



KENNETH BRONSTEIN

## PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"

### SHOULD WE BE SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY?

Recently, some well-meaning nonbelievers have suggested that we Atheists should get cozier with our religious brethren. One reason they give is that "you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar." They feel that if we are perceived as "nice," "unthreatening," and "non-aggressive" people, we could win more converts to the Atheist cause.

These same critiquers call the "New Atheists"—people like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett—"too aggressive," and claim that these New Atheists are turning off many people who may be potential sympathizers with our cause.

Moreover, they point out, we Atheists are a small group, and the religious organizations are powerful and wealthy. Thus, say those who would want us to be buddies with religious people, we have more to gain than to lose in partnering with religious groups.

On the surface, cozying up to the religious sounds like an okay idea. But let's take a look at what collaborating with religious groups would mean and whether it makes any sense.

#### **We're Getting Bigger**

First of all, we are not a "small group." A recent Pew study that counted the secularists and non-church-affiliated along with Atheists found us to be upwards of 25 percent of the U.S. population. That means nonbelievers make up some 20 to 40 million Americans, or a bigger percentage of the population than African Americans, Jews and Muslims combined.

Secondly, we are not by any means an impoverished group that needs to be intimidated by the immense wealth of various religious organizations. An astonishing

number of the wealthiest billionaires in the world are nonbelievers, including Bill Gates, Warren Buffet and George Soros. What's more, since the percentage of nonbelievers goes up with education, and with education comes higher employment and better salaries, one can assume that the majority of nonbelievers are people employed in the highest-paid jobs and professions. All of which would indicate to me that we need not be in awe of the so-called "powerful and wealthy" religionists. We have our own sources of wealth.

#### **The Trojan Horse of Religionists**

But more serious issues remain when considering who we should get in bed with, so to speak. A major cautionary note I'd like to hammer home is, pick your allies carefully. Our religious foes do not really care if we are "nice" or surly; what they care about is that our very existence as a group-force tends to discredit and diminish them. We must beware of those so-called religious "friends" who would use any collaboration with us as a Trojan Horse to stealthily enter our community for their own purposes. They are out to destroy us, not to collaborate with us, and their stealth may be disguised as collaboration.

For example, there was a recent Darwin Day event in New York, heavily promoted to many Atheist groups, in which it was never disclosed in the promotions or to the audience that the Darwin Day speaker was hand in glove with the Templeton Foundation. Many people new to Atheism may not know what the Templeton Foundation is. But those of us who do know what it is are aware that it is a front organization for religion.

Founded in 1972 by the multimillionaire Sir John Templeton, a dedicated member of the Presbyterian church, the Templeton Foundation has, as one of its

avowed goals, according to Wikipedia, “to proliferate the monetary support of spiritual discoveries.”

The Templeton Foundation also awards an annual prize, valued at a million British pounds, which until 2001 was called “The Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.” In 2001, its name was changed to the more euphemistic, “The Templeton Prize for Progress Toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities.” The first winner of the prize, in 1973, was Mother Teresa. Richard Dawkins has criticized the Templeton prize in his book, *The God Delusion*, saying it is given “usually to a scientist who is prepared to say something nice about religion.”

### Hidden Agenda at Darwin Event

The moderator of the Darwin Day event in New York did not reveal all this to the audience, many of whom thought they had come to hear a bona fide tribute to Darwin. Instead, they heard what they considered a bashing of Darwin. That is what I call a stealth approach. The speaker invoked the well-known but irrelevant fact that Darwin was passionately opposed to slavery and suggested that this was the moral impetus behind Darwin’s work. That is, Darwin’s detractors claim that because he had a desire to prove that black slaves and white people were descended from a common ancestor (and therefore blacks are deserving of equal citizenship), Darwin had a personal motive and thus his work on natural selection was not scientifically unbiased.

Further, the speaker claimed that because Darwin didn’t consider all the fossils and bones available at the time, his research was not complete. Did this really matter in forming his theory? No. The truth is, Darwin had plenty of evidence without the fossils and bones and they would have added little or nothing, in their incompleteness, to his theory of natural selection. However, throwing this bit of nit-picking out to the audience had the function of inserting a bit of doubt as to Darwin’s reliability as a scientist.

