

NYC ATHEISTS INC.



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AN AFFILIATE OF AMERICAN ATHEISTS

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SEPT. / OCT. 2014

“PRESIDENT’S SERMON”

A Call to Action!

Or, How Religion is Winning the Battle for Dominance in the U.S.



KENNETH BRONSTEIN

While you are sitting there reading this article, which I satirically call my “sermon,” the Religious Right has made scores of inroads into our constitutional rights. It has closed down abortion clinics in half of American states, won the right to religious prayer at government meetings and established that employers don’t have to provide certain medical coverage to their employees if their own religious views prohibit it. It has allowed religious icons to occupy government-supported museums, snuck religious teachings into elementary schools under the cover of “Good News Clubs,” censored and rewritten public school textbooks and recruited cadets at government military schools.

It goes on: The Religious Right has won the ruling that hecklers can legally harass women as they walk into abortion clinics; established in court that the official U.S. motto, “In God We Trust,” has “nothing to do with religion,” and won a court decision that “under god” should remain in our Pledge of Allegiance because it has “lost its religious connotation” and “become a tradition.”

And those are just the things we know about.



The Religious Right never sleeps. The Religious Right is persistent, tenacious, watchful, patient and sly. It finds ways to encroach itself into situations where, when the time is ripe, it can make a move.

For instance, in the past decade, the Religious Right has deliberately packed public-school boards all over the country with its representatives, and when it felt the time was ripe, tried to sneak the teaching of creationism into local school curricula. The Right lost its bid to get creationism into textbooks in Dover, PA when local parents discovered and protested the sneaky move, but who knows how many small towns there are where the Religious Right quietly succeeded?



Though the Religious Right was thwarted in Dover, it hasn’t curbed their momentum for a moment: The Religious Right has now become ardent supporters of charter schools, where they can presumably teach whatever they want, including creationism. Are they seeking to destroy our public school system? Only time will tell.

Atheists Too Complacent

The Religious Right often moves as slowly and deliberately as a pre-historic mammoth--but it never, ever, gives up. If it loses on any issue, it bides its time and chews on the edges of the issue. Take abortion, for example. The Religious Right held back for decades as one state after another legalized abortion. Then one day--pow!--it won in court on a seemingly insignificant free

speech issue and, suddenly, we discover that religious folk can continue to shout at women who are walking into an abortion clinic because that's deemed free speech. How many pregnant women do you think will want to walk the gauntlet to get an abortion with their neighbors screaming at them on the sidelines?

In contrast to the persistence and hard work of the Religious Right, I find that we Atheists are surprisingly laid back, complacent, often tentative and uncommitted to sustained, resolute action for our cause. Why? I'm not sure why. It may be because we haven't had the hundreds of years of experience with organized action like religion does. It may be because, unlike religion, Atheist organizations don't use fear of hellfire-and-brimstone to coerce you to work for the cause.

Religious Do Good for Selfish Reasons

Or it may be that because we Atheists are predominantly the scientists, professors, thinkers and doers of our society and, busy in our workaday world, we do not succumb to entreaties like "this is what god wants you to do." I have often felt that the supposedly righteous actions of religious people are mostly done for selfish reasons: the doer just wants to go to heaven.

What moves us Atheists to action is more complicated than that. It is, basically, the knowledge that we work for what is needed for the continuation of life on earth, for fairness, for reason, for our descendants. We are motivated by the need to ward off destruction of our species.

Theocracy Is Here

The problem is, I think, that a lot of Atheists do not connect the dots: They do not sense as urgently as I do that a theocracy in America heralds the destruction of everything we hold dear. Nor do they sense that we are already on the threshold of theocracy, right now, in 2014. When there are no nonbelievers in our Congress--or none who feel they can admit to it--isn't that theocracy?

When god is on our money, in our pledge of allegiance, on our courthouse walls, in our government meetings, in our textbooks--doesn't that signify theocracy? When the prevalent religious beliefs force you to bear a child you don't want, or say words you don't want to say or study things you know in your heart aren't true--isn't that theocracy? It is here! It is seeping into every nook and cranny in our civic institutions and public spaces, and those who don't see the signs can only be in denial.



