

PRESIDENT'S "SERMON": OUR FUTURE IS HERE AND NOW!

by **Kenneth Bronstein**



Now we're talking—and doing, too! I asked for help, ideas, and energy, and you produced them. I'm proud of the membership for pitching in, and excited about where that will take us. Of course you've noticed Edwin Vazquez's brilliant design of our newsletter; what a difference it makes! And you can read Tyson Gill's new NYC Atheists' Web site: www.nycatheists.org as well as his scathing feature in this issue, *Ending the Atheist Movement* (p. 3).

On Thursday, December 24, we premiered our new cable show, *My Road to Atheism*, with Susan Jacobsen and Rad Mason interviewing NYCA members about how, why and when they became Atheists; Edward Tasick is the video editor and created the video opening. And we have Martin Heimsdorf's new NYCA library database to enable us to lend books from our 600+ (and growing) volumes.

That's just for starters...

Our "Single-Issue Voter" program (see November/December newsletter) is rolling out, with Jay Rice constructing the database of elected officials so crucial to the campaign. This is a great way for us to be heard and exert our influence where it counts most: in a presidential election year. I strongly encourage all of you to contribute time and effort to keeping up the pressure.

With an eye to the future: we've made a great start, but there's much more to do! For instance, it's essential that the public learn that Atheists exist, are real, and have compassion. With this objective, NYCA has made a New Year's resolution to expand and implement our Community Outreach Program—to be proactive beyond our Street Tabling at the Time-Warner Center, beyond our NYCA Cable Shows, and our annual Gift for Life Blood Donation efforts. We need to identify goals for high-profile single-day events, and gradually expand to long-term commitments for the good of the community.

I'm looking for members with good ideas to join the momentum, to propose future programs and to become program leaders.

We also need lawyers for legal advice—crucial to the success of our campaigns and upcoming lawsuits. Energy contributed is energy earned.

At the risk of repeating myself, I'd like to say again that we've gotten off to a flying start. By continuing to work together as a collaborative organization, we will become stronger, achieve momentum, attract new members and develop new strategies for expanding our mission. Trust me!

So give some thought about what you can do best for NYC Atheists and raise your hand.

Contact me at: ✉ nycatheists@gmail.com
☎ (212) 535-7525

Let's talk!

For more news on progress, see p. 7.



Mark your calendars! Join us at the Reason Rally on the Mall in Washington, D.C. There were 20,000 last time; it's sure to be even bigger and better next year. Details at: www.reasonrally.org

CLASSROOM IS FOR LEARNING NOT PRAYER

ENDING THE ATHEIST MOVEMENT:

by Tyson Gill



Have no doubt: Atheism is a movement. It is every bit as much a movement as the Gay Rights Movement, the Feminist Movement, and the Civil Rights movement. It involves a large number of people working to advance an idea; the idea that religion and magical beliefs are not only unnecessary but are dangerously harmful.

Prior to the movement, Atheism was anathema. Those who even hinted at Atheistic ideas were ostracized, persecuted, imprisoned, and even put to death. In 1729, the French Catholic priest Jean Meslier (wisely posthumously) published what is considered the first fully-formed Atheist treatise. This marked the historical kick-off of the Atheist movement.



Jean Meslier

Since its formal inception by Jean Meslier, the Atheist movement has progressed through several well-established stages of maturity. First was the emergence stage, during which other famous thinkers from Baron d'Holbach to Upton Sinclair emerged to criticize religion and to articulate secular alternatives. Collectively, they laid the foundations of secular thought by articulating the principles of rationalism, humanism, skepticism, and so many other related 'isms.

Following emergence, the next stage was coalescence. During this stage, leaders stepped forward to solidify the rhetorical movement, give it more physical substance and make it more personal. Trailblazers like Madalyn O'Hair, Anne Gaylor, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and others waged public debates not only in opposition to religion in theory, but in practice as well. They legitimized Atheism in the public sphere, made it acceptable to criticize religion, and gave many people the courage to come out as Atheists and even to take social action to oppose entrenched religious institutions.

