

NYC ATHEISTS INC.



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AN AFFILIATE OF AMERICAN ATHEISTS

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KENNETH BRONSTEIN

PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"

Are You Living a Life That Matters?

Socrates famously stated, at one point in his life, "The unexamined life is not worth living." He must have been an Atheist because most of us feel that way too. But as a modern-day Atheist, I feel Socrates didn't go far enough: You not only need to examine your life--you also need to optimize it.



SOCRATES

What do I mean by "optimizing" your life? Suppose you had a sleek car that could do 100 miles per hour with no effort but you only drove it at 55 miles per hour. That would be sub-optimization of the car. Are you also sub-optimizing yourself? Are you coasting along at 55 mph when your mind and body were made for 100 mph?

Atheists believe that because there is no afterlife, they need to optimize their life on earth. That means if you are unhappy in your job, marriage or relationship, get out of it!

It also means educating yourself through the media, travel, reading, lectures. It means pouring yourself, with no reservations, into what you feel passionate about, be it a hobby, sports, research, literature or the arts. It means exploring the meaning, for you, of what's coming to the fore today in science, technology, politics, evolution. It means being tuned into the world and acting upon it.

Optimizing your life means enhancing your special abilities and giving them to the world even if you are limited in some way--like singer Stevie Wonder, who is blind; Stephen Hawking, who is paralyzed; or Temple Grandin, the animal scientist who has autism. All of these people live fully optimized lives and contribute immensely to our world, so don't give me any excuses.

I don't think religious people can optimize their lives very well. They are restricted by relying on the Torah/Bible/Koran as their guidebooks for life. They are programmed by their religion, their church dogma, their catechism, their traditions. They are shackled by whatever they think god wants them to be or do. They are restrained by the parish, their customs, their church, their mosque, their synagogue. How can a religious person even find out who they are or what they feel, they are so manacled by what their religion expects them to be and do.



Torah

Bible,

Koran

Atheists, on the other hand, understand the importance of curiosity, skepticism, reason and rationalism in exploring life. I'm sure it was an Atheist colleague who said, "To be human is to think, appraise and explore the world, discovering new sources of material and the pleasure of happiness, self achievement and fulfilling goals without hurting yourself or others." Notice our sage says nothing there about obeying god, praying or sacrificing.

The Freedom of Atheism

Another colleague, recently turned Atheist, said to me, "As an Atheist, I appreciate life now. I am free to question, to explore, to help others live a better life. I am not fearful of death. I am not always trying to do 'what god wants' because I am afraid of going to hell; I am not doing silly rituals. I know now I must make the most of my awesome life."

Another Atheist friend described why he felt he is able to live a moral life without religion: "Being a good person is really easy: Live an honest life, do good to

others, do no harm. There is no need for ritual, no bloody sacrifices, no fancy preachers begging me for money. Now I can help people who really need it with that money. My life is wonderful as an Atheist.”

The Beauty of Science

And, of course, there is our dedication to and inspiration by science that enhances our Atheist lives. Some 90 percent of scientists are said to be Atheists. I don't recall what genius said the following but I'm convinced they were Atheist: “Science seeks the truth. And it does not discriminate. For better or worse, it finds things out. Science is humble. It knows what it knows and it knows what it doesn't know. It bases its conclusions and beliefs on hard evidence--evidence that is constantly updated and upgraded. It doesn't get offended when new facts come along. It embraces the body of knowledge. It doesn't hold on to medieval practices because they are tradition. If it did, you wouldn't get a shot of penicillin, you'd pop a leech down your trousers and pray. Whatever you may 'believe,' that is not effective as medicine.”

Kosher Does Not Make You Good

Religious people often compartmentalize the different aspects of their religion. By that I mean they cherry-pick the parts they like in the Bible, the Koran or the Torah and focus on that. I often visit the B & H Camera shop in Manhattan, which is run by Hassidic Jews. They know that I am an Atheist, and they can't resist always asking me the same questions about Atheism. But they tell me they are happy with their Judaism. When I ask them why they keep Kosher, they answer “Jewish law.” I respond, “Try bacon. You may give up being Kosher.” We all have a big laugh.



B & H EMPLOYEE

The point is, being Kosher does not make you a good person. Or even a good Jew, for that matter. When I encounter religious people, or when we do street tabling, I do not try to push Atheism; rather, I stress that they should *question* their beliefs. Some Christians have said to me, “Jesus makes me happy.” or “Jesus is my

master.” One woman told me at street tabling that when she has a problem, “I throw it out to god and it becomes His problem.” How can an Atheist even respond to that? I could only say, “But there's no one there to solve your problem. You know, you are quite capable of solving your problems yourself.”

