

NYC ATHEISTS INC.



WEB: NYC-ATHEISTS.ORG - BOX 6060 NY, NY 10150-6060 - 212-330-6794

AN AFFILIATE OF AMERICAN ATHEISTS

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JANUARY 2013



KENNETH BRONSTEIN

PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"

2012--A Breakthrough Year for Atheism *Reason Rally, Clergy Project, Election Mark Progress*

I'll always think of 2012 as the year that brought both sparkle and sadness to Atheists. Sparkle, because we hit the big time with our Atheist billboards, the Reason Rally in Washington and watching our nation visibly take note of the fact that we exist. Sadness, because we lost Christopher Hitchens and Paul Kurtz, founder of the Center for Inquiry.



Christopher Hitchens

2012 was a year marked by a presidential election in which we feared the possible election of a candidate who was not only religious but a pillar in a strange, offbeat American sect. Some of us worked hard in the presidential campaign and were, in the end, gratified that the more moderate and less-religious liberal candidate won. It meant that any Justice appointed to the Supreme Court in the next four years would more likely be moderate and objective, and thus any suit we might press to gain rights for Atheists would have a better chance.

Reason Rally Draws Thousands

It was a year in which some 20,000 Atheists gathered on the National Mall in Washington, DC for the Reason Rally in March, the first time in the history of this country that a huge group of nonbelievers gathered in a public place to show the world our faces. Atheist all-stars, such as Richard Dawkins and PZ Myers, regaled us from the stage, and despite the rain, some 130 New York City Atheists showed up, the largest contingent from *any* city--or as one person reported, "the first thing I saw at the Mall was a sea of blue NYCA caps!"

It was also a year in which the Clergy Project debuted publicly at the American Atheists convention in Washington as five church pastors "came out" as Atheists. The Clergy Project, the brainchild of Tufts professor and Atheist author Daniel Dennett, helps disenchanted pastors leave their ministries and transition into the secular community. So far, more than 200 pastors are said to have made the transition or are in the process. One such ex-pastor, Jerry DeWitt of Texas, was the subject of a major article in the *New York Times Sunday magazine* about his defection from religion.



Daniel Dennett

Meanwhile, NYCA's suit to remove the so-called "Miracle Cross" from the 9/11 Museum in Manhattan was slowly moving toward resolution. In April, plaintiffs in the case, including myself, AA's president David Silverman, and NYCA's director of communications, Jane Everhart, underwent deposition in the fancy high-rise offices of the legal firm representing the Board of Directors of the 9/11 Museum.

NYCA Grows & Expands

NYC Atheists Inc., acclaimed as the largest and most active affiliate of AA in the nation, is still growing. Our meetings have increased in number from six each month in 2011 to 10 meetings a month in 2012. Count 'em! 1) Our monthly Brunch with a speaker, 2) Living With Atheism Support group led by Linda Blaikie, 3) Discussion Group led by Michael Dorian, 4) the Book and Film Club run by David Orenstein, 5) the Monthly

Meeting with speaker, 6) Roger Smith's Philosophy Group, 7) our new Advanced Writers Group, led by Betsy Gordon, and 8,9,10) three Young Professionals meetings a month, led by Lianna.

On top of that, we produce four (4) Cable TV shows a week, shown on Channels 57 & 67. In the spring and summer, we do street tabling at Columbus Circle every fair-weather Saturday. Our Meetup site membership this year passed the 1,000-member mark. We celebrate the Solstice with parties twice a year; we march in the Halloween parade under the NYCA banner and on the last day of the year, we breakfast with Mayor Bloomberg at his annual Interfaith Breakfast.



NYC Atheists Street Tabling

We donate blood twice a year--once on the so-called "National Day of Prayer" and again on Election Day. On the Fourth of July, we affirm our Atheist patriotism by joining our Westchester Atheist leaders, **Eric and Elaine Stone**, for a Barbecue in Chappaqua.