HUBERT HUMPHREY

We nonbelievers are fighting a difficult struggle; we need all hands on board for this battle. Are you willing to allow religion to win without fighting back? "Never give in and never give up," said Hubert H. Humphrey, 38th vice president of the U.S. and a workers' advocate.

Choose to Be Involved

As an Atheist, it is your responsibility to get involved. Join us! I strongly believe that life is what you make it and that one person can make a difference. For starters, become a member of NYC Atheists Inc. if you aren't already one. Our dues are \$25 a year compared to the church's expectation of 10 or 15 percent of their members' annual incomes. But to us, that \$25 signifies your commitment to the cause. It means you are choosing to be involved.

But that's just the beginning. We urge you to be there at demonstrations with us, lobbying with us in Washington, join us in petitioning, support us in our lawsuits. Your reward: knowing you are being true to yourself plus a strong sense of accomplishment.

The fight against theocracy may seem like a David vs. Goliath fight at times, but who was it that said, "The truth shall make you free?" Never forget that in this struggle against theocracy, the truth is on our side. □

GET INVOLVED – VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

- 1) We need individuals who can set up and coordinate NYC Atheists social media sites: Groupme, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter, Viber, Vine, Whatsapp, etc.
- 2) Set up a NYC Atheists YouTube Channel
- 3) Video editor for our cable shows
- 4) Computer Graphics
- 5) Lawyer (PRO BONO)

DEMYSTIFYING THE 'SOUL'

SCIENCE SAYS HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS IS JUST SELF-AWARENESS



By Tyson Gill, Ph.D

Most of us who are reading this article pride ourselves in our fact-based understanding of objective reality. When it comes to things that we experience in the external world, we hold fast to soundly scientific explanations. But when it comes to our inner world, to our consciousness and perception of self, we often exceed the limits of our rational capacity. We are far less able to accommodate having an insufficient explanation of the seeming “miracle” that is self-awareness. It is extremely common for even highly evidence-based thinkers to make some variation of the following assertion:

“But I do believe in a kind of soul. Not in the religious sense, but still something transcendent that mere anatomy and physiology cannot explain.”

Consciousness is one of the last hold-outs of mysticism. But it is no miracle, let alone even mystical. Certainly, it is not yet fully understood. Indeed, consciousness understanding itself may be one of the most difficult challenges of any self-aware species, but it is nevertheless clearly within the domain of natural phenomena and it is definitely knowable.

In fact, we already do have a much deeper understanding of consciousness than most people appreciate. While not yet as fully developed as we would all like, these puzzles always seem indecipherable and deceptively obscure until suddenly the last pieces fall into place.

One very notable model of consciousness was presented by the cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter in his 2007 book “I Am a Strange Loop.” In this important book, Dr. Hofstadter debunks one of the fundamental misconceptions of consciousness: that it “suddenly appeared” in humans.

Consciousness Evolved

The typical inference is that the appearance of consciousness somehow defies an evolutionary explanation. Dr. Hofstadter places representative species on a continuum of consciousness - from bees, to chickens, dogs, and finally humans. As with other complex systems like eyes and wings, consciousness did not just suddenly appear. But rather it evolved in incremental, traceable steps, each of which provided an evolutionary advantage. We humans are not the

sole bearers of consciousness. We merely have the most highly evolved consciousness.

And while most would acknowledge that our consciousness evolved, many would still insist that human self-awareness is such a huge leap that it defies scientific explanation. But Dr. Hofstadter’s work illustrates quite compellingly how that is not actually the case. Our human self-awareness was merely another incremental improvement in a gradually evolving consciousness. Make no mistake, self-awareness did have profound impact. But it nevertheless came about through only relatively small incremental changes built upon earlier consciousness.

Self Awareness = Seeing Oneself

Dr. Hofstadter came to this understanding by studying video feedback phenomena and it is best explained retaining that as a metaphor. Imagine that the perceptions of a bee are like a head-mounted camera pointing forward. It sees other things, but a bee cannot see itself. Although it does see much of what we do, it has no self-awareness.

Next imagine the chicken. Their chicken-cam has shifted to a shoulder mount that allows them to “see” their own beak and feet. Their consciousness may include some rudimentary self-awareness. The dog has a camera mounted on a nearby tripod so therefore it can see itself and is somewhat self-aware.