Today the Atheist movement is in the bureaucratization stage. During this stage, institutions are formed to organize the movement and give it legitimacy, strength of numbers and political clout. Organizations like the Secular Policy Institute, the Freedom from Religion Foundation, the Secular Coalition, and New York City Atheists are just a few examples of our secular institutions.

We have accomplished a great deal as a movement since Jean Meslier first excoriated religious belief. American society is at least nominally secular; our Wall of Separation between Church and State still stands despite continual battering; Atheists are still discriminated against, but we no longer have to fear outright persecution let alone death; and we do now have strong institutions that advocate for secular interests.

But despite all this progress we're still far from where we need to go as a movement. The uneasy détente we have established with religion is not a stable status quo. Our Wall and our institutions are under constant attack. Religious views are still regarded as valid, respectable and even admirable. Society is still heavily influenced by magical thinking of all kinds and the rule of reason is neither secure nor assured.

We're Not There Yet

Movements can end in different ways, including total success (religion and belief are exterminated); total failure (the movement collapses); co-optation (the movement is subverted); and repression (the movement is silenced by religious extremists or even by our own secular moderates).

For us, the most realistic and acceptable end state is enculturation, in which societal attitudes toward Atheism and reason are normalized regarding over religion and belief. In such an end state, magical thinking and mass delusions like religion are marginalized and denormalized. If and when enculturation is achieved, there will no longer be a need for a movement or for institutions to protect and advance secular rights and scientific thinking.

And such secular enculturation is achievable. Many of us may not believe that such transformation is possible, but at one time it was inconceivable that we could ever denormalize racism, sexism, or homophobia from civil society. Yet we have largely accomplished these in just the span of decades. We should likewise envision and work toward a near future in which society no longer tolerates magical thinking; when religious and other belief-based assertions are no longer socially acceptable, let alone admirable.

Not only is secular enculturation possible, it is essential. If we do not denormalize magical thinking throughout all strata of society, we will not be able to overcome the existential challenges we face as a society and as a species. Secular enculturation must saturate, dominate, and endure in public discourse, education and policy-making.

Moving On

So how do we advance forward from the current bureaucratization stage—characterized by incessant attacks upon secular freedoms and irrational belief-based decision-making - to an end stage of secular enculturation?

First, we must adapt our tactics, our strategy and our tone to best respond to the unique challenges facing us at this particular stage of the movement. The arguments and attitudes that brought us here are not necessarily effective moving forward. In every successful movement, the methods and approaches that achieve success during one stage must be adapted and even abandoned in order to succeed in the next.

Here are some adjustments we must make collectively as a movement if we hope to achieve and end the state of enculturation in which our secular organizations are no longer necessary.

Don't Settle for Détente

It's true that we no longer live in fear of being tortured by the Inquisition until we renounce the heretical Atheistic ideas. But we shouldn't be satisfied with our current uneasy détente between religion and secular society. We are essentially mired in a "Cold War" in which both sides struggle to expand their influence without explicitly declaring war. But this is a battle we must fight to win to merely hold our ground.

Don't Rely Upon the Wall

Our Constitutional Wall of Separation between Church and State is essential but insufficient. All walls eventually fall when besieged by continual assault. We must appreciate that merely defending the wall is not a sustainable strategy, let alone a winning one, against an opponent that will never relent.

DON'T RELY UPON THE WALL

Further, an attitude of "live and let live" is not realistic because those outside the Wall will never be satisfied with a "separate-but-equal" society. As long as religious beliefs are viewed as reasonable, religious believers will reasonably expect and demand that their beliefs be enacted in public policy and will continue to circumvent and undermine the Wall. Further, the Wall offers no protection whatsoever against their right to vote for radically religious political candidates who can throw open the gates from the inside.

The Civil Rights movement did not restrict itself to merely defending the explicit protections enumerated under the Civil Rights Act. They understood that they could not stop there—that civil rights would never be secured until fundamental cultural change was achieved.

