

New York City Atheists Inc.

Serving the Tri-State area

An affiliate of American Atheists & Center For Atheism

WEB: NYC-ATHEISTS.ORG

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KENNETH BRONSTEIN

PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"

THE TEXAS TEXTBOOK MASSACRE

The Fundamentalist ultra-conservative right wing in this country is like the undead—just when you think they've been booted out of Washington DC or Dover, PA, they pop up in another part of the U.S.—alive, feisty and chomping at the bit. Their latest incarnation has been in Texas, where the state's Board of Education recently approved a Social Studies curriculum that will give a conservative spin to history textbooks by stressing Republican philosophies, religious views and the superiority of American capitalism.

The Texas textbook massacre is, I'm convinced, the work of a right-wing conspiracy, part of the fundamentalist jihad that was started nearly 30 years ago by the calculating and insidiously clever Ralph Reed, who headed the Christian Coalition from 1989 to 1997. The Christian Coalition, founded by the Reverend Pat Robertson, is a U.S. Christian advocacy group that claims some 2.5 million members, all fundamentalists, evangelicals or charismatics.

School Boards Packed with Religionists

Ralph Reed, basically a public relations man, was determined to get his fundamentalist constituents into politics. His strategy was to get them in on the lowest level of entry: school boards, from whence they could move up to more important political offices. (Don't laugh: Sarah Palin started out her political career on a school board.) Reed's grand plan was to get his fundamentalists onto the Supreme Court and into Congress so they could

discredit Darwin, evolution, science, and prove that we are a Christian nation.

Reed's method of accomplishing this was basically a grass-roots effort. Organizing voting blocs through local churches, Reed was able to control party machinery in many locations and could turn out large blocs of votes for Religious Right candidates. He was one of the first to use Voters Guides effectively and, according to once source, "The fear of being listed on Voter Guides as casting anti-Christian votes prompted politicians to carefully consider the positions urged by the Christian Coalition."

Reed and his Christian Coalition also perfected the Conservative penchant for framing policies and goals in a way that was semantically more enticing to their constituency. Thus, capitalism became "free enterprise," and the words "intelligent design" and "creation science" came into being—oxymorons though they may seem to us.

It's amazing to me that this network of conservative enclaves still exists all over the country and, based in churches, they thrive, doing their reactionary work as thoroughly and effectively as a Malware virus infects a computer. The Texas School Board has seen to it that its children's textbooks will teach them that our country's Founding Fathers were not committed to a secular government, that global warming is not a fact, and that the Bible is correct about most things.

Cont. next page...

To control our children's education is to control their minds. The Jesuits had a saying, "Give me a child until he is seven, and I will give you the man." It is disheartening to me, as a sometime teacher (I taught at a Black university for a year and at a ghetto school in Los Angeles for another year while on sabbaticals) to see our children's minds being treated like billboards on which the Religious Right can impose anything they want and put their message into their euphemistic advertising jargon. The truth is being lost, trimmed, clipped and pruned along the way.

But recently I had an epiphany of sorts, thinking about the children and how intelligent they really are. Remember the early days of rock and roll, when many fundamentalist parents, preachers, ministers, priests and conservative lawmakers opposed this form of music, on the grounds that it was too sexually suggestive? Ed Sullivan's TV show even cut off Elvis Presley at the waist so Christian America could not see his swinging hips. Were the kids put off by such parental objections? Not a chance. The more the parents forbade their music, the more the kids wanted it.

Google the Truth!

It occurred to me that the kids might react similarly to protest their altered textbooks. Many already resent being force-fed schooling. The problem is, the kids whose minds are being warped by the newly "enhanced" textbooks are generally too young to protest. And school, with its daily supervision, grades and required attendance, is a different venue than a disco.

Then it dawned on me: Technology may be the key. What consumes today's kids is the Internet, googling, computer games, Kindles, iPhones and iPads. Computer games are more important to them than textbooks.

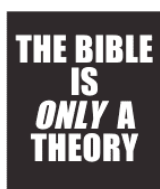
Yet the very technology that takes kids away from their school texts may also offer them a doorway to an alternate source of learning. Every child has access to the truth. With the Internet, kids can tap into a different view of history than that offered by their tampered-with textbooks. The curious student will be able to drill down and get impartial information on Thomas Jefferson, secularism, Darwin and evolution.

