

## NYC ATHEISTS INC.



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AN AFFILIATE OF AMERICAN ATHEISTS

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### “PRESIDENT’S SERMON”

## THE FALSE PROMISES OF PRAYER

### *Science, Not Prayer, Is The Atheist Way*



KENNETH BRONSTEIN

The other day I was watching Channel 1 on the Time Warner cable station when a news item came on about a small Black church in Brooklyn that was having a prayer service for Dr. Craig Spencer, the Ebola patient at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. I became more and more annoyed as I watched, not just because the churchgoers believed they were helping Dr. Spencer but also because the media was recognizing and promoting prayer as a cure for a fatal disease.



Dr. Craig Spencer

Raising hope for prayer as an Ebola treatment is deceitful and troubling to me as an Atheist. But both churchgoers and their pastors have defended prayer with all the usual justifications:

- They assert that prayer is a positive and effective thing that sympathizers can do. When prayer does not work—and, let’s face it, most of the time, it doesn’t -- they claim justification for that, too: “god has other plans,” they say, or “god is testing us” or “the ways of the Lord are mysterious.” But if, say, Dr. Spencer recovers, you can bet that churchgoers will claim credit for that: Their prayers made it happen!
- They claim that prayer gives comfort to the person praying, as well as hope and satisfaction because they feel they are doing something helpful.

#### Prayer Doesn’t Work

- I feel strongly that prayer is absolutely the most ineffective and reprehensible action to take in any crisis and that, furthermore, it is actually deleterious to

the person *doing the praying* as well as to efforts to help whatever crisis is underway. Here’s why:

- The person praying for a resolution of the crisis is wasting his or her time and effort absorbed in entreaties to the Lord when they could spend that time more profitably working on practical real-life solutions to the crisis. On some gut level, the religious person knows this because when I ask them, “If prayer works so well, why do you go to a doctor?” I often get a guilty smirk from them. They are apparently taking no chances on god alone.



Logo: Doctors Without Borders

- The person engaged in prayer has been misguidedly told that prayer will have some impact on the crisis. It won’t. Prayer is, quite simply, a delaying mechanism and what used to be called in my day “busywork”--something that makes you think you are doing something useful though you aren’t.
- Prayer closes doors and shuts minds. After all, what is prayer? You are beseeching a “higher power,” or that invisible guy in the sky, or your favorite saint, to solve your problems for you. (Catholics have special saints depending on what you are praying for. Lost your car keys? There is a saint you can pray to who specializes in helping you find lost items.) Any reasonable person knows that you need to figure out how to solve the problems yourself.
- Prayer wastes time. If the river is rising and your house is about to float away, praying isn’t going to help. You

need to quickly find flotation devices and call rescue crews. Unless god is a helicopter pilot in His spare time, He is pretty useless to you in this situation.

- Prayer gives false hope. In the old days when a doctor would say, “We’ve done all we can. All we can do now is pray,” you knew the doctor was really saying, “Tough luck, the chances aren’t good that your loved one will make it.” Today, doctors are trained to give a more realistic appraisal of the patient’s chances and if there is no hope, they generally will not suggest you plead with that Great Surgeon in the Sky. If they do, it may be time to get a new surgeon.
- Prayer disables you. This may sound farfetched until I explain that most prayer is done while kneeling. (I was surprised to find out that kneeling was first instituted by kings in medieval times to keep supplicants from charging the king’s throne when refused favors.) Nowadays, if the river is rising, you don’t want to be on your knees. You want to be up and in good swimming or paddling shape.
- Religion claims that prayer “comforts” the person who is praying. I find this the most insidious claim of all because there is no way of judging the comfort level of any individual; it is an unscientific construct based on word of mouth. Prayer holds no exclusive claim to comfort; people have been comforted by meditation, teddy bears, yoga, exercise, music or reciting a mantra, with about the same result. The claim that prayer makes you feel good is, I suspect, the inspired delusion of a Vatican publicist.

#### The Atheist Way

Atheists do not engage in prayer or other “magical” ways of thinking when a crisis like Ebola arises. Nor do we prioritize our own feelings of comfort or satisfaction in dealing with such an emergency. We act. We act individually and together, we act in scientifically useful ways, we act promptly, and if there are no immediate solutions, we unite, we rally, we cooperate to find solutions through research and experimentation.