Stop Underestimating Belief

The idea that religious beliefs are personal and therefore harmless is false. We must acknowledge that all beliefs tangibly harm us all. We must treat all beliefs as infectious diseases that inherently compromise the rational capacity of our society and inevitably seek out others to convert and influence.

We know it is not harmless to hold "purely personal" racist or sexist beliefs and we should not accept the argument that religious ideas are any less harmful or more sacrosanct.

Curtail Unproductive Debate

During the coalescence phase—our four horsemen (writers Dawkins, Dennet, Harris and Hitchens) engaged in an ongoing public debate to articulate the case for Atheism and against religion. That was necessary then. But now, the arguments have all been made and the debating must stop. To achieve enculturation, we must understand that logic is inadequate to addressing the illogical, and that attempts to do so only become silly distractions that serve mainly to legitimize fantasy and keep it alive.

Of course we can still engage in dialogue with individuals, but we must stop arguing about whether god exists or whether the bible has contradictions. We must begin to model the behavior and attitude we want society to adopt.

We no longer debate whether racism is reasonable or sexism is harmless fun. We no longer engage in debate as to whether sexual orientation is a choice. Similarly, we Atheists must stop treating religious fantasy as if it is a legitimate subject of debate.

Don't Buy into Compartmentalization

Many believers claim that one can be a believer on Sunday morning and a rational fact-based thinker the rest of the week. Even many Atheists accept this assertion.

Believers would like to have their cake and eat it too. They want to be able to espouse magical thinking regarding their faith but not have that impinge upon their credibility as rational thinkers. This claim is invalid and we should not allow them to get away with making it. The rationalizations necessary to accommodate beliefs necessarily spill over to affect all thinking. If their mental processes allow believers to rationalize that the Earth is 6,000 years old, those same mental processes likely impact their thinking about everything else.

If a person is an avowed racist or sexist or is certified as delusional, we rightly hold all of their conclusions to a higher degree of scrutiny. We should adopt the same skeptical stance with believers if we are to ever achieve the enculturation of fact-based thinking.

Reject Deep Conviction

The religious community argues that beliefs described as “deeply held” or “heartfelt” or “sincere” or “cherished” are particularly acceptable and unassailable. We must reject this claim. Crazy is crazy regardless of how sincere it might be; in fact, the stronger the belief the crazier it often is. We would not accept the claim that racist or sexist ideas are more acceptable because they are “sincerely deeply held” beliefs. We should likewise not allow religious believers to insulate themselves with such appeals to sentiment.

Define the Language

Language changes attitudes and attitudes define cultures. To change our culture, to enculturate secularism, we must start with language. Using religious references and idioms, no matter how innocent they seem in isolation, collectively enshrines magical thinking and influences how we think. To change our culture, to enculturate secularism, we must start by purging all forms of religious language no matter how insignificant it may seem.

We no longer tolerate sexist innuendo, homophobic slurs, or racial epithets and we should no longer tolerate magical language in civil discourse. We understand the subtle but profound impact such language has. It is not that sexism disappeared and then so did sexist language, but quite the opposite. We made sexist language taboo and only then did sexism disappear from minds and hearts. Language does not merely reflect our thinking but it is critical to shaping how we think.

Expel Mystical Thinking

Even people who consider themselves secular often hold mystical ideas like spirituality, souls, our own ideas of god, of consciousness, and of pseudo-scientific phenomenon. We Atheists have to be the first to purge such ideas from our own thinking. All these forms of modern mystical thinking only give credence to religious beliefs and to other New-Age nonsense.

Many if not most Atheists are “agnostic Atheists” who believe that in order to be rigorous in our thinking we must admit some possibility that god might exist. This position is simply not valid philosophically; it is not actually valid logically; it is not truly scientific; and it is certainly not a good tactic.

