

# 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 Most Important Thing We Do for Our Members

Would you hazard a guess about what I think is the best thing we do for our members? Did you say—the Solstice parties? Wrong. Solstice parties are fun but I have always felt that the most important thing we do—and it's right there in our mission statement—is to keep our members abreast of what's happening in science, in law, in politics, in society, in literature and in the international Atheist movement through the 24 lectures a year we present to our members.

We'll let others bicker about whether there is a god or not. Our lecture programs are aimed to keep you on top of advances in the world almost as they happen and to help you figure out how these advances impact the Atheist community.

For example, last year we featured Dr. William Jungers of Stony Brook University, who told us about a new, extinct human species just discovered in Indonesia, nicknamed Hobbits (covering evolution, biology, archeology); Attorney Geoff Henley, author of "Beyond Reasonable Doubt: A Lawyer's Case for Disbelief in God," (law, history); and Dr. Larry Egbert of "Final Exit," the organization that helps terminally ill patients die peacefully (sociology, medicine, law).

#### **Love and Blasphemy**

Wait, there's more, just in 2009: We also had Law Professor Sarah Gordon of Pennsylvania tell us about Blasphemy (law, sociology); Dr. Darrel Ray, author of "The God Virus," explained his Recovering from Religion support groups to us (psychology, sociology); and Dr. Lucy Brown of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, made us think about love (psychology, science). (Maybe we should have scheduled her this year, too, for our Valentine's Day brunch.)

I invited Dr. Ed Buckner to come up from Atlanta to tell us his dreams and plans for the new American Atheists (Atheist movement news). And Sean Faircloth of the Secular Coalition of America came from Washington to tell us what he wants to do for Atheism with Congress (politics, law, Atheist movement news).

We covered the pure sciences that you don't hear about every day: Dr. Fred Walter, professor of astronomy at Stony Brook, brought us up to date on the galaxies (science, futurism); geologist Dr. Bret Bennington, also from Stony Brook, told us about dinosaurs in New York—and no, he didn't mean our City Council members (science, geology, evolution, archeology). And psychiatrist Dr. Andy Thomson from Virginia hammered the church for exploiting human emotional needs to get members (psychology, sociology, history).

#### **Gays, Blacks and Jehovah's Witnesses**

We also presented, for a balanced mix, some ethnographic speakers like African-American Sibanye, who, dressed in African garb, told us how religion captivates Black members through a sense of community (psychology, history, sociology) and Warren Allen Smith, who counseled us on how to fight for our rights the way the Gay Civil Rights movement did in the wake of the Stonewall riots (sociology, history, how-to).

And that's just a sampling of speakers from 2009. In previous years, we've had extraordinary speakers such as the professor from India who runs an Atheist institute there (intercultural sociology); a couple of escapees from the Jehovah's Witnesses (Atheist movement news); an author who tried to live for a whole year like the Bible tells us to do (psychopathology? literature). And the

lawyer/actor who played Clarence Darrow Off-Broadway did us the tremendous honor of acting out one of the scenes from the play, “An Evening with Clarence Darrow,” at our brunch meeting (theatre, law, history).

Strangely enough, I’ve had a couple of undiscerning people ask me, don’t I realize that we are ‘preaching to the choir?’

### **Preaching to What Choir?**

Exactly what choir are you talking about, I ask them. Are you talking about the choir that knows about Hobbits? Or the one that is acquainted with the progress of Atheism in India? Or the Gay choir that can tell us how to fight for our Atheist civil rights? I shake my head in disbelief at the short-sightedness of the questioner and the realization that this know-it-all has obviously either not been to our lectures, has slept through them or is living in the world of the 60-second sound-bite.

I think that my love of knowledge—especially investigative, evidence-based knowledge—harks back to my childhood in Brookline, Mass., when I was forced to go to Hebrew school for two hours every day after my regular school. Let me tell you, the teachers at Hebrew school were not in the habit of entertaining questions by bright, inquisitive little boys about the veracity of Jewish lore. If you wanted evidence about how the sea was able to be parted, you got narrowed eyes, pursed lips and you realized that you were being a nuisance to these “learned” men. “You have to take it on faith,” was the short answer to everything.

