

NYC ATHEISTS INC.



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AN AFFILIATE OF AMERICAN ATHEISTS

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American Atheists 2014 Convention:

Firebrand Atheists Invade Mormon City for 2014 National Convention

AA Prez Publicly Challenges Mormon Beliefs



By Jane Everhart with Dr. Eric Stone

Salt Lake City, Utah--What would you think would happen if a group of Atheists, some 800 strong, invaded this Mormon headquarters city for a three-day pow-wow? Knowing the sharp economic acuity of the Mormons, you might expect them to welcome the Atheist celebrants because their presence brings business to local hoteliers and restaurants.

That's exactly what the Mormons did on the 2014 Easter weekend, when American Atheists (AA) held its annual convention in the heart of the biggest cult in the nation, Mormonism. The Mormon stronghold quietly accepted Atheists in this Oz-like city, gave us tours of their Temple grounds and politely debated us.



Protester placard outside our hotel

But throw into the mix the daily picketers outside our convention hotel sporting placards that said things like "JESUS IS THE ANSWER," along with the refusal of any local advertising firms in Salt Lake City or environs to put up our billboards, plus subtle attempts to convert us to Mormonism--and the Mormon welcome seems a bit dissembling.

The mixed welcome of the Mormon hosts became obvious at an ad hoc panel discussion on April 16, the eve of the April 17-20 convention, when AA president David Silverman, along with Joanne Hanks, (an ex-Mormon and ex-polygamist, author of a memoir exposing Mormonism, *It's Not About the Sex, My Ass*) faced two Mormon professors from Brigham Young University in front of a packed auditorium at the Salt Lake City Library.

AA Prez Takes On Mormons

The panel discussion started out politely with Mormon Professor Richard Holzapfel giving a pitch about the "inclusiveness and expansiveness" of the Mormon community. But the cordiality soon froze as Silverman differed with the two Mormons.



Jane Everhart with Dave Silverman, who is dressed as Mormon founder Joseph Smith and carries the "magic hat" at AA Costume Party.

"Inclusive? You don't include us!" Silverman retorted, complaining that not a single advertising business in the area would work with AA to put up Atheist billboards before the convention. Silverman also brought up the Mormon customs of shunning, polygamy and baptizing dead strangers, and the discussion became less genial as

the Mormon professors defended their faith. “Where is your evidence?” countered Silverman. “Show us the evidence!” For a moment, the two Mormon professors faltered. Then the younger, Professor JB Haws, cleared his throat and offered a response:

“The evidence is personal,” he said. “It is in things like love, and awe at the beauty of a sunset.”

An audible groan swept through the auditorium, which was packed to the gills with Atheists who had arrived early for the convention. The few Mormons in the audience applauded.

“That’s not evidence!” retorted Silverman. This writer, sitting in the audience with other Atheists, was appalled that two college professors, persons of scholarly stature in their societies, evidently did not understand what constituted scientific evidence.

Mormon Profs Lash Back

When Silverman brought up common criticisms against the Mormons such as their engagement in shunning, polygamy, neglect of their needy and Mormonism’s history of violence, the Brigham Young professors had a ready answer: “Those Mormons are not us,” a professor said. “Those are *other* Mormons.”

Prof. Holzapfel argued that these rogue Mormons are like “East European dictators who were Atheists and the Southeast Asian atheists who killed people.” The professor had evidently done some superficial homework on atheism and was prepared to use a spurious comparison.

(For the record, anybody can call themselves an Atheist and there is nothing we can do about it. It simply means they do not believe in god. But Atheist *organizations* do not sanction their actions, have never conducted wars or massacres and to the best of our knowledge, have never killed anybody. This is different from a religious organization that vigorously recruits members who must accept the Mormon party line, and then disavows them when they hue to other versions of that party line.)

A City Resembling Oz

But there was no denying that Mormons have succeeded economically in making their headquarters city into their version of a Garden of Eden. Or, to an Atheist sensibility, a kind of Oz. The vast grounds surrounding the Mormon Temple are precisely landscaped with gardens filled with colorful flowers. Fresh-faced young Mormon girls are available as tour guides, two by two, to show visitors around the Temple grounds. The cleanliness and precise order of the Mormons’ property is exemplary.

