



# Ethically Speaking

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## Sundays at the Meeting House

10:00 am: Members' Sharing Circle, Library

10:30—12:30 pm  
Children's Sunday Assembly

11:00—12:30 pm  
Platform, Meeting Room

1:00 pm or as noted  
Afternoon Program

## Platform Program Quotes



Quotes to Remember . . .

Art must discover and reveal the beauty which prejudice and caricature have overlaid.

— **Alain Locke**

The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and all they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art

— **James Weldon Johnson**

## BSEC Platforms



### Exiles in the Promised Land Sunday, June 7, 11am with Rev. Osagyefo Sekou

Rev. Sekou, a 2009 BSEC Fellow, will reflect on his life in the Arkansas Delta and offer a tribute to those who raised him. In a personal attempt to give an inventory of his formation, he asks what it means to be raised by people who could not write their names. **1pm: Annual Member Meeting**



### Si Kahn Comes to Ethical Sunday, June 14, 11am Children Behind Bars in America

For the June 14 platform, Si will discuss the **Campaign to End Immigrant Family Detention**, and what each of us can do end "immigrant family detention" once and for all. After the platform at 1pm, he will screen a short documentary film, *Hutto: America's Family Prison* and lead further discussion.

[www.grassrootsleadership.org](http://www.grassrootsleadership.org). **1pm: Documentary film on Detention**



### Women for Afghan Women BSEC Peace Site Award Winner Sunday, June 21, 11am

Women for Afghan Women is a Queens-based organization committed to ensuring the human rights of Afghan women. Most of its staffers are in Afghanistan, where they support the development of vocational training and education for women and girls, provide counseling and safe spaces for women threatened with violence, advocate for the "full inclusion of women in all aspects of Afghan life", and "keep alive and vibrant the discourse of human rights for women in an Islamic context."

**2pm: Women's Writing Group Book Party**



### To Be or Not to Be Larry Bush On Becoming a Straight Ally to Gay Communities Sunday, June 28, 11am with Lawrence Bush

Back in 1981, when BSEC fellow Larry Bush got his first piece published in the *Village Voice*, another Larry Bush — a gay Larry Bush — appeared on the scene and was published in the *Village Voice* before him. A face-to-face interview set our fellow on his path to confronting his own homophobia and learning to be an ally to LGBT struggles. **1pm: Member Picnic**

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**The Good  
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Music Parlor**

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ACOUSTIC ROOTS MUSIC**

Our 34th Year

53 Prospect Park West at 2nd  
Street Park Slope  
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718-768-2972

**June 5**

**American Flyer-Bluegrass**

(\$10 adults, \$6 kids)

**June 12**

**Brooklyn Women's Chorus Third**

(\$10 adults, \$6 kids)

**June 19**

**Third Friday with the Park Slope  
Food Coop-Eric Alabaster**

(\$10 adults, \$6 kids)

**June 26**

**Coffeehouse  
Closed for the Summer**

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**The Felix Helix Blog**

Audrey Kindred, who directs BSEC's Children's Sunday Assembly (CSA), has created a blog named "The Felix Helix" (<http://felixhelix.blogspot.com/>), which is open to the participation and comments of all Society members. Named for Felix Adler, the founder of Ethical Culture, the Felix Helix aims to serve as a "dialogic zine" of ethics for children, youth, parents, families, and friends of all ages. Bravo, Audrey, for taking this communications initiative.

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**DIRECTIONS TO BSEC BY  
MASS TRANSIT:**

Q train to 7th Av station in Brooklyn; F train to 7th Av; 2or 3 train to Grand Army Plaza; B69 bus to 2nd St; B75 bus to Prospect

## President's Note

Dear Members and Friends,

Our Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture is thriving in this late spring just at the cusp of summer. Please plan to join us for our Annual Membership Meeting in June. We'll hold it on **Sunday, June 7th from 1:00pm to 3:30pm.**

The AEU National Assembly, held this year in St. Louis, will take place from June 11th to June 14th. BSEC votes will be provided by three delegates: Tom Castelnuovo, Reina Horowitz, and Vandra Thorburn. In addition, Osagyefo Sekou and Audrey Kindred will be a part of the Assembly activities. Sekou is currently working with the renewed Leader Task Force and will use the Assembly as an opportunity to help BSEC with the leader search process. Audrey will join to engage in work related to CSA and other key areas that benefit our community families.

