

New York City Atheists Inc.

Serving the Tri-State area

An affiliate of American Atheists, Atheist Alliance International & Center For Atheism

WEB: NYC-ATHEISTS.ORG COOPER STATION - Box 93, NY, NY 10276-0093

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KENNETH BRONSTEIN

PRESIDENT'S "SERMON"

How the god Business Gets Away With Being Tax Free

...And Why Taxing Churches Could Bring Us into the 21st Century

True or False: Eliminating tax exemptions for religious institutions would provide enough revenue so that the government could cut every U.S. citizen's tax bill by 50 to 70 percent and/or provide the money the government says it needs to start a national health insurance plan (\$700 billion). Answer: True!

Experts have estimated that the tax exemption for the religion industry costs us about a trillion dollars per year in lost tax revenue. Thus, if religions were taxed like any other business (and many people insist they are indeed businesses), it would bring in more than a trillion dollars in tax revenue each year to local, state and federal government coffers.

But of course, if you are looking for a quick tax cut, there are a couple of caveats here. Just because the government collects a trillion dollars from a new source doesn't mean it is automatically going to lower the taxes on an old source. Laws will need to be passed concomitantly to lower the average taxpayer's contributions as the religious source kicks in.

But as a matter of fact, the current administration is seeking ways to lower individual taxes, especially for people with incomes below \$200,000—and it is digging deep to find ways to replace that revenue. With a kick-in of tax revenue from churches and religious institutions, that lowering of taxes for the lower and middle classes is possible.

The administration is also lamenting that it does not have the money to finance much-needed programs, such as national health insurance. Taxing religion could very well provide that funding and give our citizens the medical benefits that are already the norm in countries like France, England and Canada. Or to loosely quote

American Atheists founder Madalyn Murray O'Hair, "We should turn all the churches into hospitals."

The god Business

But are churches truly a business? I would strongly argue that they are. The definition of a business is an organization that sells services or products. A buyer purchases those services or products and some form of monetary transfer takes place. I contend that churches are indeed selling services. They are selling salvation, prayers, hope, heaven, forgiveness of sins, rituals, trinkets. Some of their services may not be tangible but intangible services can be bought and sold. For example, when your psychiatrist makes you feel better, that is an intangible service that you pay for.

Churches also charge fees for various ceremonies: weddings, funerals, baptisms, bar mitzvahs, communions, confirmations. St. Patrick's Cathedral recently made news when it decided to sell "indulgences" again. The indulgence promises sinners so many years off of their stay in purgatory after they die, based on how much money they pay. Is this a tangible item or a service? Whatever it is, it is a transaction that involves money even if the service purchased is to take place in the afterlife. If the whole idea weren't so comically bizarre, it would be tragic. Think of it, a believer could spend his whole life saving up money to buy out his punishment for a lifetime of sinfulness.

Churches also get income from their other services such as schools, marriage counseling, collections, donations, legacies and investments. Remember that any land owned by churches is not taxed. Churches do not pay taxes on money received from donations and tithing. Moreover, the donor can deduct the amount donated

from his income tax, which makes the government a double loser.

Churches Take Advantage

There is yet another important way that churches drain away tax money: the underutilization of taxable land. This is known as “Opportunity Costs” and it refers to the fact that churches often occupy prime locations that could be put to more effective use in terms of tax revenue production. For example, take The Church of Christ on Park Avenue and 63rd Street, which occupies some expensive prime real estate. If that same location were used for a 40-story office building, it would produce millions of dollars in tax revenue for the city, not to mention jobs (and thus income taxes) and an increase in local business activity which, of course, also adds to the city tax coffers. But the Church of Christ produces no tax revenue whatsoever for the city because it is a tax-free religious edifice. The land it is on isn’t being utilized to its full potential. It is, therefore, depriving the city of untold tax and business opportunities, hence the term “Opportunity Costs.”

The church also finds creative ways of using government programs and resources to line its pockets and increase the value of its property. For example, consider the following:

- 1) Some churches have used the government’s Historical Landmark programs for maintenance of their property. Claiming landmark status for their churches, they use millions of dollars in government money to repair church facades, organs and the like.
- 2) Churches have also used money from Faith-Based Initiative programs for repair and maintenance of their buildings instead of what it was intended for—Social Services for the needy.
- 3) Some churches have entered the catering and rental businesses. Because they pay no taxes, they are able to undercut other catering and rental businesses, apparently causing a number of bankruptcies of legitimate

businesses. There is one church on Park Avenue that does not hold any religious services but simply rents its rooms for meetings.