What else did we do in 2012? Each month provided a cornucopia of Atheist events including the following:

January

National Public Radio personality **Margot Adler** spoke at our Brunch about the strange new American fad of vampires. Why vampires? Adler saw it as a metaphor for power, mortality and fear of things we can't control. We said goodbye in January to **Christopher Hitchens**, one of the famed "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" Atheist authors, who died of lung cancer.

What we learned: Americans, primed by religion to believe in unreal things, seem to indulge themselves in the vampire cult because they feel they have little power in the real world.

February

Professor Michael Rampino of NYU's biology department lectured on how mass extinctions impacted on the evolution of life. **Roy Sablosky**, scholar and author from California, exposed "The Myth of Christian Charity," by telling us how religionists inflate their alleged charitable donations.

What we learned: Humans probably would not have evolved if the planet had not experienced five mass extinctions in the past 500 million years. And

Christian charity is highly exaggerated; most of what they give goes mainly to themselves.

March

Ellen Johnson, the lovely, accomplished former president of American Atheists, now director of "Enlighten the Vote," a Political Action Committee to get Atheists elected to office, talked on "Let's Play Hardball." **Dr. Alan Mann**, Princeton anthropologist regaled us with "What It Means to be Human."



Ellen Johnson

What we learned: The religionists are way ahead of us in playing the political card to advance their cause; we've got to slug harder and reach higher to catch up. And from Dr. Mann we learned that if god made us in his image, then god has a bad back.

April

Katherine Stewart, author and investigative journalist, discussed her book, "The Good News Club: The Christian Right's Stealth Assault on America's Children." From Washington D.C., **Gregory Paul**, another investigative journalist, told us about "The Vatican and the Mob."

What we learned: We should watch our backs because the fundamentalists are sneaking into schools under false pretenses, trying to convert our children. And though the Godfather is dead, we've still got the Vatican and its strange financial goings on, including murder and mayhem.

May

Jerry DeWitt, former Pentecostal minister in Texas, and subject of a *New York Times* Sunday magazine story about his defection from religion, came to talk to us about The Clergy Project, which helps pastors who have lost their faith enter the secular world. And **Edwina Rogers**, surprise new executive director of Washington-based Secular Coalition (and a Republican who formerly served as an economic advisor for Pres. George W. Bush) came to tell us her plans for the lobbying group.

What we learned: DeWitt, shunned in his small Texas town for coming out as an Atheist, has experienced the hate that can come from religionists when you reject their faith. As for Edwina Rogers, hey, never look a dark horse in the mouth: Rogers has proved to be a top notch administrator and spokesperson for the Secular Coalition.

June

Dr. David Orenstein, who runs our Book and Film Club, spoke to NYCA brunchers about “The Joy of Atheism.” And at our end-of-the-month meeting, AA’s director of development, **A.J. Johnson**, told us about rebelling against the African-American strong ties to religion and straitlaced sexuality by coming out as a bisexual Atheist.



Jerry DeWitt

What We Learned: Dr. Orenstein won the hearts and minds of NYCA listeners with his upbeat talk about overcoming a serious heart defect and turning, not to god for thanks, but to science. A.J. Johnson, who has since moved on from AA, impressed us with her brightness and composure in rebelling against traditional southern values.

July/August

One of our favorite speakers was invited for an encore presentation: Prof. **Nelson Tebbe**, who teaches constitutional law and Law & Religion at Brooklyn Law School, came to discuss suing to get religious symbols out of public places. **Alex L. White**, a psychologist working at New York University on the phenomenon of illusion, talked to us about “The New Psychology: How the Brain Determines What You See.”

What we learned: That we may--or may not--have a good chance of winning our “Miracle Cross” suit. The constitution and case law may be with us but the perception and politics of the judge may be the decision maker. There is no evidence of a soul in our physiognomy; just neurons firing away in our brain that die when we do, says psychologist White.

September

Jim Hubbard, producer and director of “United in Anger: A History of Act-up” showed us his film and told us about the AIDS activist organization, Act-Up, and how we could use some of its methods to get civil rights for Atheists. Dr. **Partha Mitra**, neuroscientist and theoretical physicist at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in Long Island, told us about his research to find out how brain neurons communicate with each other.