An Alternative Textbook

What, you don't think they will do that? They will, if we see to it that they know that their textbooks have been revised, distorted and tainted, and that there *is* an alternative. In fact, most kids are already more in tune with getting facts via their computers than adults are. I envision, in a world that is becoming more and more "green" and wants to save the forests, that someday the primary source of knowledge for students will not be their bound textbooks but their computers.

I have enormous confidence in students, even those in Texas: As soon as word gets around that the forbidden truths are on Wikipedia, or some other popular site, the Texas book depository in Dallas will have the largest collection of textbooks in the nation returned with uncut pages. Kids don't like being fooled.

But we Atheists also have our jobs cut out for us to combat the religious reactionaries. We must learn from our enemy's strategies and successes. We must form our own grass roots groups, publish our own Voter's Guide, get our people onto school boards, into Congress and onto the Supreme Court. We can't let the religious right outdo us, outsmart us, out-organize us, out-vote us or out-politicize us. True, they've been doing it a lot longer than we have, some 2,000 years longer, but remember, we've got technology, computers and truth on our side. ☐



Posters by Susan Ferguson

Editor's Q and A

Are Atheists Happy People?

Do You Need god to Make You Happy?



By Jane Everhart

Dear Editor,

Is it possible for Atheists to be happy people? Most people think of us Atheists as angry and glum. But religious people are thought to be content, beatific, blissed-out, secure in the knowledge that they will find happiness in heaven. I'm offended by their holier-than-thou attitude of superiority, as though they have a lock on happiness. Aren't they using their god as a security blanket?

--Ralph from Red Hook

Dear Ralph,

If ignorance is bliss, then presumably the religionists are indeed happier. Well, I jest. But as Shakespeare says, many a serious word is said in jest.

I believe there are two kinds of happiness: real and fake. Religious people apparently achieve their bliss with illusions of heaven and hell, a bountiful god who listens to their prayers, angels who fly around, and saints (dead people who have been elevated to god's board of directors because they were so good while alive) who watch over them. I understand that there is even one saint that Catholics pray to if they lose their car keys—apparently a heavenly division of labor exists.

Let me tell you, that is fake happiness. Walk into an insane asylum and you will find the same kinds of delusion rampant among the inhabitants. Are these patients happier? Half of them want to kill themselves.

Do Illusions Make You Happy?

You are really asking if one needs an illusion to be happy. Here's the hidden secret about illusions: Almost everybody who entertains illusions has deep-down doubts about them that they don't admit, sometimes not even to themselves. Even Mother Teresa, that beacon of illusory nobleness, had secret doubts—or "dark nights" as she called them—that were revealed in her diaries

after her death. It goes against the grain of human logic to believe in something that isn't there, has never been there and, logically, can't possibly be there. There's some part of your brain that won't accept it, so it takes constant self-hypnosis and suppression of doubts to hang on to those illusions.

I think that facing reality, even if that reality involves hardships, is much preferable. You can struggle, work and fight to overcome whatever hardships life presents to you. And each success in overcoming a hardship affords a little happiness in itself—right now, right here, in this world, not in some afterlife.

You may well ask: Isn't fake happiness as good as real happiness to the person experiencing it? After all, the person experiencing happiness that is based on illusion goes to his or her grave euphoric and full of hope for the afterlife, right? Tammy Faye Baker, for instance, said on television on the day before she died that she was not afraid to die because she was sure heaven is a huge Wal-Mart where she could shop to her heart's content.

Illusions Hold Back Progress

Fake happiness based on an illusion such as Tammy Faye's anticipated shopping spree, cons the person harboring the illusion and, in fact, cheats the whole world. If you are preparing for paradise in heaven, you aren't going to be much interested in changing things for better on earth.

So the religious engage in useless activity to prepare for the afterlife with prayer, church attendance, praising god, bake sales and, heaven forefend, Bingo, which has become a church-anointed way for oldsters to waste their time. Think of those Tibetans who twirl those prayer wheels all day long to send their prayers to heaven, even in freezing-cold weather. Wouldn't they be better off inside, building a better stove to keep themselves warm?

With its offerings of illusions and endorsement of

useless activity to prepare for the afterlife, religion displaces efforts in the real world to make a better life and thus religion becomes an actual deterrent to progress in society and the happiness that it might bring.

What is Happiness?

