

NYC ATHEISTS INC.



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AN AFFILIATE OF AMERICAN ATHEISTS

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The 2013 American Atheist Convention...



Kenneth Bronstein



Eric Stone

Firebrand Atheism Works!

Eric Stone, co-leader with his wife Elaine of the Westchester chapter of American Atheists, and Ken Bronstein, NYC Atheists president, report on the American Atheists convention in Austin, Texas, which took place March 29-31, 2013.

Ken Bronstein: The most important news that came out of the American Atheists' (AA) convention in Austin was that "Firebrand Atheism Works!" In fact, the whole theme of this convention, which some said was the biggest and best ever in the history of AA, was that the audacious, in-your-face activism we've engaged in over the past two years or so--the billboards, the lawsuits, the demonstrations, the rallies--has had *proven* positive results!



David Silverman

Eric Stone: AA's president David Silverman showed facts and figures demonstrating that interest in Atheism has grown exponentially *with every one of our public actions*, particularly the Atheist billboards AA has put up nationwide! In his convention-opening speech, Silverman showed the huge audience of 940 attendees the charts and statistics that demonstrated how, by tabulating the number of searches on the internet nationwide for the topic "Atheism," peaks of hits by surfers were recorded that *matched each date of AA's billboard postings* and AA's other public activism. What's more, these peaks of interest in Atheism remained high long after the AA event.

Bronstein: The conclusion couldn't be missed: AA's boldest, most gutsy public activism had a major impact. It attracted the most attention, inspired young

people to check out Atheism online and--most important of all--their interest in Atheism continued long afterwards.

Stone: Silverman showed that other secular groups who didn't do any public activism had no impact whatsoever in the last seven years. They had no traction, they flatlined. His advice to them was: "Get with the program."



Bronstein & Stone visit one of many Austin AA headquarters: 1976 - 1988.

Bronstein: Let's face it, AA's young and dynamic president is a crackerjack marketer. With an MBA in marketing from Penn State University, he knows the value of marketing studies, and he had the facts and figures in front of him to prove *statistically* that Firebrand Atheism works!

We're Winning!

Stone: Dave is also an elegant statistician and an early aficionado of computer science. The best news he presented at that opening session of the convention is that American Atheists is having a major impact. "We're winning," Silverman told the attendees, "so let's keep up the pressure!" It is sharp, bold thinking, and the whole audience gave Silverman a standing ovation. That opening salvo is what gave the convention its upbeat, fun feeling: We're making

progress, we're winning! It's great to be on a winning team.

Bronstein: Word is that this was the "best convention ever," with nearly a thousand attendees from all over the country, including 200 students. I remember just nine years ago we felt lucky to get 300 people to an Atheist convention. The robust attendance in Austin was especially gratifying because we were meeting in the heart of Texas, where AA founder Madalyn Murray O'Hair had her last headquarters, and where she was murdered.



Madalyn Murray O'Hair

This convention marked the 50th anniversary of the founding of AA, and, you know, I felt Madalyn's personality there in Texas, with all the photos of her around and in the AA magazine. Madalyn was a firebrand herself, so she would have loved Dave Silverman's speech about how our daring "firebrand" Atheism is firing up the attention of America.



Jay Jay French

Stone: Madalyn was a strong advocate of getting the attention of Americans and then zapping them with the realities of secularism. It's said she had a great sense of humor, so she would have loved that the 50th anniversary convention in her home town was an energetic, happy one with fun-loving people, a comedy show, a costume banquet and a rock concert. She would have gotten a kick out of knowing that one of the keynote speakers at the convention was Jay Jay French, the lead guitarist of the rock band Twisted Sister, who is also an Atheist.

Art by Atheists Sold Out

Bronstein: I heard the convention was financially successful too. It not only made some profit for AA--which they're going to use to finance next year's convention in Salt Lake City--but all of the exhibitors at the 31 tables in the exhibit halls reported that they made a profit. AA had its first auction of Atheist art--and it totally sold out!

Stone: There was more ethnic participation this year, too. We had representation from the Hispanic American Freethinkers and several Black Atheist groups. More than 50 percent of the speakers were women, and a women's group, the Godless Bitches, gave a podcast.