### **The Bar Mitzvah Epiphany**

I simmered, and over the years I amassed a huge compendium of unproven factoids that I never got an answer to, or couldn’t find any answer to, or was told to take “on faith.” My resentment at this boiled up during my Bar Mitzvah when, looking out at the congregation of adults, I realized that my entry to this assemblage was a sham, that I couldn’t, wouldn’t, ever take anything “on faith,” and that henceforth, I was going to be in charge of my own education, I was going to choose my own teachers and they were going to be those who would tell me the truth.

In a way, my Bar Mitzvah was a farewell, not an entry to the Jewish religion. It signaled, perhaps, the beginning of my real education. I went on to get three university degrees, my hunger for the truth was so unquenchable. I sought truth not only through books but also through experiences, travel, theatre, listening, observing. And

always, I went to the source. Those friends and colleagues who were amused last year at my trip to Kansas to chase tornados were nevertheless made aware of my desire to experience real things. As they were by my trip to the South Pole to see penguins, my journey to Siberia to experience the cold, and my trek into the rain forests of Ecuador, where I lived for a week with natives though I was only the second white person they had ever met.

### **The University As a Smorgasbord**

When I became president of New York City Atheists some six years ago, I continued this, well, aberration. But now I sought to share it with my friends, my constituency, my fellow atheists and sometime-students. I wanted to say, look, every university is a smorgasbord, every professor has truths he wants to share with us. So I harnessed an expert here, called a specialist there, contacted friends of friends in every field I was curious about, asking them to come to our meeting, tell us about their field, what’s new in it, what’s cutting edge, what’s coming around the bend.

It would have been easy to just get authors who want to publicize their books come speak to us, they will always come and tout their books, but I wanted to go above and beyond that. I wanted our members to know about everything—after all, we are competing with the Koran and the Talmud and the Bible—and I wanted them to know it from the horse’s mouth, from the best expert I could find. I wanted them to know it so they could be confident with their database of knowledge, sure of themselves, unassailable when they face their religious adversary.

### **Atheists Expect Change**

The difference between us Atheists and religious people is: Show us evidence and we will change. Religion does not tolerate change very well; it is inextricably glued to its ancient directives based on ignorance and superstition.

I am convinced that change is what life is about, change is what science, medicine, psychology, geology, archeology are about, and my goal is to bring this feast of changes to my constituency so that in a world where the most brilliant, most knowledgeable, most up-to-date carry the day, my Atheists will be one step ahead in the race for the future.

And that, my friends, is why we have 24 fascinating, dynamic, intriguing speakers a year at NYCA. □

## NYC ATHEISTS 2010 ANNUAL MEETING

### Dennis Horvitz Named NYCA 2009 'Atheist of the Year'



Dennis Horvitz, host of two NYCA Cable TV shows, was named 2009 "Atheist of the Year" at NYCA's Annual Meeting on January 28. Horvitz also hosts NYCA's brunches and lectures, where he famously introduces himself as "The David Letterman of the Hopelessly Damned."

Horvitz was born in Pennsylvania but grew up in New Bedford, Mass. He moved to New York City in 1983 to be an actor and has appeared in soap opera and Off-Broadway productions. He was the lead in the French play "Tartuffe" in its Off-Broadway production. Horvitz is a member of the Screen Actors Guild, AFTRA and Actors Equity.

He has been NYCA's TV host of *New York City Atheists Live on Tape* and *This is Atheism* since 2004. He is also co-host of American Atheists' Cable TV show, *Atheist Viewpoint*, which is syndicated nationwide. Horvitz often travels to Atheist conventions for NYCA, where he conducts interviews with Atheist celebrities for NYCA's TV shows.

Horvitz is known among his Atheist colleagues for his dependability, his humor, his quickness on the uptake, his in-depth knowledge about Atheism and his kindness to all who work with him. ☐

### Key 2009 Accomplishments

#### First NYCA Lawsuit



John Aretakis    Bob Hoatson

#### Bus Poster Campaign



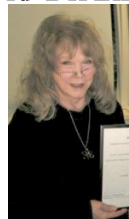
### Some of 2009 Award Recipients



David Birnkrant



Linda Blaikie



Jane Everhart



Roger Smith



Alexandra Sidiropoulos



John Wagner

## Editor's Q and A

# Why Is the Catholic Church So Cozy with Politicians?

## *A Very Personal Look at the Historical Underpinnings Of the Church-Politics Collusion*



By Jane Everhart

Dear Editor,

I have heard you say that religion and politics are deeply intertwined and often use each other. Religious institutions are supposed to be apolitical in the U.S. because they are tax exempt and yet everyone is aware that many, if not most, religious institutions are hand in glove with politics, especially the evangelical fundamentalist sects in the deep South, where the preacher actually tells his followers who they should vote for. But here in the Northeast, the most flagrant violator of the don't-get-involved-with-politics rule seems to be the Catholic church, whose Brooklyn bishop is being sued by NYC Atheists for making robocalls to sway the voters during the last election. How do you think the Catholic church has come to this brazen trespass?