The motive of the speaker at the Darwin Day event (and others of his ilk) was to downgrade Darwin’s work and keep the evolution-versus-creation debate open. Luckily, some very astute Atheists were in the audience that day and they promptly alerted me and others in the Atheist community to this particular stealth attack.

### The Enemy Within

What motivates some within the Atheist community to so blatantly collaborate with the “enemy?” While, certainly, ignorance of the whole picture may be partly to blame, as well as a desire for recognition, power or fame, or a yearning to be contrarian, but in the end, one expects more of those who purport to be Atheists. It is

folly to ally oneself with the enemy’s public posturings calculated to insert doubt about credible scientific analyses in those who are vulnerable.

And to those who justify their collaboration with the enemy citing the sanctimonious reason of “free speech” for our adversary, I can only say that I find this to be sheer hyperbole in these circumstances. The enemy-within uses the term “free speech” to their advantage (think of a filibuster, used as a delaying tactic). The enemy-within uses the term to ascribe some righteous motive to their accommodation of the enemy. The enemy-within justifies giving a platform to the blatherings of religion—though religion certainly is not suffering any lack of freedom in spreading their notions in this country—by asserting that they are generously allowing free speech. As though religion would ever allow us to enter their portals and speak equally freely about Atheism!

### We are Here, We Are Strong

There are those who would ask me: Has not New York City Atheists consorted with religious people occasionally? What about NYCA’s attendance at Mayor Bloomberg’s Interfaith Breakfast in 2009?

That is an example of our selectivity, I would answer. The Mayor’s breakfast was a one-day event that required of us only that we show up. We chose to appear that morning, on that city-wide platform, to show the world that we exist, that we are represented by reputable people, that we are respectable, that we are organized and that we are here to stay. It was an opportunity for us to make a many pronged statement through the media on what turned out to be not just a city-wide but a nationwide stage when the story was picked up by national publications.

As a general rule, I have considerable misgivings about consorting with the enemy. I find that in most cases, there is not much to be gained and much to be wary of. I believe we will get more bang for the buck by strengthening our Atheist organizations rather than trying to curry favor with religion. I have long been advocating a secular voting bloc for both national and local elections. (See my December 2009 “sermon,” *Why Atheism Needs a Voting Bloc*.) That is something that religion has already done for decades. That is where our efforts should go.

Though religious organizations may want to engage us in “friendly” dialogue, our goals are basically anathema to their purpose and thus their “friendly” overtures have an unsettling undercurrent. As the great bard Shakespeare once said, “you can smile and smile and still be a villain.” □

## Editor's Q and A

# Some of My Favorite Atheist Heroes



By Jane Everhart

Dear Editor,

I have heard it said that you personally tape an interview with each speaker we have at NYCA before you write the press release announcing his or her lecture. Plus, you go to all the Atheist conventions and conferences nationwide to cover these events for the NYCA newsletter. Of all the Atheist celebrities you have met or interviewed, which do you like the most, which do you think have contributed the most to our cause and what are your reasons for thinking this?

--Roger from Rahway, N.J.

Dear Roger,

It is true, I have indeed met and listened to a lot of Atheist celebrities. They have often told me interesting things about themselves that I don't use in the press releases but which have influenced me in how I feel about these people. I tend to like the doers, fighters, strategists. Here are some of my favorite people in and around Atheist movement:



**John Aretakis**

I like Attorney John Aretakis because he is feisty, angry, mercurial and forthright. He has taken part in suits against the Catholic Church on behalf of victims of clergy abuse in Boston and California that have won, respectively, \$85 million and \$500 million for the victims. He single-handedly won millions for victims of clergy child abuse in New Jersey. He is now representing some 300 victims of clergy child abuse in New York state. Aretakis is a graduate of Albany Law School and has a Master of Law degree from Georgetown University Law Center. Despite these lofty

qualifications, a New York judge recently suspended Aretakis from practicing law for a limited time because of his angry outburst in a courtroom accusing the judge of protecting the Catholic church.