Frank Zindler

Bronstein: Who were your favorite speakers? I think Dave Silverman gave the most rousing, inspiring speech of his tenure and got the convention rolling. I liked **Frank Zindler's** moving tribute to his wife, Ann, who passed away recently. It was titled "How Religion Killed My Wife." Both Frank and Ann were on the AA Board of Directors dating back to Madalyn Murray O'Hair's time. Frank contended that because religion resisted medical and scientific advances for more than 500 years, the research that would have saved Ann's life was not allowed to be done.



Pete Stark

Remove Congress's Chaplain!

Stone: I liked hearing **Pete Stark**, who was a U.S. congressman from California from 1973 to 2013 and the first legislator to come out publicly as an Atheist. He told the convention that "religion is due to fear." He said we should continue our lawsuits and suggested that we sue to remove the chaplain who services Congress, which, he claimed, is "a violation of church and state to the tune of \$170,000 a year."



Edwina Rogers

Bronstein: **Edwina Rogers** of the Washington DC-based lobbying group, Secular Coalition, made some startling and important points. She noted that religion spends \$390 million a year on lobbying; the Secular Coalition's annual budget is only \$384,000. We Atheists are being out-spent on lobbying by religion 1,000 to one.



A.C. Grayling

Stone: I enjoyed British keynote speaker **A.C. Grayling**. Dawkins has been a frequent visitor to AA events, so I've gotten rather used to having a classy British speaker at our events. It was good to hear Oxford scholar Grayling bring up John Stuart Mill and George Bernard Shaw, both famous British Atheists.

We tend to forget that Great Britain was way ahead of us in venerating its Atheist pundits.



Abby Hafer

Bronstein: Then there was **Abby Hafer**, a convention speaker who also studied at Oxford. She's an anatomy and physiology professor now and the author of "*The Not-So-Intelligent Designer--Ten of God's Biggest Mistakes*"--a great title! I think she was one of the convention's best presenters. She said intelligent design is a political argument, not a scientific one. She pointed out that evolution had resulted in such bad design--both of humans and animals (testicles outside and vulnerable instead of inside and protected as in frogs)--that it couldn't possibly have been done by any "intelligent" deity.



Katherine Stewart

Stone: I found **Katherine Stewart's** account of her investigation of the Good News Club, which is the fundamentalists' disguised attempt to invade our public schools, to be very provocative and troubling. I think her book, also named "**The Good News Club**," is a must-read for me.



Greta Christina

Bronstein: San Francisco writer **Greta Christina** came up with a fascinating point: She asked the audience, "How many of you were once religious?" Many hands went up. She said, "See, it is not futile to argue about religion with believers!" She emphasized that we cannot hope to convince any believer in one talk. We just need to "plant seeds" in their minds.

Pastor 'Saved' by Atheists

Stone: I was very moved by ex-pastor **Jerry**

DeWitt's incredible story. He told about how, after quitting the ministry and coming out as an Atheist, he couldn't get a job in his Texas town and was in dire financial straits. On the very day his house went on the auction block (or back to the bank), all of secularism came together to help rescue him. I feel that what DeWitt did when he had the stage at this convention was elevate secularism and Atheism to that high moral and emotional plane that has been occupied forever only by religion. I think this was one of the main themes of this convention--along with Dave Silverman's strong stand that bold and daring Atheism really works.



Jerry DeWitt

Bronstein: There were so many good speakers at this convention, we can't possibly cover them all, although I must admit I have a soft spot in my heart for **Dale McGowan** and his book, "*Atheism for Dummies*." I'd like to buy a lot of copies and distribute them to the believers I know--or even have the book on our table during our street tabling! McGowan, who hails from Atlanta, is a founding director of the Foundation Beyond Belief, a humanist charitable organization.



Dale McGowan

Stone: Everybody takes away something different from these uplifting conventions. I encourage all our members to plan to come to the next one, which will be in Salt Lake City in 2014. For me, these AA conventions are so inspiring that I go home revitalized and rededicated to the Atheist cause. □

Dr. Eric Stone earned his Ph.D. in psychology at Yale. Prior to his recent retirement, he did advanced research on the brain in academia.