What we learned: That the sometimes outrageous actions of Act-Up (such as bringing an actual dead body of an AIDS victim in his coffin to the White House) worked because the issues were a life and

death matter. Dr. Mitra baffled us with the complexity of his research but left us grateful that he and his team are doing complex studies which may someday lead to the cure for many mental illnesses.

October

Professor Alea Mills, also of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, told us about her seminal discovery of a genetic cluster that, when missing, may be the cause of autism. AA president **David Silverman** related his experiences at the presidential debate in Boca Raton, Florida, as he rode through town in the AA mobile billboard truck that said “Shame on Mormonism: No Blacks Allowed until 1978, No Gays Allowed Now.”



Edwina Rogers

What we Learned: That riding in a billboard truck in Boca Raton is fun and, hey, somebody needed to point out that Romney is a Mormon. Dr. Mills made us realize that we need more women scientists like her, whose dedication to both science and teaching is changing the world.

November/December

Princeton’s **Dr. Alan Mann**, came back to our group for an encore to explore with us the historical origins of “humanness”--or the soul. Our last speaker of the year was ex-pastor **Teresa MacBain**, who surprised her family by coming out as an Atheist at AA’s Washington DC convention. She told us about her road from Methodist minister to AA’s new communications director.

What we learned: There is no evidence throughout the millenniums of human history that “humanness” is anything more than our advanced brain. History has no record of “soul.” We also learned--a good lesson for the end of 2012--that though religion may try to indoctrinate a child at her father’s knee, as happened to MacBain, sometimes the agile human mind will tear asunder the faith-based shackles and free itself to seek the truth.

As NYCA enters its ninth successful year, keep tuned to this newsletter to see what events we are planning for 2013. Look for a resolution to our “Miracle Cross” suit. Look for exciting speakers from top universities. Look for us to initiate new lawsuits to force our courts to recognize our rights! And look for us to undertake gutsy demonstrations against those who would tread on our constitution. □

The 2012 NYC Atheists Year-End Dimwit Awards

For Strange, Inept, Harebrained and Often Stupid Behavior
That Left us Laughing or Scratching Our Heads



By Jane Everhart

Ed. Note: In 2010, we began an annual tradition, a tongue-in-cheek skewering of various elements in or around the Atheist movement for doing some mighty dimwitted things. Once again this year we continue conferring these awards even though the continued proliferation of dimwittedness shows that we have had no effect whatsoever.

The Scrooge Award for Gratuitous Holiday Cheer to New York's Center for Inquiry (CFI) bureau for its Christmas caroling event in Washington Square Park during the holiday season, organized in their avowed belief that this would show the world that, quote, "Atheists can be fun and good people." This Award is based on two apparently new delusions of CFI/NY: 1) that singing *Silent Night, Holy Night* in a public place will prove to people that Atheists are good people and 2) that Atheists need to prove to anyone that we are good people.

The Carl Rove "What, He Didn't Win? Count the Votes Again!" Incredulity Award to the organizers of the Reason Rally for not providing any Reason for the Rally to the media other than "to show our numbers and our strength." That's like a gorilla beating his chest to scare off a predator. The result was: No press coverage--except for Al Jazeera. Here's a crazy idea: What better Reason to have held the Rally than to support American Atheists' suit to remove the so-called "Miracle Cross" from the 9/11 Museum?

The Barney Frank Strange Bedfellows Award to Al Jazeera for being the only press group to cover in real time the Washington DC Reason Rally in March. While Atheists were grateful for coverage of the event, the fact that it came from a Middle Eastern Muslim media left some of us some thinking that the attention might be damning us with praise.

The Japanese Tsunami Cleanup Committee Wake-Up Call to the state of Kentucky for putting in the Kentucky constitution that the state's homeland security depends "on Almighty god as being vital to the security of the Commonwealth." Yeah, right, say the Japanese, like we counted on Him to protect us from tsunamis.

