

## NYC Atheists Prez Wins American Atheists' Award for Leadership and Activism

### *Convention Speakers Tackle Blasphemy, How to Be an Atheist*

*By Jane Everhart*

It was New York's moment in time at the American Atheists (AA) national convention in Newark this year. Not only was the convention opened with a presentation by New York City Atheists' president, Kenneth Bronstein, but he was also awarded the prestigious Outreach Award at the annual banquet in recognition of his "Outstanding Leadership and Activism."



*Ken Bronstein opens convention*

Bronstein launched the three-day convention at 8:15 in the morning on Friday, April 2, with a rousing program that featured comedian George Carlin ("At 8:15 a.m., I needed to wake up the audience," he explains) plus a film sequence of famous American Atheists and a video of some of NYCA accomplishments during the past year, which included our four Cable TV shows, the NYCA bus poster ad campaign and its press conference, and our filing of a suit against the Catholic Bishop of Brooklyn for his Robocalls.

#### **Standing Ovation for Our Prez**

That evening, Bronstein got a standing ovation at the AA annual banquet in the Grand Ballroom of the Renaissance Newark Hotel when he was presented the award for his leadership and activism. Among those present was a large contingent of NYCA members including Michael Dorian and Alexandra Sidiropoulas, co-hosts of the NYCA Discussion Meetup, David Birnkrant, editor of The Focus and Dennis Horvitz, host

of several NYCA Cable TV shows.

The convention, the 36<sup>th</sup> to take place since Madalyn Murray O'Hair founded American Atheists, attracted more than 300 Atheists to Newark's Renaissance Hotel to hear some 18 speakers, including Atheist stars and stalwarts such as Paul Kurtz, founder of the Center for Inquiry, outspoken California attorney Eddie Tabash and Dan Barker, co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

True, last year's convention in Atlanta had attracted more attendance but some speculated that this was due to AA members' desire to meet, for the first time, the then-new AA president, Ed Buckner, plus a somewhat more robust economy than we have this year as well as the perennial draw of the romantic deep South.

This year's convention had some obstacles to overcome, including its location in the crucible of former civil rights struggles, Newark. But this reporter found that Newark turned out to be no obstacle at all: The ultra modern Renaissance hotel was comfy, well-appointed and well-serviced, and with the fine weather and morning-to-midnight schedules, we Atheists might just as well have been in Atlanta.

#### **Kurtz: What Defines an Atheist?**



*Paul Kurtz*

The convention speakers this year included one of our favorites, the venerable, ever-wise Paul Kurtz, founder of the Center for Inquiry (CFI) and Prometheus Press, the major Atheist book publishing company in the U.S.

Prometheus has published more books on Atheism than any other publisher—some 3,500 books in 58 languages—and was the first publishing house to publish books critical of Muslims. Despite his recent, controversial change to an emeritus position, allegedly called for by CFI’s Board (for which Kurtz offered no explanation or comment to convention-goers), Kurtz apparently maintains an ongoing relationship with his Board.

Kurtz’s message to convention-goers was that “Atheists have a greater mission than critiquing religion.” Our task, he said, is to understand the universe and to develop principles and values that are secular. He quipped that AA should not stand for Angry Atheists but rather, Altruistic Atheists. “Atheism needs to be gentler and kinder,” he noted, and the image we present to the world should be one of moral integrity and good will.

### **Atheists for Social Justice**

To project this positive affirmation of life, “We should be defined not by who we are against but by what we are for,” he said, pointing out that Atheism stands for reason, harmony, ethics, human values, personal morality, creative actualization, democracy and a good life on each person’s own terms.

A strong interest in social justice is also an integral part of the Atheist outlook, Kurtz noted. Atheists should, and do, work for such things as human rights for women and minorities, advanced education for all who want it, gainful employment for all who need it and someday, he foresees “planet-wide Atheism to cope with global problems.”

In short, Atheists should be “affirmative, positive and constructive for the fullness of life,” he observed. “They should have self-respect, self-discipline, concern for planet earth and be committed to maximizing our own lives and those of others.”

### **Atheist Elected to Office**



*Cecil Bothwell*

One speaker who appeared to fulfill Kurtz’s description of an ideal Atheist was Cecil Bothwell, a journalist who was elected to the Asheville, NC, City Council in 2009 despite the fact that the state has an ancient law barring

Atheists from holding office. Bothwell beat out two incumbents in winning the election and, so far, is hanging on to his Council seat in Asheville despite the fact that he is infamous in his hometown for writing the only known, deeply critical, book-length biography of evangelist Billy Graham, titled “Prince of War.”