4) Some Parochial schools are becoming charter schools, which are funded with tax money.

5) Churches get free services which we taxpayers support with our taxes, such as water, police protection, firefighting services and garbage disposal. Because churches are getting a free ride for these amenities, our own bill for these services is much higher than it should be.

No More Religion Subsidies!

Can we afford to continue to subsidize churches?

It is difficult for us as atheists to realize that we are subsidizing religion whether we want to or not. And it is especially hard for atheists to realize that churches are being maintained and repaired and even profiting with the help of our tax money.

Let me make it even clearer: god is a business and a quite profitable business because it is excused from many of the obligations of other businesses. It’s not fair, it doesn’t make sense, it’s untenable, and it’s time that business people across the nation looked at this discrepancy in taxation policy and protested.

What can be done to right these enormous taxation discrepancies that have so obviously gotten out of hand? It is incumbent on us, as atheists, to start the ball rolling toward fairer tax policies. In my research on this topic, I have gotten in touch with tax think tanks, tax specialists and tax reformers, all of whom have urged me to continue educating and alarming my constituency to get the ball rolling to eliminate tax exemptions for churches. Friends, if atheists do not work on this issue, who will? Join me in spreading the word and alerting the public about this long-concealed and overlooked injustice. ☐

**ATHEISM IS A CONCLUSION
NOT A BELIEF**

**ATHEISTS ARE NOT SIMPLY “NON BELIEVERS,”
WE ARE REALISTS**

American Atheists' 2009 Convention Unveils a Subdued, Reorganized Group

Some Ask, Whither Goest, AA?



By Jane Everhart

The unspoken questions hanging in the air at this year's American Atheists (AA) convention were: Will it be as exciting as last year's conference in Minneapolis? Will deposed president Ellen Johnson be missed? Will the new president, Dr. Ed Buckner of Atlanta, be able to fill Johnson's shoes?

Reader, the answers to these questions were (arguably): No, yes, and maybe—but not necessarily in that order. Read on for a report on the convention by this writer with input from other New York area AA members, all of whom are committed to the success of American Atheists.

Beautiful Atlanta was the site of this year's gathering of 515 American Atheists, a city that is—coincidentally, I'm told—the hometown of AA's new president, Dr. Ed Buckner. The convention was also Dr. Buckner's debut as only the second president in the history of American Atheists since the death of its founder, Madalyn Murray O'Hair in 1995.

But to be precise, the location of the convention was actually the Conference Center on the campus of Atlanta's Emory University, some 20 minutes from downtown Atlanta. Cordial Southern hospitality graced this attractive, wooded site and permeated the lectures, workshops and corridors during the three days of the conference. No contentiousness ruffled the air, no unpleasantness seethed in the corridors, no arguments or cantankerousness marred the lecture schedules. If you were expecting the excitement, the gusto, or the hurly-burly of the Seattle or Minneapolis AA conventions of recent years, you might be a wee bit disappointed. Or as one New York delegate said to me, "It was a nice convention." To which another delegate retorted: "I don't want nice. I want exhilarating!"

This writer felt it was a subdued, smoothly run, serviceable convention. What was missing was, perhaps, fire in the belly. And of course the 400-pound gorilla in

every room was the ghost of Ellen Johnson, the charismatic former president of AA who had been precipitously fired last summer. It seemed obvious that AA's Board of Directors were determined to put on a smooth, well-run convention to show that they don't need Johnson. In that, they succeeded. They made the trains run on time.



AA president Dr. Ed Buckner gives opening speech

Many members seemed satisfied with Dr. Buckner's opening remarks. AA member Dr. Eric Stone of Chappaqua, NY, found him "intelligent and personable." In his convention-opening speech, Buckner's main theme was, "No More Lies from Religionists." The big four current lies Buckner inveighed against were:

- 1) That this is a Christian nation. "Rubbish. Ours is a secular nation," Buckner said.
- 2) That religionists are more patriotic than secularists. "Another lie. Many atheists have fought and died for this country."
- 3) That laws should protect ideas like those in the bible or the torah. "More lies. Ideas should be open to all to judge, discuss and criticize."
- 4) That religionists are more moral and ethical than secularists. "Biggest lie yet. Religion has been used to justify slavery, discrimination against women, gays and atheists."