The Internal Revenue Fiscal Happy Times Award to Bill O'Reilly of Fox News' "O'Reilly Factor" for presenting to the world the news that "Christianity is not a religion, it's a philosophy." Great, said the

Internal Revenue Service, "Now we can tax all Christian churches on the grounds that they are not a religion and therefore are not tax exempt!" Great, added Obama and the U.S. Treasury, "With this additional tax revenue, our deficit should be wiped out by 2014." Atheism salutes you for your patriotism, Mr. O'Reilly!

The Mel Gibson Name Calling & Vicious Insults Award also goes to Bill O'Reilly, for yelling "Fascist!" at American Atheists' president, Dave Silverman, during the O'Reilly TV show. O'Reilly has earned this award for going beyond anti-semitic and racist name-calling and taking his insults to a new political level not seen since Joe McCarthy era.

The Swifty Lazar Best Public Relations Gimmick of the Year Award goes to the Catholic Church and its wealthy arm, Opus Dei, which maintains a clique of public relations people in Catholicism's New York office, for coming up with the preposterous but maliciously clever idea that Atheists' efforts to get religious propaganda off public or government-owned property represents "interfering with the church's right to Free Speech." Look for this phony Free Speech for Religion concept to be tested further in courts as the Catholics try to push their messages into public places like museums, schools and courthouses.

The Lady Gaga Unexpectedly Grand Entrance Award goes (with congratulations) to CFI's new New York director for initially presenting herself to fellow Atheists and the public *en deshabille* online. There was disappointment in both Atheist and Believers' camps when the site went down. After all, part of our Atheist message is that the Emperor is naked.

The Battling Myths Award to American Atheists Inc. for putting up a holiday billboard in Times Square that said, "Keep the Merry," (under a picture of Santa Claus); "Dump the Myth" (under a picture of Jesus). Unfortunately, as everyone at AA headquarters must

know, Santa Claus is also a myth and most Atheists don't want to indoctrinate children with *any* kind of myth, including Santa. Hey, it's tough to write these billboard things.

Ted Haggard Unnecessary Confessions Award to Mitt Romney for his declaration, "I am a religious man!" during the presidential campaign, aimed at sucking up to the fundies and evangelicals but oblivious to the fact many Christians look askance at Mormonism, considering it a more a cult than a religion.

The Joe Biden Back-in-Our-Good-Graces Award to Jon Stewart and his "Daily Show" for his excellent segment debunking the so-called "War on Christmas." He points out that Christmas now starts on Thanksgiving Day and overwhelms us with sales,

decorations, lights, Santas, gifts, carols. If only Stewart would agree with us that the "Miracle Cross" now sitting in the 9/11 Museum is a piece of phony junk being exploited as a permanent advertisement for the Vatican, we'd agree on everything.

The Gangnam-Style Ensemble Production Award to the high-powered New York law firm of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, for representing the 9/11 Museum's Board of Directors in our suit to have the so-called "Miracle Cross" removed from the Museum. NYCA has become David fighting Goliath. I ask, with children starving in Third World Countries, don't you feel guilty about using your sumptuous offices, ivy league expertise and state of the art video technology to defend a piece of rusty junk claimed by religious grifters to be a "message from god?" ☐

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NYC ATHEISTS – FACEBOOK

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

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

PROUD TO BE AN ATHEIST

Renew your NYC Atheists Inc. Membership!

This is the Season for renewals, so don't forget NYC Atheists!
Your dues and contributions are an educational 501- C3 tax -free contribution, and are 100% deductible.

If you are a basic member now, consider increasing to a higher category:
Basic Plus, \$50, Friend, \$100, Sustainer, \$250, Patron, \$500, Benefactor \$1000, Life \$5000.

You can donate via check or web site. Make checks payable to NYC Atheists Inc. and send to:
NYC Atheists Inc. (Membership), P.O. Box 6060, New York, NY 10150-6060.
Or there is a donation form on NYC-Atheists.Org. (See the enclosed Membership flyer!)

