

 **NEWS & FEATURES**

Imagine no religion

'Free, proud, godless, and on the move' at the American Atheists' convention. Not to mention finding a new definition of WWJD.

BY DAN KENNEDY

THERE IS SOMETHING incongruously amusing about listening in on several hundred atheists who have gathered to wallow in the exaggerated sense of grievance and persecution that is the hallmark of identity politics. Atheists, after all, think of themselves as superior beings, as rationalists who have succeeded in rising above the superstition and prejudice that so blight the lives of their fellow citizens. Shouldn't such virtue be its own reward?

Apparently not. Take, for example, Ellen Johnson, the president of American Atheists, speaking to her fellow members at the opening of last weekend's national convention in Boston. Johnson — described in the organization's literature as "a second-generation Atheist" and "soccer mom" — spoke of the rage atheists felt after the September 11 attacks. From George W. Bush to the lowliest local official, she charged, government's response was drenched in religion.

"Atheists felt marginalized and angered," Johnson said, standing in front of a banner that announced AMERICAN ATHEISTS: LEADING THE WAY FOR ATHEISTS' CIVIL RIGHTS. "It's religion that caused the attack on our country," she added, "and it's religion that divides America."

Johnson seethed as she denounced such post-September 11 idiocies as the Ten Commandments Defense Act, which would give states the right to decide whether to display the Ten Commandments on public property, and a decision by school officials in Palestine, Texas, to allow a minister to lead students in prayer.

"We are also grieving Americans, and we won't shut up and be quiet while



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AND PROUD OF IT: a wide selection of slogans are available for people who want to wear they lack of faith like a badge of honor.



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others break the law," she thundered — that is, if thundered is the right word for someone who comes across more as a carefully groomed, well-spoken K Street lobbyist than as the fire-breathing heir of that most infamous atheist of them all, the late Madalyn Murray O'Hair.

To the untrained ear — to someone unaccustomed to hearing of "atheist rights" in the same context as gay-and-lesbian rights or racial equality — Johnson's remarks at times seemed to border on parody. "If you are not being thrown in jail today for not praying, thank an atheist," she said at one point. She also announced the formation of an atheists' political-action committee. (Don't laugh — according to Johnson, a Libertarian gubernatorial candidate from Colorado has already made inquiries.) And she told the crowd about a "March on Washington for Godless America" being planned for next September 21. The message: "We are free, proud, godless, and on the move."

As I said, incongruously amusing.

But once you get past the rhetoric, there remains the content of what Johnson and others at the convention were saying. If it sounds crazy, maybe it's because we've been so browbeaten into accepting, even embracing, religiosity in the public sphere that it's shocking to hear anyone depart from orthodoxy. That hasn't always been the case.

As the social critic Wendy Kaminer, herself an atheist, observed in the *New Republic* some years back, Mark Twain and H.L. Mencken railed against religion, with Mencken calling it "so absurd that it comes close to imbecility." People don't write or talk that way anymore, Kaminer said, noting, "Atheists generate about as much sympathy as pedophiles."

The atheistic impulse is not alien to me. Years ago, I was a staunchly secular agnostic. These days I'm what I guess you could call a religious liberal — a member of a Unitarian Universalist church and someone who has no particular beliefs beyond the vague notion that spirituality is good. So when I found out that the atheists were coming to town, I wanted to learn more. For me, as for many liberals, poking fun at fundamentalist Christians, fanatical Islamists, and the like is easy — too easy. The atheists, I suspected, posed a more formidable intellectual challenge.

I WAS TALKING with a desk clerk at the Hyatt Harborside Hotel, at Logan Airport, trying to figure out how I could leave and come back without incurring another parking fee, when she smiled and asked, "Are you with the atheists?"

"No!" I replied immediately. "I'm a reporter." I paused before mumbling, "I'm just covering them."

I felt a little guilty about my disavowal. I may have more in common with Ellen Johnson than I do with Pat Robertson, but that didn't mean I was eager to identify myself with the godless. Wendy Kaminer was right.

So maybe what surprised me more than anything about the atheists I met during the weekend was not that they don't believe in God (well, duh), but that they are so upfront and in-your-face about it. After all, what percentage is there in giving offense to the righteous? During the convention, I heard atheists complain not just about prayer in the schools and public invocations of the Ten Commandments, but about churches on government property, about prayers at public gatherings, even about the inscription IN GOD WE TRUST on money.

My attitude tends to be: "Who cares?" I know my views are not mainstream, and I don't expect to see them reflected in the majority culture; all I ask is that the majority's views not be imposed on me. The idea that nearly 300 people would travel across the country to spend a

weekend *complaining* about such trivial insults — if, indeed, they can even be considered insults — struck me as weird.

At lunch on Friday, Lydia Rice tried to set me straight. A manufacturing engineer from Silicon Valley (and the proprietor of a Web site called godlessgeeks.com), Rice described herself as a refugee from a conservative religious childhood in which women were treated as "slaves." Having overcome such an upbringing, she said, the impulse to activism comes naturally. She was the prime mover behind a non-religious memorial to the victims of September 11 at Golden Gate State Park, in San Francisco. And she is quick to point out what she sees as the damaging effects of religion on everyday life.

"There are so many religious images that are really ugly," Rice told me. As an example, she cited the crucifix. "It's a picture of a guy being tortured to death," she said. "Do you really want your kids looking at that? It's an ugly, ugly vision." Again, it's a matter of perspective. If you're a believing Christian, no doubt you'll find Rice's words sacrilegious. Personally, I hadn't given it much thought. But yeah, she's got a point.

Rice's friend Mark Thomas, a software engineer also from Silicon Valley, called religion a form of "mind control," adding that coming out publicly as an atheist can be an important step in getting over that control. Religion, he said, erects an "electric fence to keep people from leaving" — to "keep them from thinking thoughts that they don't want to be thought." To which Rice followed up, "Maybe there isn't a God — oh! I can't think that; I'm going to hell!"

If being an atheist in Silicon Valley is hard, imagine what it must be like in the Shenandoah Valley region of Virginia. James Ramsey, the American Atheists' state director for Virginia, lives near a small city called Harrisonburg. He looks like the sort of person you might run into at a science-fiction convention: young, bearded, bespectacled, and with a long ponytail, offset by a well-tailored suit and an unusually sober demeanor.

Ramsey, whose family finds his atheism so upsetting that his brother is able to refer to it only as "the A-word," says becoming an active, outspoken atheist was part of his "leaving the closet — gays and atheists both have closets." His license plate reads atheism. He recalls the time that his supervisor at the warehouse where he works as a clerk saw him on television, protesting at City Hall against the National Day of Prayer. He counts himself lucky that he wasn't fired.

Occasionally, Ramsey says, he'll encounter someone who is put off by his outspokenness and who tells him something like, "You need to remember what kind of community you're in." Ramsey's response: "Listen, this is my community, too."

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