"Buckner hit all the right notes," said Kenneth Bronstein, president of New York City Atheists. "He made no blunders." However, Bronstein and other New York delegates said they felt that one thing missing in

the well-run convention was any discussion of future goals or plans about where AA is going.

Million-Atheists March on Wash.DC

One thing for sure, AA is going to Washington, D.C.

For this writer, one of the exhilarating moments of the conference was the announcement by Charleston, SC professor Dr. Herb Silverman, president of the Secular Coalition for America, that his group is planning a Million-Atheists March on Washington. No date has been set yet, but for me this was joyous news. I pictured the Washington monument area overflowing with millions of atheists as it had long ago overflowed with African Americans, pacifists and women. Now is our time!

I pictured television screens from Cleveland to Katmandu filled with the spectacle of millions of nonbelievers overflowing our capitol city, a presence the legislators could not ignore, a vision that the fundamentalists would envy and a spectacle that millions of nonbelievers worldwide would celebrate. Cheers for Herb Silverman and his brave, audacious thinking!

Escape from the ‘Fundies’

For many others, the most uplifting event of the conference was the confessional speech by Nate Phelps, son of the infamous Rev. Fred Phelps of “God Hates Fags” notoriety. Growing up in the Phelps’ family in Topeka, Kansas, Nate suffered physical and mental abuse in what he dubbed “the most hated fundamentalist family in the country.” He escaped in 1976 on his 18th birthday, fled to British Columbia, where he lives today, and ultimately rejected religion.



Dennis Horvitz (l.) interviews Nathan Phelps (r.) (son of Fred Phelps) for NYCA Cable Show

In this first-ever public telling of his experiences in this extremist family, Phelps choked with emotion and held back tears as he told of the abuse suffered at the hands of his fundamentalist father. In the end, he got a standing ovation and many in the audience were seen weeping

and embracing each other. For this Northeasterner, not that acquainted with the persistently in-your-face Rev. Fred Phelps, the audience emotions aroused by Nate were a surprise, but Southerners told me that the Rev. Phelps is a well-known pestilence down south and that it took great courage for Nate to “come out” and tell about the religious abuse he suffered as a child.

‘Fundies’ & Power Politics

In the speaker lineup, I enjoyed Atlanta’s talk-radio host Mike Malloy, whose nationally syndicated program can be heard, most week nights, on Sirius XM Satellite Radio, among other places. Malloy said he believes there is a Jihadist-Christian belief in this country that “mows down anyone who gets in their way” and he questions whether religion is their real motive. It is, rather, he believes, a quest for power, a marriage between Christian “fundies” and politics.

Malloy also touched on the dichotomy between Liberals and Conservatives in the atheist movement. He allowed as he has not met any genuine conservative atheists (not counting Libertarians), upon which a woman jumped up from the audience saying, “There is no contradiction between being politically conservative and atheist!” for which she got a bit of applause. “How many conservative atheists are there here?” Malloy asked the audience. Three or four people (in an audience of some 500), raised their hands. Malloy rested his case.



Richard Dawkins

I also enjoyed the dry, subtle British humor of headliner Richard Dawkins, who congratulated Americans on “getting rid of the worst president in history.” Dawkins seems to relish, in his speeches, making fun of how right wing religionists have distorted his quotes. This time, he excoriated the perhaps fictional “Tony Blair Faith Foundation,” whose motto is, he said, “A world without religion doesn’t have a prayer.”

From China came speaker John Lombard, an American businessman who has lived in China for 18 years. In his talk, “Lessons from China,” he pointed out that the Chinese educational system is 100 percent atheist. “Not only is religion not taught, it is actively discouraged,”

he said. However, the Chinese educational system fails to teach critical thinking skills, opined this former fundamentalist, and this has led, he believes, to what he described as the rapid spread of religion and cults in China.

Dr. J. Anderson Thompson, a Washington psychiatrist, won the admiration of AA member Dr. Eric Stone who reported that “he delivered an unusually interesting scientific talk about how religion has become so entrenched in our lives by hijacking cognitive processes that have evolved to help us survive. For example, religion has hijacked our need for attachment, our theory of mind, our parental transference and our altruistic punishment (punishment of wrongdoers), each of which evolved to solve critical problems in our history.”