Have you considered giving a NYCA membership to your favorite Atheist or Agnostic as a holiday or birthday gift? And remember NYCA in your estate planning! Why leave your money to a religious person? Our civil rights efforts for Atheists' goals can move ahead faster if you make NYCA the beneficiary of an insurance policy, bank account, IRA or property. Let your money work for YOUR cause when you no longer need it.

NYC ATHEISTS 2013 MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION ENCLOSED

Goodbye to the Ministry

Or, How One Pastor Fled the Church To Expose 'Bad Theology'



By David Madison, Ph.D.

It was about 1970, when I was studying for the ministry at Boston University School of Theology, that I wrote an essay titled "On the Improbability of god." Many years later I found out that Percy Bysshe Shelley had been expelled from Oxford in 1811 for writing his essay, "The Necessity of Atheism." Well, 1970 wasn't 1811 and I survived my blatant cheekiness. Since I never went to chapel while I attended seminary, I was just considered the class eccentric, the contrarian seminarian.



Percy Bysshe Shelley

I wasn't kicked out of the seminary, and I finally managed to write a statement of personal theology that was approved by that liberal Methodist institution. I leaned heavily on the obtuse theology of Paul Tillich, who called god "The Ground of All Being," and said that god didn't exist because existence would be a limiting concept.

I survived the seminary--and my doubts--to make it into the ordained ministry, but the obtuse theology wore very thin as the years passed—as did conducting weekly worship services. The members of my congregation thought of god as "the man upstairs" who looked forward to hearing their songs of praise and flattery and listened to their prayers. How can something called the "Ground of All Being" do that?

No god Found in Cosmos

Over the years in my job as pastor, my conviction grew that I'd been on the right track with my cheeky essay at the seminary. I argued in that piece that we don't know enough about the cosmos to jump to conclusions about god. It's not a matter of feeling so tiny in the scheme of things; rather, we need to come to terms with our isolation. It was only 15 years before my birth that Edwin Hubble had demonstrated that the Andromeda Galaxy was indeed a *galaxy* far outside our Milky Way. With that discovery came the realization that the cosmos is vast beyond imagining, and therefore our isolation is even more profound.

I had argued in my essay that until we are able to

compare notes with a few other thinkers "out there"—especially those who have been thinking about the cosmos far longer than we have—we're in no position to be so confident about deities. Theologians should take the hint.

Can Humans Talk to god?

Clearly, in the decades following Hubble we've made great advances. We know that the cosmos is 13.7 billion years old, and that thousands of stars within 6,000 light years of earth have detectable planets. But we still have no way of knowing if there are thinkers on some of those planets or what they may be thinking. Our isolation remains utterly profound.



Edwin Hubble

Theists claim that our isolation has been breached by the channels of communication that exist between god and humans, such as meditation, prayer, visions, and revelations. However, the believers who embrace such channels have paid scant attention to a major roadblock: How do you tell the difference between revelation and imagination—or even hallucination?

Can it possibly be true that our mammalian brains can get in touch with deities? What would be the mechanism for that? All of these communication channels with god are unverifiable, and revelation in the form of holy books is especially suspect, given, for example, that the Bible is such a deeply flawed book. Theologians have devoted considerable effort to picking out the bits and pieces of the bible that could deserve the designation "holy writ." But few people outside the cult are convinced.

My New Roles

In the years following my departure from the ministry, there has been no grief or regrets; it was a relief to move on. My interest in theology and Biblical studies has not diminished—but not because I'm trying to find my way back or conquer my disbelief. I've just been curious how religious folks still try to make their case even as the case *against* Christianity piles up.

In the past decade especially, the deluge of Atheist writings—a full frontal assault on Christianity—has been robust, and in the past two or three years, my thoughts have been centered on the problems that Christianity faces. So one of the books that I’m writing is titled **“10 Tough Problems in Christian Thought and Belief.”** My goal is to help those who are curious to understand why it can be said that Christianity has been falsified. One of the ten tough problems I explore is that the Bible falls far short of revelation.

Two other books I’m writing are secular commentaries on Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* and the *Gospel of Mark*. These are two of the charter documents of the Christian faith, and both are treasuries of magical thinking and bad theology.