--Bryan from Brooklyn

Dear Bryan,

Mark Hanna, the great Republican kingmaker of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is reputed to have said: "There are two things that are important in politics. The first is money, and I can't remember what the second one is."

Well, I can tell Mr. Hanna what the second one is: Religion.

Religion impacts politics in countless ways and not just the quid pro quos of doing favors for each other. It is my opinion that religion depends on politics for its very existence. Let me give you a historical perspective of that from my own family history.

My parents, immigrants to the U.S. from the East European countries of Poland and Russia, had both left small villages, my father from a rural area near Warsaw, my mother from a Russian border village northeast of the vast Bialowieza forest, where wild bison still roam.

My maternal great-grandfather was a gamekeeper for the

Polish nobility. Both my parents grew up in tiny villages where the Catholic church was the biggest—and sometimes the only—edifice, and where the Catholic priest was—surprise!—a revolutionary leader taking the side of his peasant flock against the ruling nobility.

### **The Priest as Robin Hood**

At the turn of the century in Eastern Europe, the village Catholic priest was the most educated person with whom the peasants had contact (which was why most Polish families always wanted one son to become a priest). The priest was everything to the peasants—(though referred to as 'peasants,' the parishioners were mostly isolated farmers who owned their small acreages). The priest was teacher, advisor, interpreter, baptizer, marriage officiator, funeral director, documenter of real estate and other transactions and the peasants' representative to the *voivodship* (or county). The village priest wrote out any necessary papers for his flock, kept records of land sales, marriages, births, departures. He settled disputes, enforced laws, even provided some rudimentary medical care. He was the titular mayor, physician, teacher and legal representative of the village with the power invested in him by god and the Vatican.

Most important of all, the priests represented and defended their flock to the ruling nobility. Village priests became widely known as protectors of the peasantry, the farmers and the poor—the Robin Hoods, so to speak, of the small villages. It was this historical, populist tradition from whence came Pope John Paul II, the first Polish pope. He had been a laborer in the limestone quarries of Poland before he became a priest, and a member of the Polish underground fighting the Nazis. It was, I think, why the farmers and workers of Catholic Poland loved Pope John Paul II so much.

### **On the Side of the Peasants**

I can use a personal example of how the priests protected

their flock against the nobility. The borders between Russia and Poland changed so often that my three maternal uncles became eligible for conscription into the Polish army. To avoid their being used as cannon fodder by an army of nobles in disputes that the young men wanted no part of, the village priest changed their baptismal records to indicate that they were born across the border in Russia. Did this village priest do this because he was a pacifist? Or did he honor the family's need to have their sons harvest the crops? We will never know. All we know is, he saved the young men from the nobles' armies.

That is, also, I think, how all three young men arrived in the U.S. with Russian passports after the quota of émigrés allowed to leave Poland was vastly cut down because of the conscription. (Records at Ellis Island show that my Uncle Albin arrived in America with a Russian passport and 25 cents in his pocket. Years later, at the time of his death in Western Massachusetts, he owned his own trucking business and a three-story house.)

That is the legend of the revolutionary Catholic priests, the fighters for the peasants, the defenders of the rights of the powerless.

### **The Atheist Scare**

Then, in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several strange things happened that changed the history of the Catholic church in Poland. First, the Polish nobles, bankrupt from profligacy and all those wars, fled Poland to settle in London and Paris, where being a "Count" or some such title had more status than in Poland. I have a photograph of my grandfather standing in front of a beautiful, capacious, wooden dacha, its architecture replete with intricate gingerbread carvings, that my mother said was her childhood home. It originally belonged to a Polish nobleman who had fled Poland and abandoned his handsome hunting lodge to his gamekeeper.