Interestingly, NYCA president Ken Bronstein and this writer came across a Mormon Elder who offered to show

us around the Temple grounds. Charles, 82, had a prodigious knowledge of Mormon history which he was delighted to share with us. But when Bronstein told our voluntary guide that there are police records showing the founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, had been arrested and jailed in upstate New York in 1826 for conning people that he could find buried gold with a “magic hat,” our tour guide Elder Charles feigned surprise and claimed to have never heard this before.

Keynote Talk by Sports Figure

Despite the shadow of the Mormon temple over our convention site, the upscale Hilton hotel in downtown Salt Lake City, the 2014 American Atheists convention blossomed with some 43 speakers, four comedians, two banquets, a Costume Party and a local band, Bramble.



Chris Kluwe

Keynote speaker Chris Kluwe, a football player who spent eight seasons with the Minnesota Vikings, surprised the AA audience by demonstrating that a star athlete can be an intellectual, an Atheist and an advocate for liberal causes. He is also the author of *Beautifully Unique Sparkleponies: On Myths, Morons, Free Speech, Football and Assorted Absurdities*, a humorous memoir published by Little Brown and Company.

“Kluwe is a strong advocate against war,” says Dr. Eric Stone of Walnut Creek, CA, co-reporter for this newsletter. “He argues that the empathy of Americans towards those who are less fortunate lags way behind our technology, which has been evolving exponentially. We are like chimpanzees with machine guns.”

To the North Pole at Age 75



Barbara Hillary

Another star in the Atheist speaker firmament was Barbara Hillary, who, in 2007, at age 75, became the first African-American woman to reach the North Pole. In 2011, at age 79, she became the first African-American woman to reach both Poles. Feisty, well spoken, Hillary recalled that at age 70, she had asked herself “Have I done everything I want to do in life?” and the answer was “No.” She decided that the one thing no woman of her race had ever done was go to the North or South Pole, and this was something she was going to do while she was still on her feet.

As a professional nurse in excellent health, she was able to pass the stamina tests and surpass her Russian guides; Power Point photos projected on screen showed her in her anorak standing in front of the tent where she slept in temperatures -20 to -40 degrees F.

“Her point was, this is what freethinking can enable you to achieve even when you are old, Black and female,” noted Dr. Stone, who is a research scientist in psychology. Hillary evidently agreed: “god didn’t get me to the North Pole, I did,” she declared. She won a standing ovation from the audience.

Popular: Death With Dignity

A popular speaker was Peg Sandeen, executive director of the Death With Dignity National Center. Who would have thought that the subject of death would draw a packed auditorium? Ah, but Ms. Sandeen spoke about patient-controlled death when there is a diagnosis of terminal illness.



Peg Sandeen

“Doctors are doing it anyway [helping terminal patients to die] so let’s do it legally,” Sandeen urged. DWD will, where it is allowed, help a terminal patient who wants to die, using a patient-controlled (no injections) method, under medical standards and principles. Alas, the major opponents to DWD are the Religious Right and the Catholic church, whose outlook seems to be that pain in childbirth or terminal illness is good for the soul-- so suffer, you sinners, suffer.

PZ Myers Wants Togetherness

Another perennial Atheist favorite is PZ Myers, evolutionary biologist (at the University of Minnesota Morris), feisty blogger (*Pharyngula*) and all-around confrontationist. Myers began his convention talk shouting a slogan that supported AA Prez Silverman’s contentious exchange with the Mormons: “**Absence of evidence is evidence of absence!**”



PZ Myers

“PZ showed the audience how analyzing DNA sequences of homo sapiens versus chimpanzees showed no evidence of god-guided evolution,” noted Dr. Eric Stone. “The difference in sequence between the two species was almost entirely due to chance and genetic drift.”

In response to the Mormonist assertion that, without god, Atheists are purposeless, Myers argued while it is true is that we Atheists do not have a guiding purpose that comes from any god, we do have down-to-earth purposes. “We are not under the thumb of a cosmic tyrant!” rankled Myers. “Our purpose is to insure the maintenance and further development of the species with the greatest welfare and enjoyment of life for the individual.” And how do we achieve that? “We must work together cooperatively,” allowed the Atheist iconoclast. Aha, is our erstwhile confrontationist mellowing in the cocktail hour of his life?