Do I feel that my many years of theology studies were a waste? One would think so, because the career I was preparing for was not, in the end, what I chose. I have no regrets about that. I’m still using what I learned in those years--but today I’m writing about the bible with a different audience in mind: I want to help Atheists and other secular people get to know the bible better than those who claim to be guided by it! ☐

Dr. David Madison is a corporate trainer and writer based in New York. He is currently working on two books and maintains a Facebook page about his writings:
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/10-Tough-Problems-in-Christian-Thought-and-Belief/402023826512153>

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

JAN. 9, 2013 (WED.) 7:00 PM
NYC ATHEISTS LIVING W/ ATHEISM
GROUP LEADER: LINDA BLAIKIE



SUBJECT: “DEFENSE MECHANISMS WE USE TO GET THROUGH LIFE, SOME HELPFUL AND SOME DESTRUCTIVE.”

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.

JAN. 13, 2013 (SUN.) 12:00 NOON
NYC ATHEISTS BRUNCH / SPEAKER
SPEAKER: LINDA BLAIKIE



SUBJECT: HOW DO WE SURVIVE THE LOSS

OF A LOVED ONE? Grieving process and recovery.

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

COST: BRUNCH is \$20, which includes a selection of Buffet Entrees, salad, one soft drink, coffee, tax and tip.

JAN. 15, 2013 (TUE.) 7:00PM
NYC ATHEISTS DISCUSSION MEETUP
GROUP LEADER: Dr. David Orenstein



Dr. Orenstein is substituting for Michael Dorian while Michael is on location working on his film.

SUBJECT: “THE RELIGIOUS WAR ON SCIENCE” With Creation Museums, Intelligent Design, home schooling, the stifling of the government's own data for political purposes and the national test scores which show that students aren't learning math and science, we're in a heap of trouble in the U.S.

LOCATION: Stone Creek -140 East 27th St. (3rd/Lex)

COST: Free, but participants are expected to purchase drink or food to compensate Stone Creek for their space.

JAN. 18, 2013 (FRI.) 6:00-7:00PM / HAPPY HOUR - 7:00 PM / NYC ATHEISTS FILM & BOOK CLUB
HOST: Dr. David Orenstein - FILM: “Defending Your Life” is a 1991 romantic comedy-fantasy film about a man who dies and arrives in the afterlife only to find that he must stand trial and justify his lifelong fears in order to advance to the next phase of life or be sent back to earth to do it again. **LOCATION:** Stone Creek -140 East 27th St. (3rd/Lex) - **COST:** Free, but participants are expected to purchase a drink or food to compensate Stone Creek for their space.

JAN. 31, 2013 (THUR.) 6:30 PM - NYC ATHEISTS ANNUAL MEETING
HOST: Kenneth Bronstein - NYC Atheists, President - SUBJECT: 2012 REVIEW / 2013 PLANS
LOCATION: SLC Conference Center–15 West 39th Street – 3rd Floor
COST: We ask for a donation of \$10 to help cover the cost of room rental

UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS
CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

JANUARY 2013

Jan.	9*	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living With Atheism Group
Jan.	13**	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
Jan.	15***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up
Jan.	18***	Fri.	6:00 / 7:00PM	NYCA Happy Hour / Book & Film Club
Jan.	31****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Annual Meeting

FEBRUARY 2013

Feb.	10**	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
Feb.	13*	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living With Atheism Group
Feb.	15***	Fri.	6:00 / 7:00PM	NYCA Happy Hour / Book & Film Club
Feb.	19***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up
Feb.	28****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Annual Meeting

- * Moonstruck Diner – 449 Third Ave. (31st) – 2nd Floor – Manhattan
 ** Press Box Restaurant & Pub – 932 Second Ave. (49/50th St.) – 2nd Floor
 *** Stone Creek Bar and Lounge – 140 East 27th St. (3rd/Lex) – REAR ROOM
 **** SLC Conference Center – 15 WEST 39TH STREET – 3RD FLOOR

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)

NYC Atheists
P.O. Box 6060
NY, NY 10150-6060

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