For example, after the 2005 tsunami disaster, members of NYC Atheists Inc. donated \$2,245 to Doctors Without Borders to help finance its role in aiding the victims. In fact, Doctors Without Borders has become a top-priority organization for us in NYCA because these trained, dedicated physicians go where they are needed and don’t wait for the patients to come to them. Many of these doctors risk their lives to help those in need and, in fact, Dr. Craig Spencer is a member of Doctors Without Borders; he contracted the Ebola virus while working for the organization in West Africa.

#### Courageous Action Needed

But there is more we can do besides give money, though that is important because religious people generally give to charities through their churches, which don’t necessarily guarantee the money will go where it is needed in a crisis. We Atheists can urge timely research on critical medical issues, we can lobby, we can pressure our legislatures to pay attention to emergency needs; we can make our needs and voices known to decision makers in our government and our medical institutions.

A successful example of this kind of pressure is the gay organization “Act-Up,” which, during the worst of the AIDS crisis, demonstrated, marched, picketed, had sit-ins and inundated the media to get the authorities to develop and make available more effective medication for HIV. Act-Up even conducted a “Die-In” at St. Patrick’s cathedral one historic Sunday morning, in which gay individuals lay down in the cathedral’s aisles during mass to make the point that people were dying because the medical institutions were not responding to the AIDS crisis.

#### Religion Cuts Research

Institutional response to crises is notoriously snail-paced and right now we may need to shovel these institutions out of their lethargy. Dr. Francis Collins, the head of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Washington DC, recently said publicly that “a decade of stagnant spending has ‘slowed down’ research on all items, including vaccinations for infectious diseases.” As a result, Collins said, the international community has been left playing catch-up on a potentially avoidable human catastrophe. He was referring, of course, to the Ebola vaccine, which was shelved before research was completed after the Religious Right and the Tea Party prevailed upon NIH to cut its budget.



Dr. Francis Collins

We, as Atheists, must work on all fronts to enable research aiding this current medical crisis. Here are some methods we must focus on:

**Lobbying.** We must lobby our legislatures to get more NIH funding and to convince lawmakers that research on the Ebola vaccine needs to be resumed and prioritized.

**Donations.** You can donate money through NYCA earmarked to Doctors Without Borders (see end of sermon for details). Also, we encourage you to support medical education through donations to your alma mater

university, earmarking your contribution for the medical school.

**Volunteer.** While you cannot be involved in the actual care of Ebola victims, which requires trained specialists, hospitals welcome volunteers on many other levels, including the highly visible pink strippers, who free-up doctors and nurses from non-medical tasks.

**Donate Blood through NYCA.** On the official U.S. “Day of Prayer,” (and on election day), while religious people are on their knees praying, Atheists all over the country will be on their feet and at the local Blood Bank, donating blood for those in need. Join us!

**Vote.** Support the candidate that says he will prioritize medical research. You know this will not be anyone from the Religious Right or the Tea Party, so we urge you to seek out progressive candidates.

**Speak Up.** Write, or speak up, and voice your opinions about universal health care and helping those in need. March with us when and if we demonstrate. Let it be known to everybody where you stand, as an Atheist, on

the issues of medical care and advancing research. While we may not be ready for an Ebola Die-In demonstration just yet, don’t rule out the possibility of picketing the NIH if Congress doesn’t act with alacrity on this issue. □

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*Note: For those who wish to donate to Doctors Without Borders to support its work fighting the Ebola virus crisis in West Africa, we would appreciate it if you donated through our group so the world and the medical community would know that Atheists contribute to good causes.*

*Make your (tax deductible) check out to Doctors Without Borders in whatever amount you wish and in the bottom left corner where it says "Memo," write "NYC Atheists Inc." Send your check to NYC Atheists Inc. – Ebola Fund / Box 6060 / NY, NY 10150-6060. I will see to it personally that Doctors Without Borders gets the envelope containing all our checks and knows that these donations are from an Atheist group.*

--K. Bronstein

### MEET A FRIENDLY NYC ATHEIST Vietnam Vet Rad Mason Was an ‘Atheist in a Foxhole’



Radcliffe Mason

You’ve probably seen Radcliffe (“Rad”) Mason at our Columbus Circle street-tabling tent in his NYCA cap and tee-shirt. He and his partner, Julie, love to interact with the public on the subject of Atheism and are in our tent every good-weather Saturday in the summer. But Rad is recognized within our group for another thing. Remember that old saying often quoted by religious people that “There are no Atheists in foxholes”? As a Vietnam veteran, Rad can say unequivocally that there are indeed Atheists in foxholes--because he himself was one.