After describing his travails while sitting on a City Council that views him with alarm and puzzlement, Bothwell received a standing ovation from the convention audience, to which he humbly responded that this was the most positive response he had ever received.



*Eddie Tabash*

The feisty California lawyer who has made Atheism his *raison d’etre*, Eddie Tabash, announced at the convention that he will be running for office in California. “I probably won’t win, but it’s important for an Atheist to run anyway,” he pointed out.

### **Religion’s Stranglehold on Masses**

“It could take 100 years of effort to cut into the stranglehold that religion has on American mass culture,” Tabash told conventioners. “Too many people in our country take it for granted that religious claims deserve some special insulation from critical examination,” he noted, echoing the theme of this year’s convention, blasphemy. (Most AA members present were soon aware that the number-one goal of AA president Ed Buckner during his tenure is that of eliminating special privileges for religion.)

Tabash’s most urgent prescription for advancing the cause of Atheism (even if it takes 100 years) calls for single issue voting: “Only a candidate who is committed to the full legal equality of Atheists should receive our votes even if that candidate may not be in accord with our views on other political issues.”

Tabash also called for legal teams to be put in place to bring lawsuits at a moment’s notice against those who would sneak religion into our schools or government, plus a “massive” outreach to women, “who must be made aware that all religions that wield power are literally *man-made* belief systems that consider women to be subordinate to men.”



*Dan Barker*

Former minister and evangelist Dan Barker, co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, told us “How to Talk to a Fundamentalist,” based on his own experiences when he was a fundamentalist. The first rule, he said, is to be respectful to the religionist confronting you. Get across the message, “I respect you, but I dissent.” Knowing the Bible well is another thing that would have impressed Barker when he was a fundamentalist. Knowing the contradictions in the Bible is impressive in dialogue with a religionist, he said.

#### **England’s Blasphemy Law Repealed!**



*Terry Sanderson*

Speaker Terry Sanderson, president of England’s National Secular Society, told the conventioners that the anti-blasphemy laws in England, which were written in the 1600s and specifically prohibited Atheism, were used in the 1800s to imprison prominent members of the Freethought movement in Britain.

Our friend and NYCA colleague Dr. Eric Stone of Chappaqua, NY, reports that Sanderson related how he and his British colleague Keith Porteous Wood, the executive director of the National Secular Society, lobbied the British Parliament to repeal the anti-blasphemy laws, which have been recently used to block several controversial poems and an opera. To everyone’s surprise, it worked. The two lobbyists succeeded in getting the blasphemy laws repealed! In celebration, the two British Atheists staged a “Bye Bye Blasphemy” party in which they showed a video containing some of the most blatant examples of blasphemy in literature and the arts. “Sanderson and Porteous Wood represent our best defense against the re-emerging religious tyranny in the British Isles,” comments Dr. Stone.

#### **African-American Atheist Honored**

Dr. Eric Stone also lauded the presentation by Jeff B. Perry, who calls himself “a scholar of the working class” but who, ironically, was educated at Princeton, Harvard, Rutgers and Columbia University. “Perry gave a complete and magnificent biographical sketch of Hubert

Harrison, (1883-1927) the most prominent yet forgotten African-American rationalist, socialist and freethinker of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,” says Dr. Stone.



*Hubert Harrison*

Harrison was an orphan immigrant who came to the U.S., educated himself, and rose to become the most influential Black intellectual, orator, author, editor and activist of his period. “The depth and breadth of his achievements were extraordinary,” says Dr. Stone. “Our speaker, Jeff Perry, devoted years to unearthing, preserving and publishing these works, which we all hope will be an antidote to the dominance of religion in current Black culture.” Good news for those of us in NYCA who often go to the Atheist meetings in Harlem (once run by the late Sibanye).

#### **Tributes to Helen Kagin**



*Helen Kagin*

There were other fine speakers at the convention, too many for us to cover all of them. Corridor talk was that writer/lawyer Wendy Kaminer’s talk was not to be missed, that psychiatrist Andy Thomson was up to something new and experimental and that philanthropist Todd Stiefel had some terrific ideas. Darrel Ray, the always jolly author of “The God Virus,” was fun to have around, both on and off the podium, and you were lucky if you got witty Tom Flynn, the editor of *Free Inquiry*, as your dinner partner. The most graceful event of all was perhaps the video tribute to Helen Kagin, co-founder with her husband, Attorney Edwin Kagin, of Camp Quest. The gentle Helen, who was a physician, died in February.