Finally we get to humans. Our perceptual camera has merely tipped slightly off-angle. As in actual video feedback loops, this subtle change in angle creates the perception of an intensely powerful feedback effect, like mirrors shifting angle ever so slightly so that they suddenly reflect infinitely upon themselves.

Consciousness Is a Sense of Self

Thus, we are enraptured in awe of our own seemingly infinite perceptual feedback loop. We perceive it as something grand and mystical. And it is, yet it is also the result of very subtle and knowable evolutionary changes arising from relatively simple underlying mechanics.

If I were to learn that Dr. Hofstadter had read this explanation of his thesis, I would be mortified and embarrassed. But I intend it only as an extremely brief glimpse into his insights meant to give at least a sense

of how consciousness can and will be modeled, understood and explained by science. Self-awareness is amazing, but certainly not mystical. Just as with other physical phenomena, there is no need for us to invoke miracles or souls or any other metaphysical explanation to explain our profoundly powerful sense of self.

The admission that our self-aware consciousness emerged out of subtle but highly consequential evolutionary changes should not make us feel any

more diminished than we feel knowing our bodies derived from those of apes or that the glorious stars above us are “merely” physical processes. Rather, it should excite us in anticipation of the wonders yet to be revealed through scientific exploration of this last rich bastion of mysticism. □

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.



IN THE NEWS

NYC ATHEISTS STREET TABLING



JULIE IS PATIENT WITH ARGUMENTATIVE BELIEVER

WHY ARE THE POOR MORE RELIGIOUS?

<http://thehumanist.com/news/national/why-are-the-poor-more-religious>

'BLACK JESUS' TARGETED AS 'BLASPHEMOUS' BY CONSERVATIVE GROUPS

[HTTP://WWW.RELIGIONNEWS.COM/2014/08/06/CHRISTIAN-GROUPS-ASK-ADULT-SWIM-PULL-NEW-SHOW-BLACK-JESUS/](http://www.religionnews.com/2014/08/06/christian-groups-ask-adult-swim-pull-new-show-black-jesus/)

CHILDREN EXPOSED TO RELIGION HAVE DIFFICULTY DISTINGUISHING FACT FROM FICTION,

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/21/children-religion-fact-fiction_n_5607009.html#

PHILADELPHIA HOSTS CONSECRATED VIRGINS

http://www.philly.com/philly/news/20140731_Philadelphia_welcomes_consecrated_virgins.html

CATHOLIC MARRIAGES IN THE U.S. ARE ON A STEEP DECLINE (40%).

<http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/07/how-important-is-it-to-have-a-church-wedding/374767/>

BYOB: BRING YOUR OWN BIBLE

<http://www.charismanews.com/world/45064-guess-what-hotel-chain-is-banning-bibles-now>

BURYING YOUR DEAD WITHOUT RELIGION

<http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/burying-your-dead-without-religion/378711/2/>

GREECE, N.Y., POLICY MAY PROHIBIT ATHEISTS FROM PUBLIC INVOCATIONS

<http://www.religionnews.com/2014/08/22/greece-n-y-policy-may-prohibit-atheists-public-invocations/>

Religion Is the Biggest Obstacle to Marriage Equality

Separation of Church and State Vital for Equal Right to Wed



By David Madison, Ph.D in Biblical Studies

We Atheists watch in horror these days as separation of church and state is under broad assault. Who would have thought? It is such a bedrock concept of American democracy. And who would have ever thought that the current violation of this American concept is being caused by the Religious Right's reaction to the pressure by gays for access to civil marriage?

But violation of the concept of church and state separation is really nothing new. Gay activists who have been pressing for marriage equality probably didn't expect that obstructionists on the right would be so contemptuous of separation of church and state. Of course, those of us who have, for years, led campaigns against prayer in school and "god" on our money are not so naïve.

Gay Marriage Not New

It may come as a surprise that equal access to civil marriage is really not a new idea. The first gay marriage that I remember took place, believe it or not, in April 1973 at Old North Church in Boston—yes, the church of Paul Revere fame. The pastor who performed the ceremony caught hell for it, especially since it made headlines in *The Boston Globe*.