Secondly, the country was hit by news of the Russian revolution and a new philosophy, communism, that was drifting over from Russia. By that time, some villagers were able to read, thanks to the rudimentary church schools, though possibly the first news about the new 'workers' revolution came to the parish priests. (Interestingly, my mother never went to the village church school. When I asked her why, she said there were only enough shoes in the family for the boys to go. Later in life, she became an autodidact, taught herself to read fluently both English and Polish; I recall her reading the tome *Quo Vadis* in the original Polish and then again in the English version. This feat made me

realize that there were a whole generation of very intelligent immigrants who lost out on a formal education because they had to do menial work in America to survive. Is it any wonder that when I grew up and moved to New York City, the first thing I did was to get into the forefront of the women's rights movement?)

### **Could Atheism Defeat Priests' Power?**

The Robin Hood priests had much to fear from communism because along with this "workers' revolution" came a new concept—Atheism. This new Atheist philosophy, it soon became clear, could destroy the very source of the priest's power: god and the Vatican. The danger to the village priests lay not in the strengthening of workers' and peasants' rights, which the priests had fought for all along, but rather, in Atheism's denial of the central importance of religion, god, the church, heaven and hell.

The Russian revolution had needed Atheism for practical reasons: Russian peasants, uneducated and hopelessly brainwashed by the Orthodox Russian church, refused to fight in Lenin's revolution because they believed that the Czar had been placed in his position as ruler of Russia by god. In order to save his revolution, Lenin had to disabuse the peasantry of the whole notion of religion. The word went out: churches were closed, religion was thrown out of schools, religion was officially denigrated as an opiate, a lie, a falsehood. (Unfortunately, Atheism has forever hence been associated with those events in Russia, an association which history did not bring to bear, since years later, communism and the Catholic church were to co-exist in Poland for many years.)

### **Church Allies with New Powers**

The Russian revolution caused the Catholic church in Poland to make a choice: it could either support the workers' revolution and lose the power granted to them by god and the Vatican, or it could renounce the worker's revolution as not part of god's plan. After all, god would see to it that the workers got their reward in heaven, the Vatican often observed.

Which did the church choose? The church and its priesthood chose to ally themselves—not with the workers' revolution, not with the nobles, who had left or were leaving every day for greener pastures—but with the new, budding capitalists and bourgeoisie. Thus arose the unspoken, unwritten understanding between the Vatican's priests and the new ruling class in Poland (and in other countries), the bourgeoisie. The unspoken pact was: the church would not interfere with the economic/political sector of the society and the bourgeoisie would allow the church to continue exerting

its influence on the people without interference. It was a win-win accord: The church kept its supernatural powerbase; the bourgeoisie gained a servile worker base, placated by religion.

### **Collusion Continues in America**

And, as the Catholic church followed its diaspora to America, so the church/political complicity has continued. In America, the Catholic church, dominated by Irish catholic priests, a few Polish priests, a sprinkling of Italian priests and more recently, an influx of Spanish-speaking priests, has continued its friendly, hand in glove, you-scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours cooperation with the economic/political sectors of our society. In Washington, to this day, only one member of Congress is willing to come out and say he is a nonbeliever. The rest, even those who are tacit nonbelievers, apparently dare not take the risk of offending the church or their constituents. Is it just an accident, do you think, that Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of the Brooklyn Diocese gave his blessings to a politician named Vito Lopez who helped pass legislation favorable to the church? I think not. I think the connection of church and politicians is so taken for granted these days that the Bishop's advisors were

surprised that we at NYCA even noticed this transgression.

So you see, Bryan, the reason the Catholic church has come to this "brazen trespass," as you put it, is because the collaboration between the church and politics has been there, I would estimate, at least since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the fading away of the so-called Robin Hood priests. The collusion has become so ingrained that neither the church nor politicians think of it as "brazen" or even consider that it represents "trespassing" against our constitutional laws that rebuff the incestuous intermarriage of government and religion.

That is why I contend that religion could not exist without the collusion of politics and the politicians. It is a complicity that is so interdependent that it is, I would say, a traditional, accepted way to conduct political business in America.

Spokespeople for the Catholic Diocese in Brooklyn say that Bishop DiMarzio, when he made the robocalls during the last election, just wanted to "thank" Democratic boss Vito Lopez for "helping" the Catholic church. The astonishing thing about this official statement is that nobody on either side—neither the Bishop nor Vito Lopez—thought that this act of thanks was unusual or out of line. □

## **NYC ATHEISTS TUTORING AND MENTORING**

**NYCA will be teaming with "Learning Leaders," ([www.learningleaders.org](http://www.learningleaders.org)) New York City's School volunteer program, to tutor and mentor public school children (K-12) throughout the five boroughs. Tutoring and mentoring opportunities are available during the day, evenings and weekends. If you are interested, please call Ken Bronstein 212-535-7425 for details.**

### **NYC ATHEISTS CLASSIFIED**

**New York City Atheists Inc. is looking for volunteers to help us with some upcoming projects:**

**TEACHER/RETIRED TEACHER OR PROFESSOR:** Help us design a high school course on Atheism and/or evolution that we can propose and deliver to public and private high schools.