Don't Need god to Optimize

Atheists do indeed pride themselves on solving problems here on earth without the aid of fairies or other invisible beings. We use reason, science, mathematics, labor. We help each other. It's a fact: Those nations known to have high degrees of Atheism tend to have the lowest homicide rates, lowest infant mortality, lowest poverty and illiteracy rates, and they boast the highest levels in the world of wealth, life expectancy, educational attainment and gender equality.



RED & BLUE STATES

In the U.S., the conservative and religious “red states”--those that traditionally vote Republican--are known to have statistically higher rates of crime, divorce, poverty and school dropouts than the more liberal and less religious “blue states” that traditionally vote Democratic. Some nonbelievers have used this data to bolster their argument that religion doesn't make people moral--in fact, it does just the opposite.

What all this shows is that when freed from the constraints of religion, countries are better able to optimize themselves and individuals better able to optimize their lives. Atheists, that's our goal! Some of us may not be able to optimize our lives just yet; we do, after all, live in a religion-besotted nation. But we must keep our eyes on the goal--optimization for all humans, for all nations--and work diligently to advance our secular values. How about this for our new slogan, folks: Optimize Your Life through Atheism. ☐

RELIGION:

**TAX EXEMPT
CASH BUSINESS**

PRAYER:

**TALKING TO
ONESELF**

Editor's Q and A

The Ethical Culture Society Says It is Holier Than Thou

By Jane Everhart

Dear Editor,

I am never surprised at dissension within the nonbeliever ranks but recently I was shocked to see, in the November issue of the official newsletter of the Ethical Culture Society, this rankling paragraph below, written by one of the Ethical Society leaders, a Dr. Joseph Chuman. I am wondering what you think of his view of Atheism:

“Ethical Culture, which construes itself as a religious world-view, is not by definition anti-religious. We, no doubt, stand opposed to those religious doctrines and actions which denigrate or oppress the human being. But we are ready to make common cause with those moderate and liberal religious groups that share our progressive vision of a just society and a dignified humanity. Atheism, by contrast, and organizations dedicated to promoting atheism, exist to oppose and attack religion, and seemingly little else. While an atheist stance arguably liberates the human mind from superstition and irrationality, atheist groups seem to have no social program, no positive vision of social reform, no commitment to social engagement. Politically, atheism can espouse a reactionary politics as readily as it does a progressive one. Beyond its liberatory function, cited above, atheism is a negative philosophy. Ethical Culture, as a humanism based on the active fulfillment of Ethical Ideals, is positive.”

I think the above is literally a blast from the past against Atheism. What do you think?

--Randy from the Upper West Side

Dear Randy,

I was so sorry to read the above paragraph written by an Ethical Culture Society leader. I have been to many Ethical Culture events over the years (35 years, to be exact) and enjoyed them (many of us nonbelievers “double-dip”--that is, attend events of other like-minded organizations) but after reading Chuman’s paragraph above, I’m not sure that I, as an Atheist, would feel welcome at the Ethical Culture Society.

I have always liked the well-meaning people at Ethical Culture, but over the years the Society did not answer my basic need (some would say my passion) to work for what I consider a seminal cause--the cause to beat all causes, the cause that would, in the end, enable all the reforms Ethical

Culture espouses--and that larger cause was the elimination of the vast, corrupting and strangling influence of religious institutions on our government, our schools, our science and our research.

Some 10 years ago, that overriding cause became, for me, the modern Atheist movement. My feeling was then, and still is: Let the Ethical Culturists focus on their piecemeal reforms, I want to put my time and energy on the Big Cause that I hoped would enable Ethical Culture to carry out its reforms.

We Are Enabling Ethical's Reforms

For example, consider one of the causes that Ethical Culture has been working on for many years, the elimination of capital punishment. One of our society’s biggest opponents--if not *the* biggest opponent to the elimination of this kind of government-sanctioned killing--is the right-wing religious sector. If, by working for NYC Atheists’ top priority, the separation of church and state, we can help eliminate the influence of the right-wing religionists, then Ethical Culture would certainly have a better chance of eliminating this institutional killing.

Another of Ethical Culture’s well-known causes is aiding the victims of domestic violence, those frightened and beaten women who need to flee from their violent husbands. Religion has been historically ambivalent on this problem: the Bible sanctions wife-beating and urges women to obey their husbands no matter what. The Catholic church does not sanction divorce no matter what the circumstances (although in recent times, you can buy an annulment if you have enough money). In Jewish sects, it is almost impossible for the wife to get a divorce (a “get”) without the permission of her husband. It seems to me that even for this popular Ethical Culture cause, eliminating the religious influence from the equation is central.