We have much to celebrate with the diversity of Platform programming crafted under Abby Scher's leadership, the gifts that Lawrence Bush and Osagyefo Sekou continue to share with us, and the strength of skills possessed by Damal Edmond, Jason Dubin, Audrey Kindred, Simba Yangala, Gabriella Belfiglio, and Otis Cotton.

As we swiftly near the end of the BSEC programming year, our good work will continue through the summer to prepare us for the coming year. If you have time and skills to hone or grow, please contact a trustee or committee chair/member to see how you can lend a hand.

I wish everyone a wonderful summer!

All best wishes,  
Eda Kapsis

## An Ethical Culture Resolution on Same-Sex Marriage



The Ethical Society of Northern Westchester recently published the following Resolution :

**We affirm** our unyielding support for the principle of the separation of Church and State, which ensures a pluralistic, secular, civil society while preserving the precious freedom of religion so deeply desired in a diverse, democratic society.

**We affirm** the right of religious communities to differ in their definitions and practices regarding ceremony, celebration, and sanctification of the meaningful experiences of life, including religious marriage.

Therefore, respecting both separation of Church and State, and the freedom of religious observance,

And acknowledging the inviolable dignity and worth of every human being, And recognizing the human rights inherent equally in all human beings,

**We affirm** our belief that the right to enter the civil state of legal marriage must be extended to same-sex couples, and that equality of marriage must be accorded to all people.

Written by Bob Berson and signed by twelve members of the Briarcliff-Ossining Ministerial Association. Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture acknowledges this resolution and stands in agreement with it.

— Submitted by Fiona Bonham



## Editor's Column

by Joel Shatzky

### I—A Global Issue: Torture



At a recent Sunday morning meeting, some BSEC members were discussing a number of the broad ethical issues facing our country — among them, the Torture controversy, which directly challenges the moral values for which this country is supposed to stand. The conventional defense of torture made by U.S. officials, including, most notoriously, ex-Vice President Cheney, is that the information extracted through “harsh interrogation techniques” saved many

lives by allowing us to preempt terrorist acts. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also argued that in the panicky days after 9/11, when it was still logical to presume that another attack on the U.S. was imminent, getting information by “any means necessary” to prevent such an attack was justifiable.

To draw an analogy, to what lengths should a law-enforcement officer go to get information from a suspect or someone else who knew the location of a missing child whose life was in imminent danger? What limit on abuse or torture would a frantic parent request to save her child’s life? These are questions that cannot be easily resolved through general, high-minded principles.

However, it seems from media reports that torture was not only used in desperate circumstances, but as a policy over months and years — and that it was of no value to interrogators, some of whom seemed intent on getting their victims to lie about a connection between al-Qaeda and Iraq in order to bolster the Administration’s case for the invasion. If this is true — and there are several independent sources that seem to substantiate it — then the Bush Administration is guilty of gross violations of the Constitution and of human rights, and the responsible people, including the former President, should be held accountable.

Unfortunately, such is the nature of politics these days that this reckoning is highly unlikely. President Obama is a political pragmatist and realizes that a full accounting of the crimes of the previous administration would do great damage to his programs because of the polarization that would ensue. We must accept the fact that many Americans, according to polls, feel that because of 9/11, *any* measures are justifiable to protect us from a terrorist attack. Those of us who would like to see prosecutions for torture will have to be satisfied with a few admonitory statements and the possible disbarment of several of the legal experts, such as John Woo, who wrote opinions justifying its use. The message from all of this will likely be that heads of state, unless they are from a conquered nation, are immune from retribution for their crimes until a more ethical form of internationally recognized accountability can be instituted and enforced. The United States itself, I believe, will not be free of accusations of moral hypocrisy until it agrees to have its own laws and courts subordinated to the final jurisdiction of international law and the International Criminal Court. I doubt that even an Obama would be able to make that miracle happen.

### II — A Local Issue: The Urge for Spirituality

A recent article in the *New York Times* by Charles Blow indicated that a significant number of people raised by secular parents are “returning” to more traditional religious practices. This can be seen among our own members who report, somewhat in dismay, that their children or other relatives who were raised in the Ethical Culture tradition have become religiously observant, even strictly observant. The reasons in Blow’s article given for such “return” to religious practices were varied, but two of them should have *(continued on p. 4)*



#### BSEC’s

#### Mission Statement

#### The Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture

is a humanistic, religious and educational fellowship promoting knowledge, love and practice of ethics-centered living.

