

- [HOME](#)
- [NEW THIS WEEK](#)
- [EDITORS' PICKS](#)
- [LISTINGS](#)
- [NEWS & FEATURES](#)
- [MUSIC](#)
- [FILM](#)
- [ART](#)
- [BOOKS](#)
- [THEATER](#)
- [DANCE](#)
- [TELEVISION](#)
- [FOOD & DRINK](#)
- [ARCHIVES](#)
- [LETTERS](#)
- [PERSONALS](#)
- [CLASSIFIEDS](#)
- [ADULT](#)
- [ASTROLOGY](#)
- [PHOENIX FORUM](#)
- [DOWNLOAD MP3s](#)

 **NEWS & FEATURES**

Imagine no religion (continued)

BY DAN KENNEDY

IF THE SORT of atheism I encountered at the Hyatt was distinctly mainstream, the path was paved by someone who was not mainstream at all — Madalyn Murray O'Hair, the founder of American Atheists and the victorious plaintiff in the 1963 Supreme Court decision that declared prayer in public schools to be unconstitutional.

O'Hair was flamboyant and outspoken — sometimes called "the most hated woman in America" — and she came to a nasty end. In 1995, she, her son Jon Garth Murray, and her daughter Robin Murray O'Hair were kidnapped from her home in North Austin, Texas, apparently as part of an extortion plot. Their bodies were discovered in South Texas in 2001. The murders were carried out at the behest of a former employee, who had stolen more than \$600,000 from O'Hair's organization.

One of the biggest critics of the American Atheists today is William Murray, a son of Madalyn O'Hair who left the movement in 1980 and became a born-again Christian. Several atheists I spoke with were surprised that Murray didn't show up last weekend, something they say he usually does when the organization has its convention. But Murray did take out an ad in Saturday's *Boston Globe*. And he has a Web site (www.wjmurray.com) devoted to explicating the so-called errors of



ATHIEST SOCCER MOM: American Atheists president Ellen Johnson sees herself as the head of an organization that 'lobbies on behalf of reality.'



ARLO PIGNOTTI shared his statuette of Jesus and his dog, along with other religious artifacts.

his mother's ways.

"I was taught that because there was not God there was no such thing as right or wrong," Murray says on his Web site. "My mother told me it was better to be a homosexual than a Christian. She taught me that the most important things in life were the physical pleasures of drink, food, and sex."

Well, if there was any serious debauchery going on at the Hyatt last weekend, it eluded me. (Then again, it usually does.) But the convention was not without its light moments — not by any means.

There was, for instance, the bookstore — a veritable laugh riot of bumper stickers (WWJD — WHO WANTS JELLY DONUTS?), T-shirts (PROUD TO BE AN AMERICAN ATHEIST, complete with American flag — trying wearing *that* to the 7-Eleven), and books (*Martin Luther: Hitler's Spiritual Ancestor* — apparently serious, but a great title nevertheless).

There was a presentation by Arlo Pignotti called "Holy Paraphernalia Mania," a show of religious artifacts ranging from a Scientology E-meter to a little bronze statuette of Jesus and his dog ("I don't remember that in the Gospels," he quipped) to something called "rumpology" — or "ass-crack reading," as Pignotti accurately described it — whereby Jacqueline Stallone (Sylvester's mom) promises to predict your future if you will merely send her a photocopy of your butt, along with (naturally) \$100. (Try Googling "rumpology" and "Stallone." You'll be amazed.)

And there was the highlight of the weekend, the showing of a video called *Godstuff*, by Joe Bob Briggs (the stage name for the writer and tongue-in-cheek movie critic John Bloom), a hilarious compilation of clips from religious television shows. The biggest star: Robert Tilton, a televangelist not well-known in this part of the country, but whose rather astounding on-air greed makes Jim Bakker look like someone who's taken a vow of poverty.

"This could be like *Religious Talk Soup*," quipped Briggs, who was on hand to introduce his film and sign autographs.

DESPITE THE OUTPOURING of religiosity that followed September 11, there are signs that we may be on the verge of a reinvigorated secularism. The Catholic Church is in the midst of an institution-threatening crisis of its own making, having covered up the crimes of thousands of pedophile priests over the course of many decades. Anti-Western terrorism is being perpetrated in the name of Islam. In the United States, two of the religious right's aging icons, the Reverends Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, have lost face and credibility by blaming terrorism on homosexuality and the women's movement. Even the Reverend Billy Graham, who brought President Bush to Jesus and who has long been thought to represent evangelical Christianity's more-benign side, has been exposed on the latest reel of Nixon tapes as a vicious anti-Semite. Ellen Johnson herself touted a recent City University of New York survey showing that the proportion of Americans who do not adhere to any religion grew from eight percent to 14.1 percent during the past decade. (However, Johnson did *not* share another finding with the delegates — that just 0.4 percent of Americans consider themselves atheists.)

