these ten things, he has a special place, full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish, where he will send you to live and suffer and burn and choke and scream and cry forever and ever 'til the end of time! ... But He loves you.

--George Carlin

thanks to that great philanthropist and Atheist, Andrew Carnegie. I bet Atheists like Ted Turner, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett and George Soros have donated lots of money to the arts over the years.

--Dennis Middlebrooks  
Brooklyn

Dear Editor,

Your daughter mentioned that she was influenced by her grandmother saying the rosary every day. For your information, and hers, the Bible says you should not repeat prayers:

**Matthew 6:7** And in your prayer do not make use of the same words again and again, as the Gentiles do: for they have the idea that God will give attention to them because of the number of their words.  
<http://bible.cc/matthew/6-7.htm>

--Michael Pacyga  
Queens

### Reducing Federal Spending

Dear Ken Bronstein,

I very much enjoyed your "sermon" in the March issue ("*I Have a \$5-10 Billion Dollar Suggestion for Reducing Federal Spending*," Page 1) and agreed with it fully. The challenge is to get it to the psyches of those who need to read it and act upon it! I do hope you attempt to do that because it's good stuff. Kudos to you.

--Stan Friedland  
Syosset, NY

### BIRTH ANNOUNCEMENT



**Ron and Lori Widelec of Long Island announce the arrival of Joshua Solomon Widelec on March 2, 2011 at 8:28 pm. He weighed in at 8 lbs., 13 oz. Ron, a frequent contributor of articles to our NYC Atheists publication, says, "We are excited, terrified and tired..."**

**UPCOMING APRIL EVENTS**  
**CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES**

**APRIL 10, 2011 (SUN.) 12:00 NOON**  
**NYC ATHEISTS BRUNCH / SPEAKER**

SPEAKER: JAPA PALLIKKATHAYIL  
Assistant Professor of Philosophy - Department of  
Philosophy – New York University



**SUBJECT: How Moral and Political Philosophy Interact to Justify the State’s Use of Coercion**

Japa’s research focuses on the relationship between moral and political philosophy and how morality is used by both individuals and the state to justify the use of coercion in both personal interactions and the state’s use of coercion.

LOCATION: The Press Box Restaurant  
932 Second Avenue (bet. 49<sup>th</sup> & 50<sup>th</sup> Sts.) -2nd Floor

COST: BRUNCH is \$20, which includes a selection of Buffet Entrees and salad, one soft drink, coffee, tax and tip. We encourage seconds on the delicious Eggs Benedict..

**APRIL 13, 2011 (WED.) 7:00 PM**  
**NYC ATHEISTS LIVING W/O RELIGION GROUP**

GROUP LEADER: LINDA BLAIKIE, L.C.S.W



**SUBJECT: Anger Management: How to Let Anger Work for You Instead of Anger Managing you.**  
Your boss got you punching the door in anger? Not good for your knuckles. Or the door. Come to learn how you can use that emotion positively to work for you, your boss and humanity.

LOCATION: Moonstruck Diner - 449 Third Ave.  
/31<sup>st</sup> -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.

**APRIL 19, 2011 (TUES.) 7:00 PM**  
**NYC ATHEISTS MEETUP**

GROUP LEADER: MICHAEL DORIAN



**SUBJECT: Can Atheists Believe in Karma?** Is our fate or destiny “in the cards” or do we bring it about with our deeds and actions? A topic that only our incomparable Michael Dorian can flirt with!

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.

**APRIL 28, 2011 (THUR.) 6:30 PM**  
**NYC ATHEISTS MONTHLY MEETING**

SPEAKER: TYSON GILL



**SUBJECT: “BELIEF IN SCIENCE AND THE SCIENCE OF BELIEF”**  
Tyson, an NYCA member, will discuss his book, in which he shows how belief-based thinking not only results in superstition, ignorance and fear, but also diminishes our reasoning capacity and compromises our fundamental decision-making capacity, both in personal matters and in critical public policy. He will present an alternative: the discipline of fact-based thinking, as in the scientific method. He will give you the insights and techniques you need to apply scientific rigor to your everyday decision-making.

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

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

## UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

### APRIL 2011

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

### MAY 2011

May.	8*	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
May.	11**	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living Without Religion Group
May.	17***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up
May.	26****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

- \* Press Box Restaurant & Pub – 932 Second Ave. (49/50<sup>th</sup> St.) – 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
 \*\* Moonstruck Diner – 449 Third Ave. (31<sup>st</sup>) – 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.)

### 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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