Religion Thwarts Ethical's Causes

In other words, I believe Dr. Chuman is overlooking the underlying barrier toward almost any reform Ethical Culture tries to tackle: Religion. As Atheists, we believe that the separation of religion from anything that requires government policy or government sanction *is the first order*. I think the Ethical Culture Society is trying to put

its finger into every hole in the dike and ignoring the bigger picture: that religion is knocking down the whole dike just beyond their vision.

The president of NYC Atheists, Kenneth Bronstein, feels even more strongly than I that separation of church and state is the most important cause in our society at this moment in history, and that anything less than eliminating religion from our government constitutes ignoring, or not recognizing, the deepest, most pervasive influence on our society's problems.

The Enemy Within the Movement

Bronstein notes that we have enemies within the secular movement, and the reason they are our enemy, he says, is: "they bash us." Bronstein feels strongly that leaders of other secular organizations can, and should, publicly state their *own* position but to strike out at us by stating, as Dr. Chuman does when he says, "...atheist groups seem to have no social program, no positive vision of social reform, no commitment to social engagement" is simply wrong. It undermines our efforts and, in the end, is an aid to our opposition. It is obvious to anyone that we Atheists have an overwhelming vision of social reform that is above and beyond the piecemeal single causes that Ethical Culture focuses on.

"The key point here is that the Atheist movement--which includes American Atheists, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, NYC Atheists and many other hardworking groups--focuses on separation of church and state, and that's where we're going to remain," says Bronstein. "The focus of groups like Ethical Culture is different. For us, getting involved in capital punishment is tangential to what we're trying to do. There are plenty of groups that focus on that specific issue. Any individual can work with them. We're focusing on separation of church and state, which we think is more important."

A Mistake to Trust Religion

But let's take a couple of Chuman's statements and we'll tell you where we think he's wrong:

Chuman says: "*We [Ethical Culture] are ready to make common cause with those moderate and liberal religious groups that share our progressive vision of a just society and a dignified humanity.*"

We say, dream on, Mr. Chuman. Religion is not going to come to your side. Bronstein points out that when the celebrated biologist E.O. Wilson of Harvard decided to work with the more-progressive religious groups, he picked an issue he felt they all could agree on--the environment. But he famously ended up disappointed and discouraged and wrote frankly about it in academic

journals: Though some religious groups initially joined him in a pro-environment "proclamation," that was the end of it. Wilson learned quickly that religious groups didn't really want to get involved. Their chief mission was to get everybody to accept Jesus. They basically believe that god would take care of the environment.

Chuman says: "*Atheism...and organizations dedicated to promoting atheism, exist to oppose and attack religion and seemingly little else.*"

We say: Chuman reveals how little he knows about Atheism. "He apparently doesn't understand that we're not trying to destroy religion," says Bronstein. "Do we think that religion should be less important? Yes! We want to expose what organized religion is doing to our society for two reasons: One, religion has policies that are detrimental to society and to the world, such as holding back progress and sabotaging science. Secondly, we are trying to get closeted Atheists to "come out" and join us. But we're never going to destroy religion. They are doing a good job of that on their own."

Chuman says: "*Politically atheism can espouse a reactionary politics as readily as it does a progressive one.*"

NYCA does not, as a group, "espouse" reactionary politics. However, we do not ask members what their politics are when they join. We are aware we may have some Libertarians in the group but, as long as the Libertarians vote firmly with us on the issue of separation of church and state, we have no objection, since we are basically a single-issue organization. As an open-to-the-public association, we do not discriminate on any basis. Ironically, Chuman says Ethical Culture is "ready to make common cause" with religious groups. If you want to find reactionaries, Mr. Chuman, you are heading in the right direction. If you succeed in making common cause with religious folk, you are soon going to be wallowing in reactionaries.

A Little Respect, Please

I would like to invite Dr. Chuman to find out more about us by attending one of NYCA's educational lectures or by borrowing Richard Dawkins' "The God Delusion" from our NYCA library. I would like to say to him, if I ever meet him in person, "We are the ones you should make common cause with, not religion."

I would also like to say to Chuman: "You claim that Ethical Culturists have respect and reverence for the innate dignity of every human man, woman and child? Well, Mr. Chuman, how about projecting some of that respect and reverence our way?" □

Why Atheism Is a Vital Cause for Me



By Tyson Gill, PhD

Of all the questions that we Atheists get asked, of all the unintentional criticisms, perhaps the most common and the most confounding is, “Why bother with Atheism?” It often gets posed with utmost sincerity by our most like-minded friends and associates. Implicit in the question is their bewilderment as to why we would focus so much attention and efforts on something so – “hollow.”