Embrace Absolute Atheism

At one time, offering some measure of doubt helped by making us appear less threatening, less dogmatic, and more open-minded. But now, anything less than absolute Atheism has proven to be counterproductive. Any expressed uncertainty that god might exist is as silly as admitting the Easter Bunny might exist – and it imparts undue legitimacy to a belief in god.

We don't express any doubt as to whether suicide bombers might actually be greeted by 72 virgins in the afterlife. We don't express doubt about any other irrational ideas except our one carve-out for this idea of a Christian god. This position

is inherently self-defeating because if there is any chance, no matter how small, that god might really exist, then Pascal's Wager becomes reasonable. And if it is reasonable to act on the chance there might be a god, then it becomes reasonable to transform society around that belief.

We need to move past this profoundly wrong-minded and undeserved deference to religion.

Start Showing

During the coalescence stage we demanded respect as Atheists and we claimed that Atheism was superior to religion. That was once all we could do. But now we have won the right to *show* what we can do, and with that right comes responsibility. Claiming and demanding is no longer sufficient to achieve enculturation. Now we must earn respect and show that Atheism is superior to religion. We must stop talking and start doing good and worthy works in the expressed name of Atheism and show that society need not accept the profound negatives inherent to religion in order to obtain social good that is ultimately humanist in origin.

Believe

We must believe in something good that can be real. So to believe that the secular movement can make damaging beliefs and religious fallacies socially unacceptable. Truly and unapologetically believe in science and fact-based thinking. Believe that Atheism is not merely a faction of the secular movement. Rather believe that the secular movement is actually a timid expression of the deeper Atheist movement.

These strategies are all essential to achieving a successful outcome for our Atheist movement. Even if the currents are moving in the direction of secularism today, we cannot be content to just float along. We must all paddle as hard as we can with the current. There is no telling when those currents might change, and we have no time to waste meandering toward a more sane and rational society. We must finish what others have started throughout the stages of emergence, coalescence, and bureaucratization, and push the atheist movement onward to enculturation.

And we as a movement cannot wait until everyone in every pocket of society is ready to move ahead with us. Society transcends individuals, and society is ripe for embracing reason even if all individuals and groups are not. There are still racists in the world, there are still sexists and homophobes, but the culture overall has moved on to enculturation and those people have been left behind. The Atheist movement must likewise keep pushing forward with deep resolve and abiding purpose until the not-so-distant day that there is no longer any need for it.

△ Tyson Gill is a scientist who has served in the Peace Corps in Africa. He is the author of the highly recommended book, *Belief in Science and the Science of Belief: A Guidebook to Fact-Based Thinking* www.figmentums.wordpress.com

UPCOMING EVENTS



Jan 10, 2016 (Sun.) 12 Noon
NYCA Brunch / Speaker
Speaker: Stephen Bronner, Professor of Political Science, Rutgers University
Location: The Press Box Restaurant (2nd Floor) 932 Second Avenue (49th/50th St.)

Book: *The Bigot: Why Prejudice Persists*
Currently, he is Director of Global Relations at the Center for the Study of Genocide, Conflict Resolution, and Human Rights at Rutgers University, and a member of the Executive Committee of the UNESCO Chair for Genocide Prevention. Professor Bronner is also Executive Chair of US Academics for Peace and an advisor to Conscience International.

Cost: Brunch, \$20, includes selection of buffet entrees, salad, one soft drink, tax and tip.



Jan. 15, 2016 (Fri.) 6/6:30PM
NYCA Book/Film Club
Host: David Orenstein, Ph.D
Location: Stone Creek 140 East 27th St. (Rear Room) (3rd/Lex)

Film: Woody Allen's: *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, a great NYC film and lots of Atheist themes. The movie generates the best kind of suspense because it's not about what will happen to people — it's about what decisions they will reach. We have the same information they have. What would we do? How far would we go to protect our happiness and reputation? How selfish would we be? Is our comfort worth more than another person's life?

Cost: Free, Recommend drink or food purchase to compensate Stone Creek for the use of their space.