As a diverse and welcoming community, we assist each other in developing ethical ideals, exploring choices, navigating our life journeys, and working to realize a more just and compassionate world.

BSEC belongs to a federation of Ethical Culture & Ethical Humanist Societies and/or Fellowships in the U.S. known as the American Ethical Union

[www.aeu.org](http://www.aeu.org)



**SAVE THE DATE**

**June 11th, 4:00pm  
Children of Abraham  
Peace Walk**

Gather @ 4pm at Al Noor School, leave at 5:15, arrive at Brooklyn Ethical 6:50 (full information on p. 9).

**June 18th, 7:30pm & 9:00pm  
A Salute to Black Music Month**

This is a Salute to Black Music in honor of Jazz. The Ed Stoute Quintet will perform and dinner will be served. The cost for the evening will be \$25.00 and the host will be Harold Valle, jazz historian, and “Keeper of the Secrets.” This event is being sponsored by the Life & Ethics Committee of Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture. For more information, go to: [www.bsec.org](http://www.bsec.org)



- June 2**  
Adrianna Baker
- June 3**  
Glenn Newman
- July 18**  
Christiane Siebert
- July 24**  
Robin Feld
- August 3**  
Lois Kellerman
- August 12**  
Laura Duffy
- August 18**  
Rita Wilson
- August 21**  
Edith Calabro
- August 23**  
Gary Schechter
- August 26**  
Constance Pigozzi

*(continued from p. 3)*

special resonance for the BSEC community: a need for spiritual sustenance, and a desire for connectedness to a larger community.

One of the dilemmas that we face as members of Ethical Culture is how to cultivate an ethical perspective and ethical lives without relying on the irrational beliefs that religions use to encourage ethical behavior: namely, the bribe of eternal life and the threat of eternal damnation.

We set aside such “magical thinking” in our teachings — yet we deliberately maintain some of the elements of traditional religious practice in the Sunday platform (which, I understand, vary from one branch of the Society to another) to cultivate a spiritual sensibility when we are together. These elements include the lighting of candles, the remembrance of the dead, and the various “blessings” that we intone, as much as we disguise them in non-religious language. Are there also certain “myths,” narratives, or stories we can employ to give greater resonance to our own beliefs? How to do so without straying too far into “religious” practice is, at least for me, a serious issue that we might consider addressing.

A more pragmatic issue that the Blow survey raised for the Society is how to provide a sense of community which goes beyond the Sunday morning meeting and the occasional events. Do we support each other’s efforts by attending programs that are held at other times? (The Good Coffeehouse, which I have only recently attended, but feel I certainly should more often, is an example.) Do we play a role in each other’s lives? Dale McGowan, Carolyn Meiselbach and Annemarie Mogil feel we do (See their comments elsewhere in this issue of “Ethically Speaking.”). But how many of us regularly see each other as an integral part of our social circle? Isn’t that what the Society is for?



**Letters from Members....**

**Dear BSEC Members and Friends:**

I knew I had chosen the right place to join a year ago! I have been out of commission the last month (pacemaker, you know) and have missed some of those wonderful Sundays of being with you. You let me know, however, that I was missed too, with your expressions of concern, calls, cards and letters (and Helen, we’re still looking for that special card you sent to me at BSEC — that was lost). Thanks to all of you.

Thanks especially to folks on the Membership Committee and Lunch w/Bunch who took over for me. You may wonder how I made the usual “buckets” of salad from a Carroll Gardens sick bed each Sunday, but it wasn’t me. Tasha took over that salad-making commitment of mine with skill, aplomb and grace, even though she had to come in a couple of hours earlier and did all her other amazing tasks, too, without missing a beat. Others on the MC committee helped out in my absence, too, with salad, suppers and lunches. Rita, Nancy and Reina, thanks for stepping up and filling in excellently.

I’m happily back making the salad for lunch again and officially greeting you at the front door when you arrive. Others can do it, I know, but it fills me up and it is my way of giving back to all you good people within.

Love, health & joy!  
Carolyn Meiselbach



*(Letters continue on p. 5)*



## Letters

(continued from p. 4)

Already long overdue is my acknowledgement for the extra-special attention that was given to me during my hospital stay last summer. For nearly three months, every Sunday at 10:45 A.M. a delightful call came to me from our 10 o'clock circle. The phone was passed to each member, giving me greetings and well-wishes. How I looked forward to those expressions of caring and love! What this did for my morale was immeasurable.