But what is happiness anyway? There has been a lot of discussion about that in the press lately, with some seven how-to books on happiness recently published. One book, “The Happiness Project,” by Gretchen Rubin, actually made the New York Times best seller list for about five minutes. (Her most profound advice for happiness: “Make your bed every day.”)

Another recently published book, “The Politics of Happiness,” by Derek Bok, former president of Harvard, points out that the American constitution guarantees every American citizen’s right to pursue happiness. But what does that mean? Bok agrees with the idea the happiness is indeed “something government ought to maximize,” as in greater equality, stabilizing the family and improving public health.

Isn’t Bok getting to the nitty gritty of why illusions won’t make you happy? No illusion is going to improve your health, no prayers are going to pay your rent. No prayer wheel is going to put food on the table

Basic Happiness Needs

Does good health and fulfilling your basic needs have anything to do with actual happiness? You betcha, says the New York Times, which recently claimed it had consulted many so-called happiness experts and come up with the sure-fire top five basics of happiness:

- 1) Be in possession of the basics—food, shelter, good health, safety.
- 2) Get enough sleep.
- 3) Have relationships that matter to you.
- 4) Take compassionate care of others and of yourself.
- 5) Have work or an interest that engages you.

You may argue with these five components of happiness—I certainly do—but please note that there is not a single thing in the list about preparing for the afterlife, going to church, praying or donating money to your church or temple.

In fact, the New York Times list of happiness components has confirmed my long-held belief that the only way to assure a highly developed civilization is to get the basics—food, shelter, health and safety—out of the way for everybody, and then citizens can spend more

of their time on poetry, music, literature, dance, scientific advances, theatre—all the arts that mark a cultured and enlightened society.

Avoid Happiness Gurus

How can we personally achieve some happiness on this earth while we can still experience it? Well, I don’t advise you to seek your personal bliss via a pop-culture instructor or guru such as those advertised on the happier.com web site, which claims, “We guarantee you will start getting happier in just seven days,” and features four smiling “happiness coaches.”

No, I don’t hold out for much success with them, even though their touted instruction book, “Learned Optimism—How To Change Your Mind and Your Life,” has been marked down to \$12.48 from \$16. We don’t want to learn a fake “optimism” any more than we want fake happiness.

What Makes YOU Happy?

So how do Atheists achieve happiness? My fellow Atheist Elaine Stone of Chappaqua, NY says, “I think Atheists have the ability to be happier than others because they are generally rational, thinking, intelligent people who are unencumbered by the dictates of religion that tend to weigh one down. We Atheists bask in our feelings of rational superiority—O, come on, fess up, we do!” she insists, adding, “Happiness is a variable that changes constantly and changes with age.”

That happiness is age-related was also observed by longtime NYCA member Arlene Breier of Rego Park, who said happiness for young people involves finding “Mr. or Ms. Right,” completing their education and finding meaningful work. But as one ages, “Health and supportive friends and family become more important to your happiness.”

Back to Basics

What that says to me is that without those basic needs being taken care of, life becomes a struggle, and the heavenly comforts that religion promises may tempt people to postpone happiness until after they die. Hungry people are vulnerable to religious entreaties.

As for me, I hope to work to try to make those basics obtainable to everybody. It will be hard work, but I tend to agree with Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Conner, who, when asked what it took to have a happy life, responded, “Work worth doing.” □

Margaret Downey Tells How Religion Hindered the Fight for Women's Right to Vote

At the March 14 NYCA Brunch, Margaret Downey, dressed in a Suffragist costume, gave a spirited talk on how the Suffragists won their fight for the right to vote despite the obstructionism of religious organizations.

New York's Mayor Michael Bloomberg sent an official proclamation to our group honoring Downey and Women's History month (see this page).



**NYCA Will Counter the 'National Day of Prayer'
With Blood Donations--
"A Lifesaving Action, Not Passive Prayer."**

**NYC ATHEISTS "GIFT OF LIFE"
BLOOD DONATION EVENT
MAY 6, 2010 (THUR.) 4:00 – 7:00 PM**

"While religious people are on their knees, we Atheists will be on our feet, giving a part of ourselves for the benefit of humanity. Atheists know that prayer does not work--but medical science does."