Are You Ready for Nude Protests?

Of course there are always the wild-card speakers at any Atheist convention who either amuse, entertain or surprise the audience. This writer admired Maryam Namazie, an Iranian-born political activist, journalist and blogger who is the spokesperson for Iranian Women’s Liberation. Namazie brought photos of herself demonstrating in the nude in public to protest the “commodification and objectification of women.”



Maryam Namazie

Oh, come on, how can public nudity fight *that* battle? But Namazie was adamant that Middle Eastern women need freedom to study, travel, work, divorce, marry, refuse sex or be an Atheist and “the nude protest is a political protest,” she insisted. Besides, Namazie looked wonderful in the nude photos.

Also fun was Seth Andrews’ Power Point presentation of “*Copycats - How Christians Steal from Us!*” showing all the ways that Christians have usurped popular American culture and copied it with a religious message. Andrews, a former Christian broadcaster for 30 years and now the host of *The Thinking Atheist* podcast, showed the audience the Christian versions of rock groups, Barbie dolls, Faithbook (for Facebook), Christian Mingle (instead of Match.com), Holy Land (instead of Disney Land).

Now if only Christianity would take up nude protests, our convention bliss would have been complete. □

Reporter Jane Everhart wishes to thank Dr. Eric Stone, incomparable friend and research scientist, who shared the reporting for this article. Dr. Stone and his wife Elaine were the leaders of the Westchester Atheists until their recent move to Walnut Creek, California.

Why Do So Many Americans Hate Atheists?

We Are Accused of Being Angry, Cynical and Rude



By Tyson Gill, Ph.D

The encouraging trend is that Americans are increasingly tolerant toward Atheists and towards the expression of Atheist perspectives in public discourse. But the bigger picture must include a recognition that this greater tolerance does not translate into proportionately greater respect for Atheist arguments or for Atheists themselves. Atheists still lag far behind all comparable groups in gaining meaningful acceptance of their expressed views, let alone meaningful acceptance as persons of good moral character.

In a 2006 study from the University of Minnesota, Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann examined the “Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society.” Their conclusion opens with the following summation:

“The core point of this article can be stated concisely. Atheists are at the top of the list of groups that Americans find problematic in both public and private life, and the gap between acceptance of Atheists and acceptance of other racial and religious minorities is large and persistent. It is striking that the rejection of Atheists is so much more common than rejection of other stigmatized groups.”

In support of this stark conclusion, their study found that 38.6% of respondents agreed that “Atheism does not at all agree with my vision of American society.” This is dramatically worse than the next least accepted minority, Muslims, at 26.3%. The study also found that while “only” 33.5% of Americans would disapprove if their child married a Muslim, a whopping 47.6% of Americans would disapprove if their child married an Atheist.

More Acceptance of Gays Than Atheists

Even more disturbing is the prognosis for the long-term. A Hemant poll found that 52% of millennials would be uncomfortable with an Atheist President. The same poll found that 61% of millennials would be *comfortable* with an Evangelical President. This is a disturbingly low level of acceptance, given the far greater strides by homosexuals and other groups within this particular demographic. These statistics reflect the strong persistence of anti-Atheist sentiments.

So, while tolerance for Atheist views and for Atheists

personally is improving, acceptance is still abysmally low. According to Farkas and co-authors in their book “For Goodness Sake: Why So Many Want Religion to Play a Greater Role in American Life”:

“Widespread political rejection of Atheists and others who profess no religion provides a ‘glaring exception’ to the general rule of increasing social tolerance over the last thirty years of the 20th century.”