For the New York City contingent, the best happening was, of course, the well-deserved accolades that came to our hardworking president. As the leader of American Atheists’ reputedly most-active affiliate, Bronstein is an example to the nation, and a president every NYCA member can be proud of. –*Jane Everhart*

*Ed note: My thanks to Dr. Eric Stone of Chappaqua, NY for his incisive reports on several of the lectures.*

## NYCA Meetup Leader to Wed



Michael Dorian and Kylah Torre have announced their upcoming wedding. Michael is the witty, outspoken leader of NYCA's once-a-month Discussion Meetup (along with Alexandra Sidiropoulas).

Kylah Torre was born in upstate New York near Schenectady but grew up in Tallahassee, FL. She graduated from McGill University in Montreal with a degree in International Development. She is currently a Special Education middle-school teacher in the Bronx but is planning a career change. She has appeared onstage in various theatrical productions. She also served in the Peace Corps in Cameroon for two and a half years.

Michael Dorian was born in the Bronx, grew up in New Rochelle and claims he has never lived more than 20 minutes from Manhattan except for a year spent in Paris. Currently, he lives in New York City. His book of poems and a play ("*The Nektonic Facteur*") was published in 1998. His plays have appeared in numerous International Fringe Festivals. He directed a documentary film, "*Pizza! The Movie*," that was sold to the Documentary Channel. His screenplay about the life of Thomas Edison, "*Alva!*," won a Tribeca Film Institute screenwriting competition and a grant from the Sloan Foundation. He graduated from Fordham University with a B.A. in Communications.

Michael says, "I fell in love with Kylah from the moment I saw her. It took her a little longer to fall for me. I had to be charming for a couple of months."

The couple will be married on August 21, 2010 at the C.V. Rich Mansion in White Plains, NY. □

## POEM

("PPL" Prostrated Pitiful Losers)

People ask me  
 Being that I'm an Atheist,  
 What is going to happen to you  
 When you die?  
 So I tell them  
 It's simple,  
 Game over.  
 There's no afterlife  
 So I don't have delusional thoughts of a white gate or a  
 fire-infested hole.  
 I'll live through my writing  
 As someone who questioned it all,  
 Looking to logic, facts and reasoning  
 Instead of blind belief that has no proof,  
 As you hide in fear  
 And that fear allows you to be controlled.  
 If you can control how someone feels  
 You can control how they'll think.  
 So life's a game of chess and I'm 3 moves ahead of you.  
 Looking at life as a business,  
 How does me helping you  
 Help me?  
 So I'll cut my losses because you're useless,  
 You hate me  
 And I could care less about you.  
 So continue to be an ant and as you march in line,  
 And me  
 I'll throw something in your path  
 So now you're lost.  
 As anger comes across your face  
 If you don't like me  
 You can go pray about it  
 Because it's obvious that you're a tool  
 And I'm simply tossing you into a tool box that you call  
 your life,  
 Locking the box  
 Because you are obsolete.  
 Happy that I'm me  
 And glad I'm not you.

Matthew Zeno NYC 2009

*Editor's note: Matthew Zeno is a young (27) African-American from Brooklyn who writes his poetry in a rap mode. Matthew declined to attach his photo to this poem, saying he feels that his poetry "is saying something that is faceless." The poem above, titled PPL, was, he says, his answer "to all the ppl who have asked me 'why are you an Atheist?'"*

## Stupid Religious Tricks



By Jane Everhart

Dear Editor,

I've heard a lot of Atheists bemoan the fact that we have no rites and rituals to pass on down through the ages. I happen to think this is a good thing. Sort of a clean slate for each new generation. What do you think?

--Bryan from Bay Ridge

Dear Bryan,

I am amazed that so many Atheists profess to miss religion's rites and rituals, many of which do not make sense in this day and age. Do you remember when David Letterman had Stupid Dog Tricks on his Late Night Show? I've assembled here a collection of what I call Stupid Religious Tricks. Or, more accurately, some rather useless, offensive and sometimes harmful religious rites and customs that religions still impose on their followers:



**Holy Water:** In most catholic churches, there is a heavy stone basin of this stuff at the entrance. You are supposed to dip your fingers into it and then make the sign of the cross on your forehead and chest. What makes this water "holy?" A priest has said a prayer over it. Holy water also has other uses, like sprinkling on an infant during Baptism. Friends, you do not want to dip your fingers into this stuff; you do not know where the fingers of the previous dipper have been.