The CSA also came to me represented by Kevin and his family. The 6-foot scroll that they created for me was taped on the wall above my bed, giving me unending pleasure. Hardly a day passed without receiving calls and get-well wishes from so many dear friends.

There was no better medicine given to me than the love and affection expressed by all. I thank my BSEC Extended Family.

Annemarie Mogil

## In Praise of BSEC: Comments by Ethical parenting Expert Dale McGowan



Dale McGowan author of *Parenting Beyond Belief* and 2008 Harvard Humanist of the Year spoke at BSEC on March 28-29, 2009. Afterward, he made the following comments on his blog.

I've met an organization founded on free-thought principles that seems to get humanistic community precisely right. It's the Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture, host of my seminar and talk last weekend, and the single most effective humanistic community I have ever seen. So what do they have going for them?

My top ten list:

10. **A great space.** Not every group can meet in a neo-Jacobean mansion with lions guarding the stairs, dark woodwork, high ceilings and art-glass windows but too many groups meet in sterile, fluorescent-lit common rooms ... free of even a scrap of inspiration or warmth.
9. **Music.** When I walked into the Brooklyn Society, a member was playing show tunes on an old upright piano as people stood around chatting and laughing. Twenty minutes before the gathering began, they switched on a CD of jazz standards. Think of what music does for a dinner party, filling in gaps in conversation and casting a glow around the room.
8. **Food.** Everybody loves to eat. All meetings should start with yummy food. Not a box of pink frosted cookies. Food, glorious food.
7. **A call to action.** Have a prominent display calling members to collective social action: a donation box, a chart tracking funds raised, a signup sheet for the next

Habitat for Humanity day. Keep social action as prominent as any intellectual content.

6. **Ritual.** (Uh oh, I lost half the audience.) Ritual doesn't have to mean fuzzy-wuzzy woowoo. In the case of the BSEC, leader Greg Tewksbury started the gathering by yanking on a tubular wind chime that hung at the side of the lectern. He tugged it again at each dividing point in the gathering. Gives a nice sense of rhythm and structure.

5. **Emotion.** Free-thought groups naturally like their intellectual content, but it frequently happens to the complete exclusion of emotional and inspirational elements. BSEC managed to include a constant feeling of emotional warmth without the slightest theistic feel. Since my talk was on parenting, Greg opened by asking those present to turn to the person next to them and share a time they nurtured someone or were nurtured by someone. Five minutes of discussion followed, centered not on debunking this or that but on human emotion.

4. **Symbolism.** Like the UU chalice, the two candles on the lectern were a clear reference to light, warmth, knowledge, and life. Adds a very nice touch. (continued on p. 6)

### The Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture (BSEC)

Lawrence Bush  
Osagyefo Sekou  
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Lisel Burns

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(continued from p. 5)

3. **Diversity.** Most groups I've visited are 80 percent white male. They don't want to be, but they don't know what to do about it. It helps to live in a place like Brooklyn, which made for the most diverse crowd I've addressed in years.

2. **Multiple generations.** I know, chicken and egg. But I cannot begin to tell you what a fabulous sense of community the Brooklyn Society gets from 20 kids running in and out among the legs of the adult members in the half-hour beforehand. And with kids come parents; people in their 20s-40s, another demographic missing from many free-thought groups. Attract families by building community. Build community by doing what's on this list. Especially the next one.

1. **A warm welcome.** This is on the list for a reason. It's no surprise that we rational free-thinking types aren't generally good at sticking our hands out to welcome strangers into a room. I'm terrible at it. But there is no less welcoming feeling than entering a new space full of strangers without anyone saying word one to you. This happens to me all the time as I travel around. I show up, walk in, and am promptly ignored. Ten minutes of awkward pamphlet reading later, someone finally walks up and asks if I'm new to the group. Not at the Brooklyn Society. No fewer than five warm and pleasant people welcomed me in the first five minutes and chatted me up BEFORE they even knew I was the speaker. If I lived in Brooklyn, the Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture would get my sorry butt out of bed every single Sunday. And that's saying something.