Agnostics Considered ‘Nicer’

These studies look at the big picture, the end result. But we must probe deeper and ask, what are the low-level attitudes and interpersonal dynamics at work here that drive these statistics? Although there are many factors at work, one of the most basic drivers must be the widespread but erroneous comparison between Atheism and Agnosticism. Here is what one blog-commenter posted about Atheists:

“I consider agnostics to be the most rational minded people. Open minded enough to question religious ideology, while leaving the concept of a higher intelligence as an unanswered unknown. Atheists, on the other hand, tend to be angry, cynical and rude. They believe themselves to be correct and everyone else deluded or gullible. This is an arrogant position to take -- and one that scientists should never take -- as science always moves on.”

This person very concisely and insightfully summarized the view of perhaps the vast majority of persuadable Americans regarding Atheism. These views likely form much of the basis for the statistics we observe regarding the acceptance of Atheists and Atheist views. But it also contains invalid assumptions and fallacious or unreasonable arguments that must be addressed.

All Questioners Are Called ‘Rude’

First is the emotional perception that Atheists tend to be angry, cynical, and rude. Even allowing that some Atheists may in fact be as angry, cynical and rude as anyone, this is extremely overstated. Portraying those who must fight for rights and recognition as “angry” is a tactic that has been selectively applied to homosexuals,

African-Americans, and women as well. Even less credible is the charge of cynicism. This is the last thing that could apply to most science-oriented Atheists who fight for real solutions to solve real problems. And as to rudeness, attacking or even questioning unfounded beliefs is always portrayed as rude and out-of-bounds no matter how delicate and sensitive one tries to be.

Next is this notion that Atheists think everyone else is deluded or gullible. Scientists of any faith are also commonly viewed as arrogant and “thinking they have all the answers.” But that’s true of everyone who believes in their beliefs. Believers of any faith largely think that everyone outside their faith is deluded or gullible. At least in the case of Atheists and scientists, we strive to base our conclusions on logic, reason, and evidence.

Agnosticism = Intellectual Timidity

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, is this popular view that Agnosticism is somehow a more logical and defensible position than Atheism. But it is not close-minded to eliminate impossible theories. Nor is it open-minded to withhold judgment of every possible assertion that has not been explicitly proven to be untrue. Indeed, if scientists or anyone else were to remain “agnostic” regarding every unprovable idea, they could never reach any conclusion about anything. For scientists, “open-mindedness” does not mean remaining agnostic to

everything, but being willing to accept new evidence about anything.

Agnosticism, in science or non-scientific matters, is not the hallmark of a good scientist let alone a good thinker. The benefit of doubt need only be extended to plausible hypotheses. A good scientist does not need to remain “agnostic” with regard to any totally unfounded theory including a belief in gods or other supernatural forces. Agnosticism regarding such implausible beliefs is not open-minded, is not rational, and only undermines sound scientific inquiry. It is a symptom of intellectual timidity, not a measure of intellectual integrity. A good scientist has to be willing to let go of even deeply held theories that are unsupported and defer to the evidence or lack thereof in all things.

All of these negative views regarding Atheism and Atheists are widespread, and are likely to persist for the foreseeable future. As long as they do, we Atheists will continue to struggle to gain not only tolerance, but more importantly, acceptance. Even though the Vatican advised deferring to science on scientific matters, we are very far from the day where our society applies this advice to the fundamental religious beliefs that infuse and drive much of our important secular decision-making. □

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

READ MORE THAN ONE BOOK

**WE JUST BELIEVE
IN ONE LESS GOD**

**ONE BOOK
DOES NOT HAVE ALL
THE ANSWERS**

**WE ARE NOT NON-BELIEVERS,
WE ARE REALISTS**

**JOIN
NYC ATHEISTS – FACEBOOK
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/New-York-City-Atheists/187304681037>**

**GODLESS REVIVAL:
LAST SUNDAY OF THE MONTH**



IN THE NEWS

by Kenneth Bronstein

**NYC ATHEISTS DEMONSTRATE AT (FOLEY SQUARE) COURT HOUSE
TO MOVE THE "MIRACLE CROSS" OUT OF 9/11 MUSEUM
MARCH 6, 2014 - AT APPEAL HEARING – U. S. 2ND CIRCUIT COURT**



High School Students Say Pledge In Arabic: 'One Nation Under Allah'

The principal at Rocky Mountain High School in Fort Collins, Colorado, is facing a hailstorm of criticism from some very angry parents and residents.