De-Baptism with Hair Dryers



Members line up to be debaptized

For AA member John Zerillo of New Jersey, the highlight of the conference was the last event—the de-Baptizing and de-Bar Mitzvah rite. “The ceremony opened with the dance of three ‘vestal vegans,’” Zerillo relates. “They came out in burqas, which they shed during the dance—three women who danced as one, in their first and most assuredly last public performance.”

Then audience members lined up to get the blast of hot air (AA’s attorney Edwin Kagin, ex-pro-tem president Frank Zindler and AA’s press officer Dave Silverman, dressed in weird religious garb, wielded the hair dryers that supposedly blasted religion out of your head.) The hot air was supposed to “taketh away the stigma and bloweth away the remnant stain of baptismal water,” according to the incantation. After that, the de-baptized person partook of a “communion wafer”—actually an unholy Trisket laden with green unconsecrated guacamole—and took a sip of un-sacramental root beer.



Pentecostal convulsions did overcome some of the ecstatically faithless, Zerillo reports, and in fact, he has a picture of himself lying prone on the floor, apparently flipped out by the sheer emotion of getting de-baptized. Afterwards, each participant got a certificate for their courage in renouncing superstition, faith and religion, and in accepting the supremacy of reason.

But from the audience, came a plaintive voice. AA member Howard Rothman inquired, “Will there also be a de-circumcision ceremony?” Come to the next convention to find out how the Kagin-Zindler-Silverman priestly triumvirate is going to handle that tricky problem. Anybody know an atheist moyl who can sew?

Some Suggestions for AA

“I missed the glitz this year,” one conventioneer lamented to this writer. It’s unclear exactly what was meant, but a number of New York-area AA members have some ideas for AA’s convention planners:

- (1) **Subsidize 500 youth convention attendees.** Ken Bronstein pointed out that there was a dearth of young people at our convention, probably because they cannot afford the expense. He suggests charging students only a \$1 entry fee, hiring buses to transport them, providing box lunches for them and working closely with the local AA affiliate to recruit young people. “Young people are our future,” says Bronstein. “They need to be here to hear these speakers, even if we have to subsidize them.” The Secular Student Association should be able to help in this effort, he noted.
- (2) **Motivational speakers.** Bronstein said he wants to feel the rush, the high, the energy of being inspired after attending an atheist convention. “I want to go home renewed, invigorated, enthused about working for atheism! Every business convention has motivational speakers. Atheism needs them too,” he says.

Cont. next page

Member Elaine Stone of Chappaqua, NY agreed with Bronstein on the second suggestion. When it comes to the convention speeches, "I am not interested in religion bashing and same-old, same-old speech topics," she says. "I want speakers who give us ideas and tips on how to get involved in our own communities or become more activist, how to better promote and publicize and get people to declare their atheism." She recommends more "big name" speakers, better audio, more Q and A time. And how about a separate Members' Meeting for rank and file AA members to discuss what's on their minds or what to do going forward? (*Ed: Wouldn't that also take care of those unspoken questions hanging in the air?*) And oh yes, Ms. Stone adds: "Only one Zindler on the board at a time."

New York AA member Howard Rothman said he longed for a serious de-baptism and de-bar mitzvah ceremony. He pointed out that we became indoctrinated into religion as children without our consent. "Religion takes advantage of children. So the emphasis [in the de-baptism and de-bar mitzvah ceremony] should be on the fact that most people did not become religious voluntarily. Perhaps our de-baptism ceremonies should be more serious, with less ridicule of believers." □

My thanks to friends and colleagues Ken Bronstein, Howard Rothman, Elaine Stone, Dr. Eric Stone, and John Zerillo for their reports, ideas and observations for this article.

Letters to the Editor

Appreciation

To the Editor:

I want to thank and congratulate you on the content of your April "Sermon." It was just what I wanted to hear and what I believe NYCA stands for. We must remain resilient, resourceful and dedicated to high ethical principles in our behavior even if people don't agree with us. Thank you for your courage as it gives me hope to know there are lots of others who feel the way I do and have the stamina to stand up to outrageous irrational ideas and religious zealotry.

I thank Jane Everhart for her comments on charity. I agree wholeheartedly with what she wrote as well.

Edith Amster - Manhattan

Avoiding Profanity

To the Editor:

Since when is c**p a religious word like g*d? (*April newsletter, "John Rafferty Talks with NYCA," page 5*) Why does a word like c**p have to be spelled with asterisks? It's not like he said s**t. And why is this word censored in an atheist publication? Are we f**king n*ts?