Rad, a Brooklyn boy whose parents came from the Caribbean Islands, says that until he was eight years old, he was an altar boy in the Episcopal church to please his mother, who sang in the church’s choir. But his father, a teacher and a nonbeliever, subtly taught him the value of scientific thinking: When Rad expressed interest in astronomy, they put together a telescope in the basement of their home so they could watch the stars. It was goodbye to the Episcopalians after that, and Rad never went back.

Rad joined the U.S. Marines after high school, and he often tells the story of how, in boot camp in North Carolina, he and a group of white Marine trainees went to a local restaurant to celebrate completing training and getting their new uniforms. But the restaurant refused to serve Rad, the waitress saying, “I’m sorry but we don’t serve your kind down here.” “Here I was in a U.S. uniform, serving my country,” Rad says. He got up to leave--and to his amazement, all eight of his fellow Marines men got up and left with him. He says he will never, ever, forget the incident and the loyalty of his Marine buddies.

After he left the military, where he had been assigned to the very dangerous duty of reconnaissance in Vietnam, Rad taught school for some 30 years at Queens College and did voiceovers for TV in his spare time. For a while, he was a professional photographer, a career he is re-awakening now in his retirement. Rad is also co-moderator, with Susan Jacobson, of our newest cable TV show, “My Road to Atheism.” Contact NYCA if you would like to share the story on TV of how you became an Atheist. □

## EVOLUTION DENIERS DON'T GIVE UP EASILY

### *The Latest Half-a-Wing Argument*



By Tyson Gill, Ph.D

Incredibly, the majority of Americans still either doubt or outright deny the reality of evolution. This is no accident. Evolution deniers have worked hard to create widespread doubt about evolution.

A few decades ago, evolution deniers resurrected the old “half-a-wing” argument. In bellicose tones rich with mocking certainty, noted “experts” such as Rush Limbaugh propagated what they purported to be a devastating refutation of evolutionary science. These deniers argued that since nothing evolves without a purpose, complex wings could not possibly have originated from something as simple as a fin. Since half of a wing serves no benefit that they could conceive of, wings could never have evolved incrementally. Wings, they argued, were conclusive proof of an intelligent designer.

Although ludicrously uninformed or disingenuous or both, the argument of these evolution deniers was eagerly embraced and parroted by legions of other deniers and often created doubt amongst many less scientifically literate Americans.

Of course that specious logic has always been refuted by a tremendous preponderance of readily observable facts. The most casual student of biology can see, even today, almost unlimited uses of partial wings. At every tiny stage of wing development we see examples of evolutionary benefits ranging from stabilization, turning and rowing in water, to jumping out of water to catch insects or to migrating between ponds in dry periods, to movement on land, assisting with falling, climbing up slopes or trees, to gliding and on to glorious flight.

#### **The Eyes Have It**

Eventually, most relatively sane deniers accepted that in fact, partial wings did have a purpose during the evolutionary process. But that didn't dissuade deniers from trying the same old argument again. Next time it was the eye that defied evolution. Certainly, their new argument went, anyone can see how a fin can become a wing, but the eye, that's different! The eye is obviously far too *complex* to have evolved naturally.

Eyes, they argued, are conclusive proof of an intelligent designer. Yet again, the evolution deniers were to be

deeply disappointed. Exquisite documentaries came out that painstakingly traced the development of the eye from very crude structures to the complex organs of advanced species. And they did this through powerful images of creatures that still exist today. Another “common-sense” evolution-killing argument was decisively dismantled, to the begrudging concession of most evolution deniers.

#### **Is Sex Latest Proof of ‘Designer?’**

But despite those failures, the deniers have still not given up on this same essential argument. Today what we hear put forth in online articles and in near proximity to coffeepots across America is the new evolution-killer: sexual reproduction. Yes, they readily admit, only a fool cannot see that wings evolved, and yes, only a bigger fool doesn't now accept that eyes evolved, but human sexuality, that's different! It is inconceivable that something as complex as sexual reproduction and all associated behaviors could merely have evolved. Sexual reproduction, they now argue, is conclusive proof of an intelligent designer.

Their basic argument is that sexual reproduction could not possibly have been “built from scratch” by evolution. This is yet again just another incarnation of the same old half-a-wing argument. What good is half a penis after all? And they have added a new twist by arguing that just because sexual reproduction has evolutionary benefits does not prove that it originated in evolution. Of course that circular argument is only possible if you assume the existence of an intelligent designer.

#### **Deniers Wrong: Sex Evolved!**

And again there are overwhelming facts--to anyone willing to look at them--that human sexuality did evolve. We see sexual reproduction and associated behaviors in over 99.99 percent of organisms with cell nuclei. The first single-celled organisms to engage in sex were protists that appeared roughly two billion years ago. Amongst this incredible diversity we see sexual organs and behaviors at all stages of development between those first organisms and humans.