LOCATION: New York Blood Bank
310 East 67th Street
(between 1st & 2nd Ave)



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10007

March 13, 2010

Dear Friends:

It is a great pleasure to welcome all those attending Margaret Downey's lecture on the Suffragists, hosted by NYC Atheists. Every year during Women's History Month, we celebrate the women who have made our city and nation great—and this event is an important opportunity to remember those courageous and heroic individuals who paved the way for women's right to vote.

In describing the battle for suffrage, Susan B. Anthony once said: "I have encountered riotous mobs and have been hung in effigy, but my motto is: Men's rights are nothing more. Women's rights are nothing less." The bravery and determination of all those who fought for suffrage helped to transform our nation, moving us closer to the vision of equality laid out in our founding documents. Today, we reflect on the tremendous progress we've made since these incredible women and men first began lobbying for equal voting rights—and honor all those whose hard work and dedication have made it possible.

On behalf of the City of New York, please accept my best wishes for an enjoyable event and continued success.

Sincerely,

Michael R. Bloomberg
Mayor

NYC PUBLIC SCHOOL TUTORING PROGRAM

**NYC ATHEISTS IS WORKING WITH
"LEARNING LEADERS" – THE TUTOR
COORDINATORS AT THE NYC DEPT. OF
EDUCATION.
VOLUNTEER TO TUTOR CHILDREN
IN GRADES K-12**

**ALL SUBJECTS, CITY-WIDE, MORNING
TO EVENINGS.**

**CONTACT: KEN BRONSTEIN
212-535-7425**

NYCA HAITI DONATION CAMPAIGN

**NYCA has collected, and sent a check
for, \$1500 to Doctors Without Borders
for their Haiti relief work.
Who says Atheists don't donate to
charity?
We have and we will!**

Creationism vs. Evolution Battles Hang on the ‘Lemon Test’



By Ron Widelec

Over the past few decades the Religious Right has been trying to inject creationism—the belief that god created mankind and the world—back into American public school education after it was being eased out of many school curricula based on up-to-date science and a number of legal decisions.

In its continuing onslaught, the Religious Right has tried to argue that creationism is science, while at the same time attacking evolution (the scientific theory propounded by Charles Darwin that mankind evolved from simpler forms) as “religious” thinking. The religionists have even tried to re-brand creation as ‘creation science’ and ‘intelligent design.’

These creationism vs. evolution battles have been waged all over America in local school boards, state legislatures and the federal courts. Creationists have had several successes at the local level and with elected officials, but have consistently lost in the courts.

Lemon Test Blocks Creationists

The courts’ decisions, where evolution has won, have been based on the establishment clause of the First Amendment, which forbids the government from any “establishment” of religion. At the District, Appeals, and Supreme Court level, decisions have held that:

1. Evolution is a valid scientific and secular theory;
2. Anti-evolution policies in education are religious in nature;
3. Creationism, under any name, is religious in nature; and thus
4. Any teaching of creationism or attempt to prevent the teaching of evolution is a violation of the establishment clause of the constitution.

The most important legal precedent used in these recent cases has been the so-called “Lemon test” from the 1971 *Lemon v. Kurtzman* Supreme Court case. In order to pass the Lemon test, a law must (1) have a secular purpose (2) cannot enhance or prohibit religion, and (3) should not excessively entangle between government and religion. The Lemon test has been the keystone supporting 20 years of jurisprudence on this topic; it has been the precedent upon which all recent creation vs. evolution cases have rested on the federal level. Despite attempts made by the Religious Right to get

around the establishment clause, the high court has continued to block creationism and anti-evolution actions. As long as this Lemon test remains in use, it is unlikely that the federal courts will rule in favor of creationism.

But there is a hitch. The Lemon test is far less popular with the current court than it has been in the past, especially after the addition of Bush’s politically conservative appointees, Chief Justice John Roberts and Associate Justice Samuel Alito.

Several Supreme Court Justices have made it clear that they do not agree with this test as the best measure to determine the constitutionality of actions dealing with the establishment clause. In the latter years of the Rehnquist court, Justice Sandra Day O’Conner provided the swing vote. She has supported separation approximately 50% of the time. The current court has a five-conservative bloc of Roberts, Scalia, Thomas, Alito and Kennedy as the closest thing to a swing vote. Three have made it very clear that they do not support the Lemon test and two others have hinted that they do not.