For an interview with Dale McGowan see p. 7

### Brooklyn Ethical Hosts Children of Abraham Peace Walk Thursday, June 11, 2009 @ 4pm



All are invited to the 6<sup>th</sup> annual Children of Abraham Peace Walk on Thursday, June 11<sup>th</sup>, which opens with festivities at the Al Noor School (675 4<sup>th</sup> Ave near 21<sup>st</sup>) at 4pm. The walk itself begins at 5:15, stopping at congregations along the way before ending at Brooklyn Ethical at 6:50 for food, poetry, and a showing of the documentary City of Light about the pre-Medieval age of understanding among Muslim, Jewish and Christian faiths.

The Peace Walk is an important moment for people of all backgrounds to gather, break bread together, meet one another, and make visible the desire for peace in our communities and among nations. Brooklyn Ethical was one of the founding congregations of the walk in the post-9/11 period and is proud to host this year's closing activities. People of all ages are welcome to join the walk or just come for the evening fellowship.



## Announcements

### Summer Fling Picnic & Barbecue Sunday, June 28th

12:20pm-3:30pm BSEC Garden  
Celebrating all our efforts @ BSEC this year!



- \*Meet our new members!
  - \*Intergenerational games!
  - \*Barbecue (meat & vegetarian)
  - \*Music
  - \*Song fest
  - \*Celebration of Joel and Ilona's recent marriage!
- We welcome pot luck donations of fruit/salads/appetizers. *We Hope to See You There!*

### Member Circle Every Sunday @ 10:00am (BSEC Library)

Every Sunday morning, before the platform meeting, a number of members get together to share "what is alive" for each of us. This can be a check-in on how we're doing and/or what ethical dilemmas/issues/challenges may be stirring in us. On the last Sunday of every month we open our doors to non-members--so please come on by and join us! The next one is **June 28, 2009**. Contact Tasha at 917 613 4207



### Compassionate Communication

BSEC Member Diane Kirschner leads the BSEC Compassionate Communication (also referred to as Nonviolent Communication-NCV) group on Sundays, twice a month, and has been studying and practicing NVC since 2004.



### Family HEART Camp (Harmony Ease - Authenticity - Respect - Trust)

July 10-18, 2009

Would families in your community enjoy having more...HEART in their relationships? Then tell them about Family HEART Camp - an unforgettable one-week immersion in Nonviolent Communication for families, held in an oasis of natural beauty 35 miles south of Washington, D.C. For more information--  
[www.familyheartcamp.org](http://www.familyheartcamp.org)



## Excerpts from An Interview with Dale McGowan

Author, *Raising Ethical Children*

You can learn more about Dale McGowan and his work at [www.parentingbeyondbelief.com](http://www.parentingbeyondbelief.com).

(<http://friendlyatheist.com/2007/07/26/interview-with-dale-mcgowan-author-of-parenting-beyond-belief/>).



**Hemant Mehta:** Were you raised with or without religion? How did it impact your childhood?

**Dale McGowan:** I was raised in what is surely the most common religious environment in the US: the nominally Christian home. We attended a UCC church and my brothers and I received the general message from our folks that religion is a good thing. I didn't wonder about religious questions too much during my early years—but fortunately doubt was not specifically stigmatized and learning was prized, so when the window did open up, I was able to think clearly.

My dad died when I was thirteen, and boom—I was full of questions. I read the entire Bible in a year . . . found it indistinguishable from the Greek and Roman myths I loved and began to ask a more interesting question — why do other people believe this? A more orthodox upbringing could have prevented that question entirely.

**HM:** What are the challenges faced by parents trying to raise their children without religion?

**DM:** Top five:

- (1) Helping children to be freethinkers in a world that stigmatizes and fears religious doubt.
- (2) Teaching empathy for those who have not found their way out of religious mythology. This is made especially difficult because so many of us fail in that empathy.
- (3) Being honest about our own opinions and values without indoctrinating our kids.
- (4) The relative lack of infrastructure and resources for secular families.
- (5) The eventual plunging of my soul into a lake of fire.

Many people assume that the topic of death must be an enormous challenge for secular parents. I expected it to be, and it's just not the case . . . The end of life is a common source of questions and wonder for my kids. We talk about it as if we were talking about digestion or planetary motion—as if it were a fascinating fact of life, which it is. Present something as a normal and appropriate thing to ponder and kids—those resilient little creatures—will accept it as normal and appropriate to ponder.