Hopefully it won't be long until the next amazing

documentary illustrates exactly how this happened in ways that will reach the general public in a compelling way. When that happens, it will be amusing to see what argument evolution deniers put forth next. I predict this will be the next one that surges in popularity:

*“Well, certainly wings and eyes and sexuality might have evolved, but consciousness! Clearly consciousness could never have evolved. Consciousness is absolute proof of an intelligent designer!”*

The good news is that science is successfully pushing

these evolution deniers back step by step by step; even if that only means that they come up with yet newer versions of the same old discredited arguments. Once all of their imagined rational arguments are exhausted, it will be interesting to see whether they will finally relent in their denial or simply retreat to an unassailable position of pure faith. □

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*Dr. Tyson Gill is author of the highly recommended book, “Belief in Science and the Science of Belief: A Guidebook to Fact-Based Thinking,” available on Amazon.com.*

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## WHAT’S A MILITANT ATHEIST?

### *And Why Do They Keep Calling Us That?*



By Lee Moore

I have to admit I am not one of the better informed Atheists. I try to keep up with the latest articles on the Secular Movement, keep an eye on what the big names are up to and sometimes have a look at what the opposition is saying about us--but that only gives me a tiny bit of the news. One thing I have noticed quite a bit in my stumbles is the term "Militant Atheist." My first thoughts when reading this term went something like, "Whoa, we have some kind of paramilitary force that takes down oppressive theocratic regimes and forces people to read Darwin at gunpoint."

#### **No Pictures of Militants**

Rather than let my imagination go too far into overdrive, I figured it might be a wise move to break out "The Google" and maybe even "The Wikipedia" and read up on this gun-toting Atheist force.

First I tried an image search. My screen filled with images of Atheist posters, geeky guys with cool beards and trendy glasses, a few images of Richard Dawkins and Chris Hitchens, even some naked people (safe search was obviously off). Pretty interesting stuff but not one image of an Atheist holding a weapon or a group of Atheists in military style clothing. The thought occurred to me that maybe these militant guys are so bad ass that no pictures exist of them.

I switched to a standard web search.

Of course the first thing I saw on the web is a wiki article on the subject, and since Wikipedia seems to hold the sum of all human knowledge, I knew I need not go any further. What I read in that article shocked me. There was no armed group of Atheists fighting for our lack of belief. Instead it seemed the term "Militant Atheist" is given to Atheists who speak out against religion. Isn't that all of us? I suppose there are some who keep their views on religion to themselves and still call themselves an Atheist. I just haven't met any.

My question was at least answered. A Militant Atheist is just an Atheist. The adjective is just there to make us sound scary. I can understand why the major religious organizations fear Atheism: We are, after all, lightening their collection plates by showing their followers that there is a more rational way. Even scarier to them, we don't have to lie or cheat to do it.

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*Lee Moore is a lifelong Atheist from the southern United States who has dedicated his life to furthering various Atheist and Secular causes. He is the founder of the podcast The Atheist News, and one of the founders of the Godless Revival, a monthly entertainment show featuring Atheist talent. □*

**NYC ATHEISTS STREET TABLING  
 END OF SEASON**

**SEE YOU APRIL 2015**



## IN THE NEWS

### A CELEBRITY VISITS NYC ATHEISTS STREET TABLING



Rev. Al Sharpton

### REV. AL SHARPTON WALKING BY OUR STREET TABLING

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#### CAPITAL GAINS MEAN CHURCH LOSSES IN NEW GERMAN TAX TWIST

<https://storify.com/oddschedul632/capital-gains-mean-church-losses-in-new-german-tax>

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#### AIRMAN DENIED RE-ENTRY TO AIR FORCE FOR REFUSING TO SAY 'SO HELP ME GOD'

<http://www.religionnews.com/2014/09/05/airman-denied-re-entry-air-force-refusing-say-help-god/>

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#### ATHEIST GROUP ASKS EVERYONE TO SIT OUT THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

<http://americanhumanist.org/news/details/2014-09-atheist-group-asks-everyone-to-sit-out-the-pledge-of>

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#### ATHEIST WINS NEARLY \$2 MILLION IN SETTLEMENT OVER FAITH-BASED REHAB PROGRAM

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/15/barry-a-hazle-jr-atheist-settlement\\_n\\_5987630.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/15/barry-a-hazle-jr-atheist-settlement_n_5987630.html)

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#### MANY CHURCH CHOIRS ARE DYING. HERE'S WHY

<http://www.religionnews.com/2014/09/17/many-church-choirs-dying-heres/>

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#### WHAT'S HAPPENING AT EAST RAMAPO?