They think Atheism is just another expression of belief, but even worse, they see it is a negative position, a belief in nothing. They think of it as offering nothing affirmative to improve the human condition. It is a waste of time that seems unworthy of our efforts, they say. Our preoccupation with Atheism seems to them as misdirected as dedicating one’s energies in fighting against a belief in the Easter Bunny.

How to Answer Critics

This questioning of the value of Atheism as an important social cause is legitimate and deserves a really good answer.

You might start by pointing out that opposing belief in god isn’t comparable to opposing a belief in the Easter Bunny. People don’t actively worship the Easter Bunny and base their social and political decisions on egg-mythology. They don’t organize to impose laws on all of us based upon divining Easter Bunny droppings. They don’t insist upon teaching the Great Colored Egg story of creation as science in our classrooms. If they did, then it would be quite necessary to become a reluctant warrior standing actively in opposition to bunny beliefs.

Stand Up Against Wrongs

Then you can point out that there is nothing base or ignoble about standing in opposition to something dangerous or wrong. We consider it quite laudable to stand in principled opposition to all sorts of ideas and behaviors in our common social ecosystem. Movements stand in proud opposition to war, bigotry, racism, poverty, drug-abuse and all manner of social ills. Those who believe in god stand in principled opposition to abortion and religious discrimination. Why are those principled oppositions somehow more admirable than standing firmly in opposition to scientific ignorance and superstition?

Standing in opposition is not a hollow stance. Atheism is

not a shallow worldview lacking its own deeply rooted underpinnings. Standing in opposition generally means that you stand firmly in support of a richly affirmative alternative. For Atheists, standing in opposition to belief is inherently a passionate advocacy of a world based on science, reason and profoundly humanist values.

Fact-Based Thinking Is Crucial

But while our friends might sympathize with our passion, many might still consider it unfortunate that we do not dedicate our efforts to some other social cause that is more worthy; a cause like fighting cancer or improving education or any number of social issues that are far more attainable and important. With so many vital and important causes that deserve our attention, why Atheism?

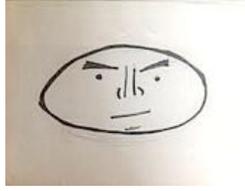
It is not difficult to address this question of priority. Most Atheists pick their battle over Atheism because they judge that fact and evidence-based thinking is a fundamental prerequisite to overcoming the great host of challenges we face as a species. Many choose it precisely because far too few are willing to push back publicly against our debilitating deference toward religion, new-age thinking and faith-based beliefs of all kinds.

When Religion Has No Power...

Lastly, be sure to discuss what may be the final concern of your dear friend. This is the assumption that religion is essential to accomplishing good works in the world--that a society based on secular values would be cold and heartless. Certainly many churches do good works and our Atheist community must continually strive to do more. But it is not a given that faith is necessary for good works. One might argue that some people do some good with guns, or that some armies fight good wars, but to suggest that guns and wars are essential to a humane and sustainable planet is simply not a valid conclusion.

You can close by pointing out that if one day, belief becomes marginalized, if it becomes relegated to the lunatic fringe who hold no sway over public policy, then Atheists will be happy to lay down the burden of this particular struggle. But that would not mean their lives would be suddenly devoid of purpose. Rather, they will still continue to stand in support of a world based on facts, on science, on humanist ethics and sane, realistic responses to the very real struggles we face as a species. □

Easy Activism: How I Do it and You Can Too



By Joey Galker

When I'm feeling frustrated about a political issue, I might open a can of Rolling Rock or sometimes I do a little lobbying to tell my representatives what I want them to do. Last night, I sent emails to Obama, Biden, Gillibrand, Schumer and Congresswoman what's-her-name. I don't think that sending an email is going to bring on the revolution; I'm realistic, not optimistic. But sending an email has more potential effect than doing nothing.

I'm not even optimistic about these emails ending abuse of the First Amendment any time soon, but sending them only took about 10 minutes. And it's probably not unreasonable to think that my emails will be used as data points in a tally of potential voters who are motivated enough by some issue to send an email.

Here's how I do it and you can, too:

- Find the official contact page, enter the required information, (which includes your address), enter your message and click "send."
- To find the page, just google something like "contact Obama" or "contact Senator Schumer."
- If you want Congresswoman what's-her-name, google "find U.S. congress" and enter your zip code in place of the name you don't remember.

- For your reps in the NY State Senate, the NY State Assembly or the NYC Council, go to the main page of the legislature's official website and look for where it says something like "find your representative."