When I interviewed Aretakis on tape for his lecture at NYCA, I began to understand why he is so angry at the church. He told me: "I have dealt, in the past six years, with about 300 priests, and all of them have had sex with or sodomized innocent children. Now when I see a man of the cloth, all I see is what's behind the mask. I see the charlatan. I'm not saying all priests are charlatans, but I know a little too much and these monsters who have sex with children have ripped any religious beliefs right out of me."

I call that righteous anger, and I hope Aretakis goes on being angry as long as there are victims of clergy child abuse out there.



**Mayor Michael Bloomberg**

New York Mayor Bloomberg's style is the opposite of Aretakis: He is calm, cool, gracious and always in control. Yet this mayor had the courage and temerity to invite six Atheists to his annual Interfaith breakfast for the first time in the history of the event. I was there at that mayoral breakfast on the last day of 2009 with five of my fellow NYCA members, and I must say, it was the Mayor's charm that got to me. He not only welcomed us as nonbelievers but also gave a little off-the-cuff speech to the religious attendees telling them why *they* should accept us into the fold. There was not a titter, not a single objection from the religious dignitaries who made up most of the audience. I realized then that one of the things it is going to take to gain acceptance for nonbelievers is having great, powerful men like Michael Bloomberg, who are not necessarily Atheists themselves,

come out and—well, give us their blessing. Thumbs up for Mayor Bloomberg!

### Gentle Hero of the Apocalypse



**Richard Dawkins**

Most Atheists appreciate Richard Dawkins as a great Atheist thinker/writer who has had the courage to come out and tell the world that god is just a delusion. I like him for another reason as well: He is a total British gentleman—kind, gentle, unassuming—with great respect for his fellow nonbelievers and a wry sense of humor. I know he is often annoyed by the hate mail he gets from religious fanatics, but he has managed to include some of that hate mail in his power-point presentations, which he punctuates with his witty, sardonic comments. Handsome, impeccably turned out, often in what appear to be Savile Row suits, Dawkins has also become a benefactor to Atheist causes through his foundation. Yet he is humble enough to have asked me once, while walking in the corridor of a convention hotel, if I thought he should change the talk he was to give that evening. I did, and he did. He is truly a gentle hero of The Four Horsemen caliber.



**Dr. Larry Egbert**

I shall never, ever, forget the 81-year-old physician Dr. Larry Egbert of Baltimore, the unpaid medical director of Final Exit Network, a nationwide volunteer association of people dedicated to helping terminally ill patients choose how, and when, and where they will die. Dr. Egbert has been harassed by the Baltimore police who have raided his office, handcuffed him, confiscated his files and his computer and put him in jail. His crime? Compassion and guidance. Technically, he was arrested for allegedly assisting a suicide. His wife had to put a lien on their house for \$60,000 to bail him out. His bank accounts were frozen by the attorney general and he barely had enough money to take the train from Baltimore to New York to come talk to us at NYCA.

When I interviewed Dr. Egbert on the phone for his press release, he told me that he had spent most of his medical career working as an anesthesiologist. He was working in Dallas, Texas when he noticed that state's use of anesthesia for executing criminals. "The so-called 'lethal injection' is actually anesthetic in larger doses than we give for anesthesia in surgery," he told me. "We wake you up after your operation but the state's executioners do not bother waking up the person who is sentenced to execution."

Dr. Egbert saw this as a moral problem for doctors—that is, a life-saving medication he used every day in surgery was being used by the state's doctors in another setting to kill people. Dr. Egbert gave talks on the issue at the local Unitarian church. He was asked to be a member of the board of the Hemlock Society, now called "Compassionate Choices" in Baltimore. But he found that it is a lot easier for the state to kill healthy people than for the Hemlock Society to help those who were already dying and in great pain. He points out the contradictions in our society, which has no compunctions about killing people in Iraq or Afghanistan but considers it a crime to help a dying person achieve a peaceful end to his or her life. Here's to Dr. Larry. Long may he continue his fight to help the terminally ill!