<http://www.wnyc.org/story/whats-happening-east-ramapo/>

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#### CHURCHES SHUN MENTAL ILLNESS – OFFER LITTLE HELP TO SUFFERERS, FAMILIES

<http://lockerdom.com/6554034429497921/6997388636207636>

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#### PRIESTS, MISTRESSES AND WIVES REMIND THE VATICAN: DON'T FORGET ABOUT US

<http://www.religionnews.com/2014/09/25/priests-celibacy-mistress-pope-francis/>

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#### DECLINING NUMBER OF U.S. NUNS, EVEN AMONG TRADITIONAL ORDERS

<http://www.religionnews.com/2014/10/13/declining-number-u-s-nuns-even-among-traditional-orders-charted-new-study/>

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#### THE SIMPLE REASON WHY PEOPLE REALLY CHANGE CHURCHES, SWITCH FAITHS OR LEAVE ALTOGETHER

<http://tobingrant.religionnews.com/2014/10/14/simple-explanation-people-change-churches-switch-faiths-leave-religion-altogether/>

## UPCOMING NOVEMBER EVENTS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

**NOV. 9, 2014 (SUN.) 12 NOON**  
**NYC ATHEISTS BRUNCH / SPEAKER**

**SPEAKER: MICHAEL RAMPINO Ph.D**  
**PROFESSOR OF EARTH SCIENCE – NYU**



World-renowned expert who has appeared on numerous TV series such as PBS (Nova), Science and Discovery Channels.

**SUBJECT: “VOLCANOES: THEIR IMPACT ON CLIMATE CHANGE, THE ENVIRONMENT AND YOU.”**

Can volcanic eruptions cause climatic change? Can they produce severe 'volcanic winter' episodes of cooling? Have they already caused near-extinction in human evolutionary history and does their recurrence threaten civilization?

**LOCATION:** The Press Box Restaurant, 932 Second Avenue (bet. 49<sup>th</sup> & 50<sup>th</sup> 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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**NOV. 18, 2014 (TUE.) 7:00PM**  
**NYC ATHEISTS DISCUSSION MEETUP**

**GROUP LEADER: MICHAEL DORIAN**



**SUBJECT: MICHAEL, AS USUAL, WILL SELECT AN EXCITING AND CONTROVERSIAL TOPIC.**

**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.

**RELIGION TAKES AWAY  
 ACCOUNTABILITY**

**NOV. 20, 2014 (THUR.) 6:30PM**  
**NYC ATHEISTS MONTHLY MEETING**

**SPEAKER: BRENDAN COLTHURST**



Brendan Colthurst is a filmmaker, software developer, entrepreneur and the producer of the film “Kumare.”

**SUBJECT: FILM “KUMARE – THE TRUE STORY OF A FALSE PROPHET.”**

We will watch a documentary about a man who impersonates a wise Indian Guru and builds up a following in Arizona. At the height of his popularity, the Guru Kumare feels he must reveal his true identity to his disciples and unveil his greatest teaching of all: **“The answers are all within you.”**

**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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**NOV. 21, 2014 (FRI.)**  
**6:00 PM (HAPPY HOUR)**  
**6:30 PM (BOOK CLUB)**  
**NYC ATHEISTS BOOK CLUB**

**HOST: DAVID ORENSTEIN, Ph.D**



**SUBJECT: “EMPATHY AND ALTRUISM – HOLY BOOKS NEED NOT APPLY.”**

We will discuss primatologist Frans de Wall’s book, “The Age of Empathy: Nature’s Lessons for a Kinder Society.” De Waal deflates the human assumption that animals lack the characteristics often referred to as humane. We’ll watch several videos that show how babies and other primates show empathy without the need for biblical teaching or tradition.

**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.

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

**NOVEMBER 2014**

NOV.	9*	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
NOV.	18**	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up Discussion Group
NOV.	20***	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting
NOV.	21**	Fri.	6:00 / 6:30 PM	NYCA Book / Film Club

**DECEMBER 2014**

DEC.	14*	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
DEC.	16**	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up Discussion Group
DEC.	20-21****	S-S.	6:30 PM	NYCA SOLSTICE PARTY

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- \* 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
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**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**  
**BOX 6060**  
**NY, NY 10150-6060**

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