So even if atheism may never be fashionable, the American Atheists' message last weekend was certainly timely. In fact, I was hard-pressed to find any issue of substance on which I disagreed with them, be it abortion-rights pioneer Bill Baird's denunciation of Bernard Cardinal Law ("this cowardly man") and the Catholic Church ("the most dangerous place for children in America") or *Why I Am Not a Muslim* author Ibn Warraq's suggestion — while noting that recent scholarship suggests that the Koran promises holy warriors "white raisins of crystal clarity" rather than 72 virgins — that terrorists "abandon their culture of death and concentrate on

getting laid 72 times in *this* world."

The most earnest speaker I heard was Eddie Tabash, an unsuccessful candidate for the California legislature who talked about the need to elect atheists to political office — even if it involves using "stealth" measures, such as not telling potential voters about their atheism unless they're specifically asked. "The prejudice that voters have against us is illegitimate and doesn't deserve to be accommodated," he said. As a comparison, he cited Congressman Barney Frank, who didn't come out as gay until he had been safely ensconced in office for several terms.

At the end of his presentation, Tabash half-seriously said he'd like nothing more than to see Ellen Johnson elected governor of New Jersey someday. "Governor Ellen!" someone shouted.

That night, as folks were filing in to watch *Godstuff*, I had a chance to speak with Johnson for a few moments. I asked if she would ever consider taking such a step. "No, because I can't leave this position," she told me. "Who's going to do this job?" Her goals: boosting her organization's membership well above its current total of about 2200 and opening an office in Washington.

I asked her how she made the leap from nonbeliever to atheist activist. After all, as a "second-generation" atheist, she's presumably not trying to exorcise any demons from her past. "When I was growing up, people didn't talk about being an atheist," she said, comparing it — as had James Ramsey and Eddie Tabash — to being gay and closeted. The euphemism she recalls being used, she added, was that "we were just not interested in religion." She saw Madalyn O'Hair on television for the first time in 1979 and experienced a moment of self-recognition: "Oh, that's what we are: she's just like us." She went to her first American Atheists' convention in 1980, became New Jersey state director, and took over the presidency after O'Hair's disappearance.

By why? Why the urge to proclaim her atheism from every rooftop rather than just live her life? It was hard to pin her down; she was distracted, making preparations for Joe Bob Briggs, and she interpreted my question as being about her members rather than herself. "If I knew that, I would have the biggest organization — I don't know," she said. "It's very individual. What makes a gay person an activist?"

As I was driving to one of the sessions on Saturday, listening to NPR, I heard Scott Simon chatting with a couple of biblical scholars about the significance of Abraham. The discussion morphed into a consideration of Abraham's almost-sacrifice of Isaac. How, Simon asked, could Abraham be revered for hearing a voice telling him to kill his son while Andrea Yates is sentenced to life in prison for essentially the same thing?

The scholars were secular, and their answers had to do with tradition and culture and the existence of ancient sects in which child sacrifice was commonplace. Yet I knew that in many places, on many parts of the radio dial where NPR is not heard, the very *discussion* would be seen as sacrilege. God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son," and if you've got a problem with that, pal, you must be one of them godless atheists.

"Sometimes I shake my head," Ellen Johnson said during her keynote address. "I am actually the president of an organization that lobbies on behalf of reality."

Wendy Kaminer put it this way: "Faith is not a function of stupidity but a frequent cause of it."

Identity politics can be dreary and smug and self-satisfied in its embrace of victimhood, but it has its uses. I'm unconvinced that the atheists are as

persecuted as they think they are. Nor have they succeeded in making reality their exclusive franchise.

But it's not a bad thing that they're here to blow away the hypocrisy and the icky piety of what passes all too often for religious discourse in this country.

For more information on American Atheists, visit their Web site at www.atheists.org. Dan Kennedy can be reached at dan@dankennedy.net.

[page 1](#) [page 2](#)

Issue Date: April 4 - 11, 2002

Back to the News & Features [table of contents](#).

[home](#) | [feedback](#) | [about the phoenix](#) | [find the phoenix](#) | [advertising info](#) | [privacy policy](#) | [work for us](#)

© 2002 Phoenix Media Communications Group