**Michael Newdow**

I find it amazing that there are people in the Atheist movement who do not know who Michael Newdow is. His name should be shouted from the rooftops. Dr. Michael Newdow, who is both a physician and a lawyer, is best known for having taken to Supreme Court a case against the use of the words "under god" in our American pledge of allegiance. Unfortunately, the case was thrown out of court on the grounds that Newdow, who was suing on behalf of his school-age daughter (who had to say the pledge in school) had no standing because he did not have custody of his daughter. Undaunted, Newdow is continuing his court cases on the state level in pursuit of eliminating the words "under god" from our money and our pledge.

At the Long Beach, Calif. Atheist Alliance International convention, Newdow, who also plays the guitar and sings folk songs, sang a song he wrote based on words in hate mail he regularly receives. It was hilarious, but also eye-opening; call it recycling. Three cheers for this persistent, unconventional activist who never gives up! ☐

## Letters to the Editor

### Mayor's Interfaith Breakfast

To the Editor,

Re "*Mayor Invites Atheists to Interfaith Breakfast*,"  
(*Jan.2010, page 6*): Yippee!!!! I'm so proud of NYCA,  
I could burst. --Margaret Downey  
Philadelphia

Congratulations on your many victories in 2009 and your positive works on behalf of the non-superstitious and non-believers in mythology. I hope someday people will understand that Atheists are not "faithless." We have reasoned faith in humanity, in each other, our families, our children, our society, earth, the universe and in countless other dearly held values and knowledge. That we are not encumbered by supernatural mythology is a blessing that we give ourselves and not a limitation on our lives. --Eileen Regan  
New York

### Grief

Re "*How do Atheists Handle Grief?*" By Jane Everhart,  
(*Dec. 2009, page 3*): I was very touched by your article and loved the part about the leaf returning to earth. That matches my own thinking very well. --Donna Marxer  
Manhattan

Love and loss and grief are human characteristics. They are not confined to theists. Atheists, too, experience those strong emotions... I think being an Atheist makes a person stronger, knowing that there is no afterlife. I believe acknowledging the finality of the situation is more honest than thinking that we are going to reunite with our loved ones in the "afterlife." Further, I never go to visit graves. My loved ones are always in my heart and in my thoughts, and that's sufficient. Jane, grieve as long as you wish, and in whatever manner you wish. --Arlene Breier  
Rego Park

My heart goes out to you. It's so hard to say goodbye, especially, I would think, to a child. It's not natural and seldom anticipated. Of course you will never "accept" your daughter April's death. That is not the Atheist way. You will simply handle your grief. That's the Atheist way. You have my very best hope for time to ease your pain. --Caroline Gilman  
Laurelton

(*Ed. note: Ms. Gilman was on the board of American Atheists when Madalyn Murray O'Hair was alive and is now a member of the NYCA Board of Directors.*)

### Sibanye Tribute

I never knew Sibanye, but I remember when I first found out a few years ago that Harlem had its own CFI group. I was surprised. Then I realized how sad it was that I was surprised. Why wouldn't there be freethinkers in the Black community? Why had I assumed that Harlem was off-limits to non-believers? What's especially sad is that my reflexive prejudice at the time seems to be a common one. The media takes for granted that religious men like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton are the (self-appointed) spokespeople for Black Americans. It's a condescending notion that people need to disabuse themselves of—the idea that Black people will always be led by a "preacher-man."

I'm sorry that I never got to meet Sibanye, but I've always been impressed by what he did and said, and the realization that this group was underrepresented in the Black community opened my eyes to the history of Black freethinkers and the involvement of nonbelievers like Bayard Rustin in the civil rights movement. For that I'm very grateful. Please give my wishes and condolences to Sibanye's family if you get the chance. --Nathaniel ("Natty") Adams  
Columbia University

(*Ed. note: Natty Adams was a much beloved discussion leader at NYCA's Tuesday night group for many, many sessions before he went to graduate school.*)

### Brancazio Lectures

To the Editor,

Just wanted to let you know that my book, "The Bible From Cover to Cover," is now available from Amazon.com. Please pass the word along to your members who were not able to buy it from me when I spoke to your group.

I loved your bus advertisements. Keep it up!