For my message, I try to get to the point with just a few words because if anyone reads my email, it's going to be an assistant, maybe an intern or a volunteer, who does no more than keep tallies of thumbs-up and thumbs-down on particular issues. So I type something easy to understand like, "Against renting space in NYC public schools for religious services. Support separation of church and state. Atheists vote." Or, "Stand fast against the enemies of Obamacare. Atheists vote." You might think supporting Obamacare isn't a prime Atheist issue but it makes the point that Atheists care about issues and are likely to vote.

My neighborhood makes political contributions at 15 times the national average, so it's not surprising that my representatives are progressive and agree with me on Obamacare. But they are noncommittal, or maybe uninformed, about explicit secular issues. So they may not want to stick their necks out for what might be a no-win issue that most voters never heard of. To bait the hook, if I'm really willing to help them get re-elected, I add that they can contact me to volunteer for the next election.

Letter to the Editor

To the Editor:

I read your article about Atheism's Youth Issue ("*To Those Who Claim Atheism Has a Youth Issue: Not to Worry!*" by Jane Everhart - July/August 2013 newsletter). As usual, you are on the money with your opinion. I think another reason for the apparent lack of young people in the Atheist movement is the result of a lack of time. Time is money and most young adults are very busy pursuing their careers. They don't have time to attend too many meetings unless the subject of those meetings directly affects their livelihood and/or personal lives. This does not mean that they are any less Atheistic in their orientation. It just signifies that they are not

interested in attending meetings. Perhaps creating situations where they can expand their social contacts with those of their own age is a good approach. I know NYCA is trying to create more of these types of programs and I wish you success in doing so.

--Gloria Kingsley
Astoria

(Editor's response: Our third-Tuesday-of-the-Month Discussion Group, led by Michael Dorian, is primarily for young people. We have also found that our Support Group, led by Linda Blaikie, is popular with young people, as is our Book and Film Club, led by David Orenstein.)

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

NOVEMBER 10, 2013 (SUN.) 12 NOON
NYC ATHEISTS BRUNCH

SUBJECT: TALKING BACK TO DAWKINS



We will watch and discuss the video of Richard Dawkins Q & A at our recent September Monthly meeting. A second chance to hear our Atheist hero!

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.

NOVEMBER 13, 2013 (WED.) 7:00 PM
NYC ATHEISTS LIVING W/ ATHEISM

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



SUBJECT: How to Compete Productively:
What and who makes you competitive? When is it not appropriate?

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.

NOVEMBER 15, 2013 (FRI.)
NYC ATHEISTS BOOK AND FILM CLUB

GROUP LEADER: DAVID ORENSTEIN



6:00 PM: HAPPY HOUR
6:30 PM: BOOK & FILM CLUB

BOOK: A.C. GRAYLINGS' BOOK, "THE GOD ARGUMENT: THE CASE AGAINST RELIGION AND FOR HUMANISM."
READ CHAPTERS 3, 4, 14 AND 17.

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.

NOVEMBER 19, 2013 (TUE.) 7:00PM
NYC ATHEISTS DISCUSSION MEETUP

GROUP LEADER: MICHAEL DORIAN



SUBJECT: Why did the U.S. organizers of the British-initiated "Sunday Assembly" split from the Brits to form their own Sunday event, "The Godless Revival"? Special guests Lee Moore, host of A News, an Atheist news blog, and Don Kennedy Albert, former musical director for SA-NY.

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.

NOVEMBER 21, 2013 (THUR.) 6:30PM
NYC ATHEISTS MONTHLY MEETING

SPEAKER: LIZ HEYWOOD



SUBJECT: CHILD VICTIMS OF RELIGIOUS ABUSE.

Liz Heywood grew up in the Christian Science Church. When she was 13 years old, Liz contracted a life-threatening bone disease, but her parents never took her to a doctor, relying instead on prayer as the only "treatment." The infection destroyed Liz's knee and she had to have her leg amputated. Liz is now campaigning for mandatory health care for religious children.

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.

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

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UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS
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NOVEMBER 2013

NOV.	10*	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
NOV.	13**	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living With Atheism Group
NOV.	15***	Fri.	6:00 / 6:30 PM	NYCA Happy Hour / Book & Film Club
NOV.	19***	Tue,	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up Discussion Group
NOV.	21****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

DECEMBER 2013

DEC.	8*	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
DEC.	11**	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living With Atheism Group
DEC.	17***	Tue,	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up Discussion Group
DEC.	20***	Fri.	6:00 / 6:30 PM	NYCA Happy Hour / Book & Film Club
DEC.	21*****	Sat.	6:30 PM	NYCA WINTER SOLSTICE PARTY

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