Four years earlier the Stonewall riots had marked the beginning of the modern gay rights movement, but as a Methodist pastor in Massachusetts at the time, I know that few liberal pastors had even the slightest awareness of Stonewall. But the marriage ceremony at Old North Church snapped everyone to attention, especially those who insisted that homosexuality was simply immoral, and thus deserved no place in the spectrum of liberal causes.

Using Bible to Back Homophobia

But the gay rights folks had no intention of going away, and the great debate on gay marriage picked up momentum. Conservatives keep circling back to the few biblical texts that seem to offer the illusion of support of homophobia. I used to give speeches at churches after I had left the ministry and given up my ordination, explaining how the Bible really isn't against homosexuality.

Church folks who want to underwrite their homophobia with scripture should be embarrassed to begin any sentence with, "But the Bible says...." I gave up giving speeches at churches, by the way. The day came when I asked myself, "Why am I trying so hard to get Christians to act like Christians?"

Gays Want Civil Marriage

I've noticed over the years, however, that the debate about marriage equality is muddled because people fail to clarify what it's about. The word marriage brings several things to mind, only one of which is relevant to the campaign for marriage equality. Gays and lesbians have not been pestering the churches to be eligible for the "sacrament" of marriage. Instead, they have been showing up at courthouses and county clerk offices asking to be granted licenses: They want access to marriage, the civil contract. That's all that the marriage equality campaign is about. And in a perfect world—in which separation of church and state prevails—what would be the problem?

The courts now seem to have caught on—especially in the wake of U.S. District Court Judge Vaughn R. Walker's 140-page opinion negating California's Proposition 8—that the fundamental issue is equal treatment under the law. That is, in this instance, equal access to the civil contract (marriage) granted as a right of citizenship to heterosexual couples.

Churches Obstruct Marriage Equality

But the debate has been poisoned by the marriage-is-sacrament crowd, and it's only because evangelical Christians have their heels dug in that the battle drags on. They realize that separation of church and state means that religious biases cannot be embedded in public policy. Most Christians despise the separation concept because they believe that we ought to be a Christian nation: Total theocracy is their ideal.

They also sense, however, that they can't get away anymore with warning that our society will incur god's judgment if we tolerate homosexuality. Hence, their diversionary tactics include claiming that heterosexual marriages are damaged by gay marriages and that children raised by gay parents are damaged as well. Judges have not believed any of this because the

evidence just isn't there and because the 'expert' witnesses whom the homophobes dig out of the woodwork can't make the case.

The debate is also poisoned—but less so—when conservatives question the quality of gay relationships. Now “marriage-the-relationship” is the wedge to win sympathy for their cause. One approach—and this is clutching at straws—has been to move grudgingly to grant civil unions or domestic partnerships. “Just don't call it marriage” is the plea, because...well, because—we're back where we started—marriage can only be between a man and a woman. Why? Just because. Conservative straight folks can't possibly imagine that the love between two men or two women can possibly be as real, and meaningful—as holy and wholesome—as that between a man and a woman.

Attitudes Have Thawed

I suspect that this bias stems from the traditional invisibility of gay and lesbian couples. So many people aren't aware of gay couples that have been together for 20, 30 or 40 years—and they don't know them personally. The marriage equality campaign has gained so much momentum recently because there are now so many gay weddings! The visibility is empowering. Straight friends of the groom and groom or bride and bride see long-term gay couples among the attendees; it's pretty hard to believe that all these people are the depraved monsters—the perverts—that the evangelicals believe are threatening the “moral fabric” of society.

On this marriage-the-relationship front, one of the code terms that conservatives use is “gay lifestyle.” This label represents an effort to minimize and trivialize same-sex orientation, to categorize it as one of the choices we make in life. Going to the opera on Saturday night or going to a basketball game—those are lifestyle choices.

Even those very few therapists left in this world who try to help gay people change are the first to admit that sexual orientation is not a choice. Even as a kid I knew I was attracted to boys instead of girls. This was in rural Indiana in the 1950s, no less. Who even knew what homosexuality was? I was programmed by nature to fall in love with someone of the same sex. I suspect that there's a genetic component, and an evolutionary advantage as well in having some members of the species who don't procreate.

What County Clerks Don't Ask

Marriage-as-relationship is especially silly and irrelevant as an argument against marriage equality because there has never been a quality-of-relationship test when people apply for marriage licenses. County clerks never ask, “How well do you two get along? Are you happy about how the chores are shared? Are you planning to have kids?” Some churches do ask these questions when couples are preparing for the sacrament of marriage—and that's probably a good thing—but it's none of the state's business.