Two other tests have been proposed recently: (1) the Endorsement test, which was used in conjunction with the Lemon test in the historic Dover case (in which a Bush-appointed Republican judge ruled that creationism is religious and does not belong in the public schools) and (2) the Coercion test. As long as a law is not seen to “endorse” any religion or religion in general, it passes the Endorsement test. The Coercion test is far more lenient than the other tests; it allows a law as long as it does not “coerce” citizens into religious actions and does not benefit religion more than the practices used in America’s past traditions.

Should the high court choose to discard the Lemon principle, a wide breach in the “wall of separation” could be opened, allowing creationism back into public schools all over the country. As recent opinion polls and actions at the local school board level have shown, there are many waiting for just such an opportunity. □

Ron Widelec is an educator who lives on Long Island. He has been writing very informative articles for this newsletter since its very inception.

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

APRIL 11, 2010 (SUN.) 12:00 PM
NYC ATHEISTS BRUNCH / SPEAKER

SPEAKER: Surprise speaker!

SUBJECT: Madalyn Murray O'Hair, Founder of American Atheists Inc.—Her Life and Her Untimely Death.



LOCATION: Press Box
 932 Second Avenue (49/50th) / 2nd Floor

COST: Brunch is \$20, which includes a selection of Buffet entrees and salad, one soft drink, coffee, tax, tip.

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APRIL 14, 2010 (WED.) 7:00 PM
NYCA Living Without Religion Group

SUBJECT: Is It Possible to Be a Happy Atheist?

It is widely claimed that Atheists are glum and angry people. But is this true? If you are unhappy is it because—or in spite of—being a nonbeliever? Reading material for this workshop is Editor Jane Everhart's article on Page 3 of this issue. Happy or unhappy, sharing our experiences and feelings with each other is one way to become stronger.

GROUP LEADER: Linda Blaikie, L.C.S.W.



LOCATION: MOONSTRUCK DINER –
 449 THIRD AVE. /31ST) -2ND FLOOR

COST: Free to members (can join at meeting if desired). but participants are expected to purchase a drink or food to compensate Moonstruck for use of their space. The reasonably priced menu features some excellent dishes.

APRIL 20, 2010 (TUE.) 7:00 PM
NYC Atheists Meetup

Group Leaders: Alexandra Sidiropoulos
 Michael Dorian



Subject: A surprise, and sure to be startling!

Location: Stone Creek Bar and Lounge
 140 East 27th St. (3rd/Lex)

Cost: Free, but participants are expected to purchase a drink or food to compensate Stone Creek for use of their space.

APRIL 29, 2010 (THUR.) 6:30 PM
NYCA MONTHLY MEETING

Speaker: Walter Pitman III



Now a senior scientist emeritus at Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, Prof. Pitman's research interests have expanded to include theoretical geomorphology and tectonics, with emphasis on unraveling the history, causes and consequences of changing sea levels. He co-authored, with William Ryan, the much-heralded book, "Noah's Flood."

SUBJECT: "Why Does the Earth Move? It's Not god, Its Plate Tectonics!" Dr. Pitman unlocked the "Rosetta Stone" of continental drift and plate-tectonic theory. He discovered the first matched transoceanic magnetic profile that proved the reality of plate generation and motion. For this achievement he received the Vetlesen Prize considered by many as the Nobel Prize for Geology.

LOCATION: SLC Conference Center-352 Seventh Ave./16th Floor-(29/30th St.

COST: We ask for a donation of \$5 to help cover the cost of room rental.

UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

APRIL 2010

Apr.	11***	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
Apr.	14**	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living Without Religion Group
Apr.	20*	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up
Apr.	29****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

MAY 2010

May	9***	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
May.	12**	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living Without Religion Group
May	18*	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up
May	27****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

* Stone Creek Bar and Lounge – 140 East 27th St. (3rd/Lex)
 ** Moonstruck Diner – 449 Third Ave. (31st) – 2nd Floor
 *** Press Box Restaurant & Pub – 932 Second Ave. (49/50th St.) – 2nd Floor
 **** SLC Conference Center–352 Seventh Ave./16th Floor-(29/30th St.)

NYCA CABLE SHOWS

Wednesdays:	5:30 PM	Atheism in History	(Manhattan Cable # 57)
	6:30 PM	This Week in Atheism	(Manhattan Cable # 57)
Thursdays:	7:00 PM	NYC Atheists	(Manhattan Cable # 67)
	7:30 PM	Atheists Book Club	(Manhattan Cable #67)

NYCA
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