--Peter Brancazio  
Long Island

(*Dr. Peter Brancazio is one of the most popular speakers NYCA has ever presented. His last lecture, "Was Jesus Invented by a Committee?" attracted a full house last November. His book, "The Bible From Cover to Cover," is an expose' of the inanities of the bible.*)

# Why Logic Does Not Persuade Religious People



*By Darrel Ray, Ed. D.*

Have you ever argued with a religious person only to hear them respond with well-practiced dogma that they probably learned in Sunday School years ago? You quickly see that, from their perspective, logic plays no part in the discussion. They see, hear and feel their invisible god-friend clearly and are amazed that you cannot see it. How can you not see and feel the love of Jesus or the power of Allah?

As you talk with these staunch believers, you may also notice that they do not hear certain things you say. Your evidence and logic seems to go right over their heads. They may be highly intelligent, yet they firmly hold that they can talk with their god or that their invisible friend is with them and monitoring their thoughts at all times. It appears that the logical part of their brain is turned off. Yet when you talk to them about something like the way they solved a mechanical problem or organized the bake sale, their brain seems to function quite logically. What is going on?

The most important thing to understand is that presenting logic to these unwaveringly religious persons is *not* the answer. Religion very selectively turns off specific logical functions in the brain and leaves other areas untouched. Religion creates strong emotional pathways that can override the higher brain functions when necessary. This override is so powerful that it can cause people to behave in ways that are consistently illogical. In fact, religion infects and controls people in just about the same way that schizophrenics are overwhelmed with emotional messages in their brains. Schizophrenics cannot reason their way out

of their emotions and compulsions any more than you can rid yourself of the Herpes virus once it gets into your system. Religion infects and controls people in much the same way: Their logical system remains intact—except for the parts that deal with religion. Their religious beliefs are rerouted through an emotional channel that can overrule the rational system when needed.

When discussing religion with a steadfast believer, you will often notice their eyes glaze over, they miss important points in the discussion, and they cannot understand key ideas about science. This glaze-over is evidence that you have triggered the religious-override system. No learning or understanding will take place after that point. The religious person's mind is now overcome with emotion.

How do you handle this situation? Recognize that triggering the override system has effectively ended any productive discussion. Hammering logic down the throat of a religious person does only one thing: it strengthens the override pathway in their brain. To keep the person as a friend or acquaintance, you must develop and maintain a relationship that effectively ignores the “god virus” within them. Ignore their god references but pay attention to the emotional message and respond to their human concerns without reference to their invisible friend. Focusing on their emotions will give you a far better chance of eventually enlightening them than any amount of logic at that moment. □

*Dr. Darrel Ray is a practicing clinical psychologist and author of “The God Virus: How Religion Infects Our Lives and Culture.”*

## UPCOMING MARCH EVENTS

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

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

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

Being dismissed, excluded, pitied and 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.

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

**Speaker: Margaret Downey**



Margaret Downey is an Atheist activist, the former President of Atheist Alliance International and the founder and president of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia.

**SUBJECT:** How the Women's (Suffragist) Movement Had to Overcome Religion's Opposition to Get the Vote. It Still Continues! (Ms. Downey will appear in a Suffragist's costume for this event.)

**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.

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**MARCH 16, 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)

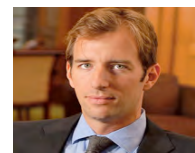
**Cost:** Free, but participants are expected to purchase a drink or food to compensate Stone Creek for use of their space.

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

**Speaker: Nelson Tebbe**

Associate Professor of Law, Brooklyn Law School.  
**Education:** A.B., Brown University; J.D., Yale Law School; Ph.D., The Univ. of Chicago Divinity School



**Subject: Religion and the Law: Today's Critical Issues**

Prof. Tebbe will discuss the relationship between religion, law and government. Statutory provisions have become critical in recent years, including those about holiday displays, the pledge of allegiance, intelligent design, faith-based initiatives, public display of the ten commandments and school vouchers.

**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**

### MARCH 2010

Mar.	2*	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Philosophy Group
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.	25****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

### 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

- \* 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.)

#### 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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