Ken Bronstein has a degree in engineering and Master's degrees in Business and Math.

**LIVE YOUR LIFE
PROUDLY AND HONESTLY
AS AN "OUT" ATHEIST**

**YOU HAVE ONLY ONE LIFE TO LIVE
THIS IS THE ONE**

Why Atheists Should Not Use the Word ‘Spiritual’



By David Madison, PhD

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

– Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*



A few weeks ago there was a bit of a dust-up among New York City Atheists over the use of the word ‘spiritual.’ There were differences of opinion as to whether non-believers can use the word in a meaningful way. For years I have heard people say, “I’m not religious at all, but I am a spiritual person,” and this has always puzzled me. What is the difference? Am I missing something? I’m always suspicious when supposedly non-religious folks claim to be spiritual. To me this is a symptom of fuzzy thinking. Maybe they’re trying to distance themselves from organized religion while saying that issues of deep meaning shouldn’t be thrown out with the bath water: They’re saying God, no; spiritual feeling, yes.

But I don’t buy it. I come down firmly on the side of those who argue that we should abandon the word ‘spiritual.’ Those who like ‘spiritual’ may argue that they know what it means to them—and, like Humpty Dumpty—they feel that “it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.”

Watch Your Words

However, they really can’t get away with this because the word “spsiritual” has so much baggage—just as much baggage as the word ‘religious.’ Albert Einstein found it very irritating that religious people claimed that he was in their camp, because they stretched the meaning of the word. In a 1954 letter he wrote: “It was, of course, a lie what you read about my religious convictions, a lie which is being systematically repeated. I do not believe in a personal god and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly. If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it.” Religious advocates could even use this sentence to insist that Einstein had religious sensibilities, because he could refer to ‘something’ in him that was ‘religious.’ Thus we have to choose our words carefully. We need to work hard to say things that don’t muddy the waters,

and the word ‘spiritual’ is a very muddy one. It reeks of religion and all of its trappings.

There’s No Spiritual World

After all, the word ‘spiritual’ inevitably carries the implication that there is a spiritual realm. Historically this has been its implication, and there is no getting around that. Atheists should stand our ground: there is no evidential basis whatever for a ‘realm of spirits’ that lurks—undetected and unverifiable—beyond the natural world. The word ‘spiritual’ is a slippery slope, because not too far behind is ‘spiritualism,’ which evokes the weird world of séances and ‘getting in touch with the spirits,’ which was a popular pastime in the days of the credulous Arthur Conan Doyle.



No doubt, the claim to be ‘spiritual’ has a lot to do with personal feelings, and personal feelings contribute mightily to fuzzy thinking. But mammalian feelings, generated by and residing in the mammalian brains on one isolated planet, cannot be taken as evidence for a spiritual realm that is built into the working of the Cosmos. This would be as arrogant—no matter how humbly felt—as the claim that prayers are heard. Of course, there is the impulse to hang on to words that have been so entrenched in Western thought. Perhaps it’s analogous to Atheists putting up Christmas decorations. But when we’re engaged in public discourse on such important matters, we should avoid the baggage-laden words.

One of the best attempts I’ve ever seen to salvage the word ‘spiritual’ comes from planetary scientist and astro-physicist David Grinspoon, in his clever book, *Lonely Planets: A Natural Philosophy of Alien Life*. One of his childhood buddies was Carl Sagan’s son Dorion, so he knew the great Carl; no wonder he ended up becoming a planetary scientist. In this book he confesses that “monotheism is not his cup of tea,” and asks:

“What is spirituality, anyway? How should I know? Do I look like the Dalai Lama? But what I mean by spirituality is the religious impulse stripped of religion. Spirituality is what’s left when you peel away all of the

inconsistencies in the lessons and the stories.”

To which he adds:

“I see spirituality as an intuitive awareness of the internal and external forces impelling us to realize our place within this complexifying, unfolding, self-seeking, beauty-reeking cosmos of ours.” (both quotes, page 412 of his book)

That’s great, but dammit, if people hear atheists talking about being spiritual, they won’t appreciate the qualifiers and subtleties involved here. We should not use the word ‘spiritual,’ but instead take a few more words to get it right. We could talk about our “unbounded admiration for the structure of the world” (Einstein) and our “intuitive awareness of our place

within this beauty-reeking cosmos of ours (Grinspoon).