The school recites the Pledge of Allegiance weekly, on Mondays. Last Monday, a member of their "Cultural Arms Club" led the student body in an Arabic version of the pledge, replacing the words "under god" with "under Allah."

I know some Atheists who say the pledge of allegiance this way: **I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation NOT under god, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.**

I have seen U.S. currency updated to: In god we **DO NOT** trust.

**Sarah Palin, former Vice Presidential candidate
announced at the National Rifle Association's
"Stand and Fight Rally" on Sunday 4/27/2014**

**"If I were in charge,
they would know that water boarding
is how we baptize terrorists."**

UPCOMING MAY EVENTS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

MAY 11, 2014 (SUN.) 12 NOON
NYC ATHEISTS BRUNCH

SUBJECT: ATHEISTS & MORMONS EXPOSING MYTHS, DISPELLING STEREOTYPES

April 16th video of a panel discussion between two Atheists: Dave Silverman (president, American Atheists) and Joanne Hanks, a former polygamist wife, versus two Mormon college professors, the night before the 2014 American Atheists Convention in Salt lake City. **Silverman at his best!**



Dave Silverman

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 16, 2014 (FRI.)
6:00 PM (HAPPY HOUR)
7:00 PM (FILM CLUB)
NYC ATHEISTS BOOK & FILM CLUB

HOST: DAVID ORENSTEIN, Ph.D



FILM: "JESUS CAMP"

The film *Jesus Camp*, which debuted at the 2006 Tribeca Film Festival, is about a charismatic Christian summer camp where children spend their summer being taught that they have "prophetic gifts" and can "take back America for Christ" by becoming part of the "army of god."

In November 2006, the shutting down of the camp was announced due to negative reaction to the film.

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

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

MAY 20, 2014 (TUE.) 7:00PM
NYC ATHEISTS DISCUSSION MEETUP

GROUP LEADER: MICHAEL DORIAN



SUBJECT: DORIAN PICKS TIMELY, LIVELY TOPICS THAT SPUR RAMBUNCTIOUS DISCUSSION.

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

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

MAY 29, 2014 (THUR.) 6:30PM
NYC ATHEISTS MONTHLY MEETING

SPEAKER: CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON



BOOK: "A Better Life: 100 Atheists Speak Out on Joy & Meaning in a World Without god"

This book of commentary features Richard Dawkins, Dan Dennett, A.C. Grayling, Lawrence M. Krauss, Steven Pinker, Penn & Teller, James Randi, Julia Sweeney and more! The myth persists: Even in our modern world, countless people believe that without god, one's life has no purpose or meaning and that the lives of Atheists are devoid of joy and happiness because they are not religious. Johnson's book contradicts that myth.

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 2014

| | | | | |
|-----|-------|-------|---------------|-------------------------------|
| MAY | 11* | Sun. | 12:00 PM | NYCA Brunch / Speaker |
| MAY | 16** | Fri. | 6:00 / 7:00PM | NYCA Book / Film Club |
| MAY | 20** | Tue. | 7:00 PM | NYCA Meet-Up Discussion Group |
| MAY | 29*** | Thur. | 6:30 PM | NYCA Monthly Meeting |

JUNE 2014

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|------|-------|-------|---------------|-------------------------------|
| JUNE | 8* | Sun. | 12:00 PM | NYCA Brunch / Speaker |
| JUNE | 17** | Tue. | 7:00 PM | NYCA Meet-Up Discussion Group |
| JUNE | 20** | Fri. | 6:00 / 7:00PM | NYCA Philosophy Club |
| JUNE | 26*** | Thur. | 6:30 PM | NYCA Monthly Meeting |

- * 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

| | | | <u>MNN</u> | <u>RCN</u> | <u>FIOS</u> |
|-------------|---------|----------------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| Wednesdays: | 5:30 PM | Atheism in History | 1997 | 84 | 35 |
| | 6:30 PM | This Week in Atheism | 1997 | 84 | 35 |
| Thursdays: | 5:00 PM | NYC Atheists | 67 | 85 | 36 |
| | 5:30 PM | Atheists Book Club | 67 | 85 | 36 |

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