**CABLE SHOW OPENING-GRAPHICS DESIGNER:** Know how to design graphics for TV? We'd love to have you help us update our TV graphics.

**CABLE SHOW PRODUCERS:** Just take MNN's simple, free, TV production course and we can use you. Must be Manhattan resident.

**LEGAL COACHING (PARALEGAL, LEGAL AID):** We need help in preparing papers for our pro se legal suits. We would like pro bono help in how to file a lawsuit and maneuvering the ins and outs of the legal system.

**NEWSLETTER MAILERS:** Need volunteers to fold, staple and address our snail mail newsletter. Will arrange a Mailing Party if two or more respond, with refreshments, noshes and gossip. Oops, we mean socializing, not gossip.

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

**FEB. 10, 2010 (WEDNESDAY) 7:00 PM**  
**NYCA Living Without Religion Group**

**SUBJECT:** How Do Atheists Deal With Grief?

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



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

**COST:** Free to members (Must be member - can join at meeting) but participants are expected to purchase a drink or food to compensate Moonstruck for use of their space.

**FEB. 14, 2010 (SUNDAY) 12:00 PM**  
**NYC Atheists Brunch / Speaker**

**Speaker:** J. Peter Gergen, Ph.D.  
 Professor, Department of Biochemistry and Cell Biology  
 Stony Brook University



**SUBJECT:** “Stem Cells: What, Why, and How”  
 Why all the ruckus about stem cell research from the religious right?

**LOCATION:** Press Box Restaurant / 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. Going back for seconds on the delicious Eggs Benedict is expected.

**FEB. 16 , 2010 (TUESDAY) 7:00 PM**  
**NYC Atheists Meetup**

**Group Leaders:** Alexandra Sidiropoulos  
 Michael Dorian



**Subject:** Surprise! Topic will be revealed there.

**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.

**FEB. 23, 2010 (TUESDAY) 7:00 PM**  
**NYCA “SPANISH SPEAKING” GROUP**

**Subject:** How do we get someone to come out as an Atheist?

**Group Leader:** Juan Castro



**Location:** Moonstruck Diner  
 449 Third Ave. (31st) - 2nd floor

**Cost:** Free - but participants are expected to purchase a drink or food to compensate Moonstruck for use of their space.

**FEB. 25, 2010 (THUR.) 6:30 PM**  
**NYCA MONTHLY MEETING**

**Speaker:** Keith Sheppard, Ed. D.  
 Director, Science Education - Stony Brook University

**SUBJECT:** How Do We Teach About Darwin in Today’s Sensitive Atmosphere?

**LOCATION:** SLC Conference Center–352  
 Seventh Ave./16<sup>th</sup> Floor-(29/30<sup>th</sup> St.)

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

## UPCOMING EVENTS AND MEETINGS

**CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES**

### FEBRUARY 2010

Feb.	1*****	Mon.	7:00 PM	NYCA Philosophy Group
Feb.	10 **	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living Without Religion Group
Feb.	14*	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
Feb.	16***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up
Feb.	23**	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA "Spanish Speaking" Meetup
Feb.	25*****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Annual Meeting

### MARCH 2010

Mar.	10**	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living Without Religion Group
Mar.	14*	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
Mar.	16***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up
Mar.	23**	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA "Spanish Speaking" Meetup
Mar.	25*****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

- \* **Press Box Restaurant & Pub – 932 Second Ave. (49/50<sup>th</sup> St.) – 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor**  
 \*\* **Moonstruck Diner – 449 Third Ave. (31<sup>st</sup>) – 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor**  
 \*\*\* **Stone Creek Bar and Lounge – 140 East 27<sup>th</sup> St. (3<sup>rd</sup>/Lex)**  
 \*\*\*\* **SLC Conference Center–352 Seventh Ave./16<sup>th</sup> Floor-(29/30<sup>th</sup> St.)**  
 \*\*\*\*\* **Contact Roger Smith (917-363-7470) for details**

#### 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)

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