Unless you want people to think you believe that old Scottish prayer...

*From ghoulies and ghosties
And long-leggedy beasties
And things that go bump in the night,
Good Lord, deliver us!*

...I suggest you give wide berth to all things spiritual.
□

Dr. David Madison is a former pastor who earned his Ph.D. in Biblical Studies from Boston University. A nonbeliever today, he uses his broad skill set as a director in a career coaching firm.



Longtime NYCA Member Edith Amster Dies

Edith Amster, a longtime member of New York City Atheists Inc., died on March 16, 2013 in New York Downtown Hospital. Hospital spokespeople said her death was caused by complications of autoimmune hemolytic anemia. Edith Klein Amster was born in Norwalk, Conn. in 1932, the only child of a couple who immigrated from Hungary. Edith’s father died when she was eight and her mother remarried a Mr. Klein, whose name Edith took. She graduated from Southern Connecticut State University with a degree in Education. She taught special education for many years. In 1981, she married Gerry Amster, with whom she conducted a temporary-staffing business. They were divorced in the late 1990s; Mr. Amster died in 2004.

In the earlier days of NYCA, Edith conducted a Movie Night for NYCA, showing Atheist-related films in the public meeting room of the downtown high-rise where she lived. In her later years, she was known for her astuteness as a bridge player and the perky emails she sent out to everybody each morning, talking of news events that day. She will also be remembered for her strong voice and feistiness. Edith is survived by her close friend and companion of recent years, Wally Berliner of New Jersey. □

Renew your NYC Atheists Inc. Membership!

Your dues and contributions to NYCA (educational 501- C3) are 100% tax deductible.

If you are a basic member now, consider increasing to a higher category: Basic \$ 25.

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 our website: **www.nyc-atheists.org**

And remember NYCA in your estate planning! Why leave your money to a religious person?

Our civil rights efforts for Atheist 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.

State By State, Conservatives Are Sneaking Their Agenda Into U.S. Laws



By Tyson Gill, PhD

Over the last few years the Conservative Right has launched a massive campaign of state-by-state legislation to advance its agenda. The campaign is unprecedented in sheer volume and audacity. They have clearly decided that whatever they cannot accomplish at the national level they will force through by sheer persistence and at the state level.

As part of their state-by-state strategy, Conservatives have pursued hundreds of initiatives to bypass or override Federal restrictions, Supreme Court rulings and Constitutional barriers. The scope and range of their initiatives has been mind-boggling. To list just a few:

- To establish personhood, mandate ultrasounds and create abortion clinic trap laws
- To limit affirmative action, collective bargaining and labor rights
- To restrict and discourage voting by largely Democrat demographic groups
- Rollback health reforms, environmental protections and corporate limits
- Install non-Democrat executive managers in Michigan and eventually across the country

These areas and others are being aggressively pursued from every possible angle in every possible state. And they don't just try once and give up. They introduce them over and over and over again. In Michigan, when the voters repealed the "emergency manager" law, their lawmakers simply reinstated it again. By deluging their opponents with overwhelming numbers of challenges to defend against, many get through even the most ardent opposition.

A State Religion?

Given this recent history, we Atheists should have seen their latest attack coming a mile off. In North Carolina, legislators introduced a bill on April 1 (but it was no joke) called the "Rowan County Defense of Religion Act." It declared that:

"The North Carolina General Assembly does not recognize federal court rulings which prohibit and otherwise regulate the State of North Carolina, its

public schools, or any political subdivisions of the State from making laws respecting an establishment of religion."

According to the Huffington Post:

"The North Carolina bill seeks to play the First Amendment both ways. It says that the state is exempted from the establishment clause under the First Amendment, which establishes the 'separation of church and state.' The clause reads that 'Congress shall make no law respecting an Establishment of Religion.' But the North Carolina bill asserts that prohibition does not apply 'to states, municipalities or schools' and that North Carolina could establish a state religion. The bill portrays this reasoning as a protection of the freedom of religion."