Jan 19, 2016 (Tues.) 7PM
NYCA Discussion / Meetup
Group Leader: Lee Moore
Location: Stone Creek 140 East 27th St. (Rear Room) (3rd/Lex)

Subject: Lee picks timely, lively topics that spur rambunctious discussion.

Cost: Free, Recommend drink or food purchase to compensate Stone Creek for the use of their space.



Jan. 28, 2016 (Thurs.) 6:30 PM
NYCA Monthly Meeting
Speaker: Mark Oppenheimer, NY Times Reporter, Religion. Mark writes The NY Times *beliefs* column, and on religious practices.
Location: SLC Conference Center (3rd Floor) 15 West 39th St.

Subject: *Atheism and the Media*. Every news article and news segment that talks about Atheists comes with a reaction from the religious community. Why? When the media has an article about religion, they don't include an Atheist response.

Cost: \$10, Donation covers room rental.

RELIGION IS FOR SOMEONE WHO IS NOT SEEKING THE TRUTH

IN THE NEWS

Our new weekly Cable show, *My Road to Atheism*, premiered Thursday, December 24, at 5:30 PM on MNN 67; RCN 85; FIOS 36.

Hosts Susan Jacobsen and Rod Mason interviewed NYC Atheists President, Ken Bronstein.



Left to Right: Rod Mason, Ken Bronstein, Susan Jacobsen

NEWS ITEMS

- Britain no longer a Christian country and should stop acting as if it is, says judge: <http://goo.gl/Ylj5qR>
- A Catholic dilemma: Should IVF embryos be adopted? <http://goo.gl/61tQUV>
- 'Daily News' provokes with cover on Calif. shooting: 'God isn't fixing this' <http://goo.gl/niVOdL>
- Justice Scalia's Majoritarian Theocracy <http://www.patheos.com>
- Seven charged with murder in beating of teen at upstate New York church <http://goo.gl/0e8jpk>
- When an Atheist Rapper Takes on Religion <https://goo.gl/yLSX6U>
- 'Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World,' by Tim Whitmarsh: <http://publishersweekly.com>
- Mystery of how snakes lost their legs solved by reptile fossil <http://goo.gl/ZQvRVW>
- Influence of churches, once dominant, now waning in South: <http://goo.gl/YIORvq>
- Duluth Catholic diocese latest to file for bankruptcy over sex abuse payouts: <http://goo.gl/HNIIjs>
- Icelanders flock to religion revering Sumerian gods and tax rebates: <http://goo.gl/bf9BSs>

NEWS CAMPAIGNS

- De Blasio's Pre-K program: still awaiting response from Department of Education about schools that opt for religious prayer. We have contacted them numerous times without satisfactory response. Now in discussion with our lawyers about best course of action.
- Port Authority of NY and NY Digital Display signs – GOD BLESS OUR TROUPS. We have contacted them repeatedly. Currently meeting with our lawyers about how to escalate the pressure.

**I AM NOT A
NON-BELIEVER
I AM A REALIST**

UPCOMING EVENTS

January 2016

- Jan. 10** - NYCA Brunch / Speaker - *12 Noon**
Jan. 15 - NYCA Book/Film Club - *6:30/7PM***
Jan. 19 - NYCA Discussion Group - *7PM***
Jan. 28 - NYCA Monthly Meeting - *6:30PM****

February 2016

- Feb. 14** - NYCA Brunch / Speaker - *12:00 PM**
Feb.16 - NYCA Discussion Group - *7:00 PM ***
Feb. 19 - NYCA Book / Film Club
*6:30 / 7:00 PM***
Feb. 25 - NYCA Monthly Meeting - *6:30PM****

- * 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

Wednesday	MNN	RCN	FIOS
Atheism in History <i>5:30 PM</i>	1997	84	35

Thursday	MNN	RCN	FIOS
NYC Atheists <i>5 PM</i>	67	85	36
My Road to Atheism <i>5:30 PM</i>	67	85	36

NYC ATHEISTS
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