**The Rosary (or Prayer Beads):** This is a rope of glass beads that a pious person fingers while reciting prayers. It usually has a small metal cross at one end. My mother, a catholic, would mumble her prayers while counting them off on the beads. Apparently this harks back to ancient times when counting required an abacus and

paper and pencil were not yet invented. But why would anybody want to keep track of how many prayers they recited a day? Is god counting? Is there a Guinness Book of Records award for the most prayers recited per day? Friends, this is busywork to keep the masses occupied and ignorant.



**Yarmulkes:** These tiny beanies do not keep a man's head warm, nor are they big enough to protect it from the sun. Most men are forced to attach their yarmulke with a ridiculously insubstantial and gender-embarrassing bobby pin. When I once worked for a jewelry magazine on diamond row, 47<sup>th</sup> Street, a block dominated by orthodox Jews, I never, ever saw my boss without his yarmulke in the entire two years I worked there. I would jest that I probably would not recognize him if he took off the yarmulke. Even the pope wears one when he's not sporting that ridiculous towering-clam crown. Men, it's time to drop this absurd custom. Wear a nice wool cap when it's cold outside and take it off indoors. For practical purposes, that's all you need.



**Kneeling:** In ancient times, when a king or nobleman entertained petitioners or representatives of other countries, he would have them kneel so they couldn't charge him and kill him. Eventually, kneeling became a sign of obeisance and servility. When you kneel in church, you are being submissive to god, to the priests, to the minister or parson and everything that religion stands for. I say: Rise, ye servile parishioners, get up off your knees and walk out that church door like a mensch! No person should be servile to another in a country that promises freedom and equality.

**Circumcision:** It is fashionable these days to condemn as "barbaric" the circumcision of women but this religious custom is still widespread for men among both Jews and non-Jews in America on the grounds that "it helps prevent infection." Men, that may have been

true in ancient times before the advent of showers and bathtubs, but in the year 2010, let's leave in place the body parts that nature, in its protective, evolutionary wisdom, put there. What's more, circumcision is dangerous. Several Jewish infants died recently when the moyl (the circumcisor), following ancient custom, sucked on the baby's newly debrided penis "to prevent infection" and instead infected the child with deadly herpes. Parents, it's time to reassess this custom.



**Incense:** If you have ever sat through a catholic mass, you may remember that at one point in the liturgy, the priest swings a metal canister of tarry, smoky smelling incense. This custom harks back to ancient times when the unwashed hordes attended mass and deodorant was not yet invented. There was also some hope that the incense could keep away infectious diseases like the plague. Why this custom persists in this age of daily showers, deodorant and antibiotics, I have no idea. Memo to the Outdated Customs Committee of the Vatican: Wake up and smell the Ralph Lauren.

**Hymns:** My childhood was haunted by the dolorous dirges emerging from the organ and choir in the catholic church we attended. The hymns made no sense to me, and my ears were assaulted by the rumbling, pew-shaking funereal peals that the organist (who doubled as the priest's housekeeper) forced out of that creaking organ. Music, it wasn't. Why does every church feel that the organ should be its musical instrument of choice? What is the tie between churches and pipe organs? Whatever the reason is, it is not good news for the organ industry.

**First Communion:** Dressing up little Christian girls of eight in white (boys, too, dressed in white in many parishes) for their "First Communion" is a parody of the wedding ceremonial. I remember wondering, when I went through this ritual, what it was all about. Somehow, it seemed that my parents were dedicating me to the catholic church and I was supposed to be old enough, at eight, to agree to it. I remember that I liked being dressed up in a white party dress; it was like being a princess on Halloween. I liked the pageantry of carrying a candle down the church aisle and kneeling at the altar rail, where, alas, the priest placed a ghastly, papery communion wafer on my tongue that I was supposed to swallow. But any deeper meaning of the whole ceremony eluded me. Like any eight-year-old, I simply enjoyed the attention and feeling a part of something bigger than my family.



**Confirmation:** By the time I was 12, the magic of the pageantry had faded and I was a bit reluctant to take part in any church ritual that might possibly dedicate me to religion. A white dress was again required by church custom for my "confirmation," the ceremony marking the "adult" agreement to the catholic vows I had taken at age eight. This time, I guessed that the white costume represented virtue, purity and virginity, though I didn't know, at that age, that it also represented the beginning of the church's imposition of its sexual mores upon me, particularly abstinence.