Absolutely against censorship!

Shirley Sacks - Queens

PROUD TO BE AN ATHEIST

UPCOMING MAY EVENTS

CALL: 212-330-6794 FOR LAST MINUTE CHANGES

MAY 7, 2009 (Thursday) 5:00 – 7:00 PM
"Gift of Life" Blood Donation Event

NYCA will Counter the 'National Day of Prayer' with Blood Donations Lifesaving Action, Not Passive Prayer. "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 - Citigroup Building - Lower Level

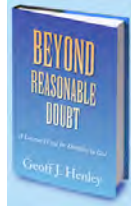
ENTRANCE: Southside of East 54th Street - 100 feet west of Third Ave.

ENTER: Straight ahead to down escalator
 NY Blood Center Straight Ahead

RESERVATIONS: NOT REQUIRED

MAY 10, 2009 (Sunday) 12:00 PM
NYC Atheists Brunch / Speaker / Book Club

Speaker: Geoff Henley, LLD



Subject: *"Beyond Reasonable Doubt: A Lawyers' Case for Disbelief in god"*

In *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, Texas attorney Henley applies accepted legal precepts to scripture with devastating results for religion. Much like science has confounded religion's depiction of the natural world, Henley shows how well-settled common law principles undermine religion's claims that a just god exists. Whether you are a skeptic or a believer, a layman or a lawyer, you will not want to miss this pointed analysis of myths, the Bible, the Koran and Anglo-American law.

Location: Press Box Restaurant & Pub
 932 Second Ave. (bet. 49th & 50th Streets)

Cost: Brunch, \$20 (includes Buffet entrees, one drink, coffee, tax, tip.)

Book Club / Library

After brunch, we move to the NYCA Library located on East 79th Street. We continue discussing Christopher Hitchens' *god is Not Great*, Chapter 15: *"Religion as an Original Sin."*

Need not have read the assignment to participate.

MAY 13, 2009 (Wednesday) 7:00 PM
NYC Atheists Philosophy Club

Subject: The Examined Life – Socrates



Socrates sought genuine knowledge rather than mere

victory over an opponent, Thus, his willingness to call everything into question and his determination to accept nothing less than an adequate account of the nature of things make him the first clear exponent of critical philosophy. Meeting conducted by Dr. Charles Lantz.

Contact: Ken Bronstein: (212-535-7425)
INFO@NYCATHEISTS.ORG to RSVP and find out location.

Meeting limited to 15 – **CALL EARLY**
 Must be a NYCA member to participate
CAN JOIN AT MEETING

MAY 19, 2009 (Tuesday) 7:00 PM
NYCA Meetup

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

Group Leader: TBA

Subject: Is Love a Scientific Concept or a Myth?

Exciting discussions with fellow freethinkers!

Cost: Free, but participants are expected to purchase a drink or food.

Register: <http://atheists.meetup.com>

MAY 28, 2008 (Thursday) 6:30 PM
NYCA MONTHLY MEETING

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

Speaker: John Coleman – Emeritus Professor of Classics – Cornell University, Ithaca, NY



Subject: "My experiences as the first professor to teach a course in Atheism in a major U.S. University."

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

MAY 2009

May	7	Thur.	5 – 7:00 PM	NYCA “Gift of Life” Blood Donation
May	10**	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch/Book Club/Library
May	13*	Wed.	7:00 PM	NYCA Philosophy Discussion Group
May	19***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up and Discussion
May	28****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

JUNE 2009

June	14**	Sun.	12:00 PM	NYCA Brunch/Book Club/Library
June	16***	Tue.	7:00 PM	NYCA Meet-Up and Discussion
June	25****	Thur.	6:30 PM	NYCA Monthly Meeting

- * **Location: Call Ken Bronstein / 212-535-7425**
 ** **Press Box Restaurant & Pub – 932 Second Ave. (49/50th St.) – 2nd Floor**
 *** **Stone Creek Bar and Lounge – 140 East 27th St. (3rd/Lex)**
 **** **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 STREET TABLING

Saturdays: 11AM – 6PM / Columbus Circle / Front of Time Warner Building
ALWAYS CHECK W/212-330-6794 FOR SCHEDULE CHANGES

NYCA
 Cooper Station
 P.O. Box 93
 NY, NY 10276-0093

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