On April 4, the Republican Speaker of the North Carolina House killed this particular legislation. But Atheists and anyone who believes in the Separation of Church and State should take this as a rude wake-up call. The Conservatives will not be dissuaded. This was just the opening salvo in what will undoubtedly be an endless, relentless campaign to extend their state-by-state strategy of attacks on our First Amendment.

We will soon see variations of these initiatives in every state where Republicans think they have even the slimmest chance of success. If we do not take this warning call seriously and respond aggressively and effectively, they will achieve some successes and we will see religion seeping through the cracks that they create in the wall of separation between church and state. Soon we may find that we live in a country with 50 different variations of our effective separation of church and state.

And even if you are in a safely Blue state, these Red-state efforts have impact on you. Each state where they manage to push through their measures adds to the weight of precedent for eventual actions at the federal level. We urge you to follow these initiatives and take whatever action you can to block them in every state.

Dr. Tyson Gill is the author of "Belief in Science and The Science of Belief--A Guidebook to Fact-Based Thinking," available on Amazon.com.

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

SAVE THE DATE
NYC ATHEISTS SUMMER SOLSTICE COMEDY SHOW (JUNE 21 - FRIDAY)

MAY 8, 2013 (WED.) 7:00 PM
NYC ATHEISTS LIVING W/ ATHEISM
GROUP LEADER: LINDA BLAIKIE, L.C.S.W.



SUBJECT: Are Atheists obligated to "respect" religion? Are believers obligated to respect Atheism?

And just what is meant by "respect?" What are the consequences of being, or seeming to be, disrespectful to religious beliefs and customs?

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.

MAY 12, 2013 (SUN.) 12 NOON
NYC ATHEISTS BRUNCH

SPEAKER: GARY BERTON

President: Thomas Paine National Historical Assn.



SUBJECT: THOMAS PAINE

Paine's *Common Sense* pamphlet inspired American patriots in 1776 to declare independence from Britain. He has been called "a corset maker by trade, a journalist by profession, and a propagandist by inclination."

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.

MAY 17, 2013 (FRI.)
6:00-6:30 PM / HAPPY HOUR
6:30 PM / NYCA FILM & BOOK CLUB

HOST: Dr. David Orenstein



BOOK: Atheist Coloring Book – Who knew?

Disturbing Bible Stories presents: Does the Bible Really Say That? A coloring book for children and adults that reveals the nasty things in the Bible that they didn't want you to know about.

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.

MAY 21, 2013 (TUE.) 7:00PM
NYC ATHEISTS DISCUSSION MEETUP

GROUP LEADER: MICHAEL DORIAN



SUBJECT: Michael will have a provocative topic, as usual. Come, enjoy an evening of discussion and banter in a relaxed atmosphere among friends.

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.

MAY 30, 2013 (THUR.) 6:30PM
NYC ATHEISTS MONTHLY MEETING

SUBJECT: We present, "**CONSPIRACY ROAD TRIP,**" an amazing British TV show where five religious fundamentalists are shown scientific evidence that their beliefs are invalid and their reaction to that.

NOT TO BE MISSED!

LOCATION: SLC Conference Center– 15 West 39th St. (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

MAY 2013

May	8*	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living With Atheism Group
May	12**	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
May	17***	Fri.	6:00 / 6:30 PM	NYCA Happy Hour / Book & Film Club
May	21***	Tue,	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up Discussion Group
May	30****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

JUNE 2013

June	9**	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
June	12*	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living With Atheism Group
June	18***	Tue,	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up Discussion Group
June	21*****	Fri.	6:30 PM	NYCA Sumner Solstice Comedy Show
June	27****	Thur.	6:30PM	NYCA Monthly 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
 ***** TBA

NYCA CABLE SHOWS

			<u>TWC</u>	<u>RCN</u>	<u>FIOS</u>
Wednesdays:	5:30 PM	Atheism in History	57	84	35
	6:30 PM	This Week in Atheism	57	84	35
Thursdays:	5:00 PM	NYC Atheists	67	85	36
	5:30 PM	Atheists Book Club	67	85	36

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