Just as there has never been (officially) a religious test for holding office, there has never been a quality-of-relationship test for getting married. If evangelicals were as alarmed about divorce as they are about gay marriage—as they should be if they want to follow the teaching of Jesus and protect marriage—perhaps they should fight with more fervor for laws limiting marriage licenses to people who can't prove that they get along!

Atheists Can Help

Atheists can help the campaign for marriage equality by doing what we can to keep the argument focused on access to the civil contract. Marriage equality depends on the separation of church and state—in our case, a state that is committed to equal treatment under the law for **all** citizens.

And here's a final irony in this saga. Gays and lesbians have commonly had access to the sacrament of marriage all along. Their churches may officially oppose same-sex marriage, but individual priests and ministers are not so pig-headed and devoid of compassion. That pastor in Boston, way back in 1973, was a profile in courage.

While having the ceremony in a church may not be possible, if you can't find a priest, minister or rabbi to perform the wedding (an imam may be tougher), you haven't looked hard enough. These folks are the dispensers of the sacrament—so, if that's your thing, go for it. □

David Madison is a former Methodist minister. He is currently writing “10 Tough Problems in Christian Thought and Belief: a Minister-Turned-Atheist Shows Why You Should Ditch the Faith.” He and his husband have been together since 1978. They were married September 13, 2011.

**NYC ATHEISTS INC.
IS A
NON-PROPHET ORGANIZATION**

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

UPCOMING SEPTEMBER EVENTS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

SEPT. 14, 2014 (SUN.) 12 NOON
NYC ATHEISTS BRUNCH / SPEAKER

SPEAKER: ANNA WILSON – MFA, MHC



**SUBJECT: “HOW TO SAY GOODBYE
 WHEN THERE IS NO HEAVEN”**

Anna Foss Wilson is a psychotherapist and former actor. She deals with individuals and groups, and specializes in issues of grief and bereavement. She is the granddaughter of a minister and now a practicing Atheist.

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.

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SEPT. 16, 2014 (TUE.) 7:00PM
NYC ATHEISTS DISCUSSION MEETUP

GROUP LEADER: MICHAEL DORIAN



**SUBJECT: MICHAEL ALWAYS CHOOSES A
 TIMELY, CONTROVERSIAL TOPIC THAT WILL
 STIMULATE YOUR THINKING.**

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.

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

SEPT. 19, 2014 (FRI.)
6:00 PM (HAPPY HOUR)
6:30 PM (BOOK CLUB)
NYC ATHEISTS BOOK CLUB

HOST: DAVID ORENSTEIN, Ph.D



**BOOK: CARL SAGAN’S “SHADOWS OF
 FORGOTTEN ANCESTORS.”**

Sagan places humanity along side and not above nature -- unlike religions, which claim humans are the center of the universe and are the recipients of god’s special creation. The book integrates the insights of science into a vision of where we came from, who we are, and what our fate might be. Very readable.

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.

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SEPT. 25, 2014 (THUR.) 6:30PM
NYC ATHEISTS MONTHLY MEETING

**SPEAKER: ROD BRADFORD – FILM
 PRODUCER & DIRECTOR**



**SUBJECT: THE FOUNDING OF THE NATION;
 RICH IN RELIGIOUS CONTRADICTIONS (VIDEO)**

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.

**“THE PURPOSE OF THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE IS TO KEEP FOREVER FROM THESE
 SHORES THE CEASELESS STRIFE THAT HAS SOAKED THE SOIL OF EUROPE IN BLOOD FOR CENTURIES.”**

-- James Madison (4th President of the United States, 1809–1817)

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

SEPTEMBER 2014

SEPT.	14*	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
SEPT.	16**	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up Discussion Group
SEPT.	19**	Fri.	6:00 / 6:30 PM	NYCA Book / Film Club
SEPT.	25***	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

OCTOBER 2014

OCT.	12*	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
OCT.	17**	Fri.	6:00 / 6:30 PM	NYCA Book / Film Club
OCT.	21**	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up Discussion Group
OCT.	30***	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

NYC ATHEISTS
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