But somehow, between the age of eight and twelve, the church had let me down, or else I had outgrown its concepts, and the ritual had no meaning. I recall a deep-seated unwillingness to take part in the dedication ceremony that I could not express to my family. I remember going through the confirmation ritual rotely and sullenly. The very next year, at the age of 13, I happened to read "The Brothers Karamazov" by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the great Russian novel that introduces arguments against religion, and I discovered that it is okay to question religion. I never again stepped inside that little catholic church in Western Massachusetts. I was to drive by it as an adult years later and realize that though a part of my innocence had gone in the process, I had escaped conformity and mediocrity.

#### **Rites: A Means of Indoctrination**

When you mention rites and rituals, Bryan, you are referring to a means by which the church's teachings and beliefs are imposed upon children without their consent and often without their understanding of what they are being exposed to. True, some religious rites are outdated, silly leftovers from another century, another culture, like those I mention above. But there is a deeper reason for these rites and rituals of religion, and it involves the preservation of the church and the indoctrination of religious dogma. Many church rituals remain to this day in order to program children, to get into their minds and, while they are vulnerable, brainwash them into becoming part of the long gray line of human supplicants to religious authority.

So my answer to you, Bryan, is, we Atheists do not have need of the kind of rites, rituals and pageantry that religion uses to indoctrinate its children or reinforce its control on adults. □

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

**MAY 6, 2010 (THUR.) 4 – 7PM**  
**NYCA “Gift of Life” / Blood Donation**

**NYC Atheists Will Counter 'National Day of Prayer' With Lifesaving Action: Blood Donations**

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

**LOCATION: NY BLOOD BANK**  
**310 EAST 67<sup>TH</sup> ST. (1<sup>ST</sup>/2<sup>ND</sup> AVE.)**

**RESERVATIONS NOT REQUIRED**

**MAY 9, 2010 (SUN.) 12:00 PM**  
**NYC Atheists Brunch / Speaker**

**SPEAKER: W. Richard McCombie, PhD**  
**Professor: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory**



**SUBJECT:** Genome structure; Human Sequence Variation; Schizophrenia; Cancer; Human Genome Project.

With the completion of the human genome reference sequence, we are at a unique time in the history of biological research. Dr. McCombie's focus is the role of genomic variation in causing two major disease classes, cognitive disorders (such as schizophrenia) and cancer.

**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.

**MAY 12, 2010 (WED.) 7:00 PM**  
**NYCA Living Without Religion Group**

**SUBJECT:** Are the challenges of being an Atheist causing you to feel conflicted? Is the lack of support from your family or from the greater society getting you down? Feeling misunderstood, excluded, pitied or blamed for not joining in the "God Delusion" causes

emotional and social challenges for all Atheists. 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.

**MAY 18, 2010 (TUE.) 7:00 PM**  
**NYC Atheists Meetup**

**GROUP LEADERS:** Alexandra Sidiropoulos  
 Michael Dorian



**SUBJECT:** The Vatican is under fire right now for world-wide sexual child abuse by priests; NYCA is suing the Catholic Bishop of Brooklyn for his Robocalls in the last election. Is there any connection between these two things? Come on Tuesday, May 18, and find out!

**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.

**MAY 27, 2010 (THUR.) 6:30 PM NYCA**  
**NYCA MONTHLY MEETING**

**SPEAKER:** Yasmin  
**SUBJECT:** “My Road From Islam to Atheism”  
 How Yasmin went from a devout Muslim to an Atheist.

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

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### MAY 2010

May	6*****	Thur.	4 – 7PM	NYCA “Gift of Life” / Blood Donation
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

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### JUNE 2010

June.	9**	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Living Without Religion Group
June	13***	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch / Speaker
June	15*	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up
June	24*****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

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- \* Stone Creek Bar and Lounge – 140 East 27<sup>th</sup> St. (3<sup>rd</sup>/Lex)
  - \*\* Moonstruck Diner – 449 Third Ave. (31<sup>st</sup>) – 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor
  - \*\*\* Press Box Restaurant & Pub – 932 Second Ave. (49/50<sup>th</sup> St.) – 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor
  - \*\*\*\* SLC Conference Center–352 Seventh Ave./16<sup>th</sup> Floor-(29/30<sup>th</sup> St.)
  - \*\*\*\*\* NYC Blood Center- 310 East 67th St. (1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> Ave,)

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#### 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  
P.O. Box 20100  
NY, NY 10021-0061

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