**HM:** What do the contributors to the book say regarding aspects of childhood such as belief in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy?

**DM:** We model free-thought values by presenting two contrasting opinions on the Santa myth. In his essay “Put the Claus Away,” Tom Flynn strongly opposes the Santa story, suggesting that it is a lie, teaches kids to be gullible, promotes fear and acquisitiveness, and actually prepares kids for religious belief. I wrote a counterpoint suggesting that the Santa myth—and its ultimate debunking—constitutes the greatest possible dry run for debunking religious mythologies. “Our culture has constructed a silly and temporary myth parallel to its silly and permanent one,” and the one with an expiration date in mid-childhood can prepare us for the other.

## BSEC Members Lobby to End Mayoral Control of NYC Schools



Four BSEC members, Ellen Raider, Warren Miner, Rita Wilson, and Alan Umlas joined two busloads of parent/community activists on a trip to Albany to let legislators know that the current system of Mayoral control of our public schools is not working for the majority of the children in the system.

The No to Mayoral Coalition organized the daylong trip on Tuesday, May 19<sup>th</sup>. The newly formed coalition represent many groups who are united in their objection to mayoral control and united in principles of unity for a new kind of system. Ellen and Warren have been keeping the BSEC Ethical Action Committee informed and involved in the coalition's activities.

The law that gave the mayoral control of the schools will “sunset” at the end of June. The legislature will have to decide whether to keep it as it is, mend it or end it.

“We want a *partnership* among the parents, their community and the school system not top down control by a mayor who believes his ‘business model’ will solve the deep systemic problems plaguing our schools and society.” Ellen said. “Our children are not widgets, schools should not be test prep factories.”

Rita, Warren, Ellen and Alan met several Brooklyn legislators during their 4-hour stay in the capitol. They told personal stories of what is not working and talked about the what unites the group.

In addition to school/community partnership, the Coalition is asking for Parent and Student Unions and training academies so parents and students can be full and knowledgeable partners in making decisions that effect them.

When asked by a parent why she was involved even though her children were grown, Ellen said because it is the right thing to do. In a nice reply, the parent said, *Oh, right, you're Ethical Culture!* — Ellen Raider, Ethical Action Committee

## Is Ethical Culture a Religion?

By Lawrence Bush, 2009 Fellow



“We want not religion as a duty, but duty as a religion.”

—Felix Adler, *Creed and Deed*, 1877

The Ethical Culture Movement is defined as a religion for purposes of tax exemption, but does this status with the Internal Revenue Service translate into a sensibility for members of the movement? When someone asks a BSEC member about his or her religious affiliation, is it an appropriate reply to say, “I’m an Ethical Culturalist”? — and would most of our members be willing to identify themselves that way, accepting the “religious” label?

Many Ethical Culture members are atheists or agnostics. Notwithstanding their standards of inclusivity and diversity within BSEC, they are uncomfortable thinking of themselves as religious, which they identify as requiring some kind of faith in a supernatural deity and devotion to a particular dogma. Yet within the world of humanistic movements, it is, arguably, those groups that adopt the trappings, if not the name, of “religion” — a congregational structure, trained leaders, a calendar of ritual observance, a way to mark life passages — that have most thrived and grown beyond the status of an intellectual or political salon into living communities.

Should people who have no faith in a supernatural deity nevertheless place themselves and their institutions outside the boundaries of “religion”? Do we give “aid and comfort” to religious fundamentalism by speaking the language of religion, however radical or non-theistic our interpretations?

To me, “religion” is a word that we should, indeed, claim as our own. “Religion” is the zone in which we come together to celebrate and cultivate our sense of interconnection (i.e., to experience spirituality), to discuss issues of meaning, morality, and ethics, and to take on the discipline of shaping our lives to reflect our values. In an era in which human power now truly rivals nature as *the* monumental, earth-shaping (and possibly earth-destroying) power because of our sheer numbers and our outrageously sophisticated technological capacities, these issues — which boil down to *What should we do with our power?* and *How can we live together most successfully?* — are of enormous significance.

Who else is there to lead such discussions? Governments? The United Nations? Corporate boards? NGOs? Universities? The mass media? Each of these bodies has a significant role to play (and few are playing it well) in helping us discuss not only what we *can* do with our power, but what we *should* do — but each is also seriously compromised by self-interest, corruption, bureaucracy, and other limiting factors. Religious institutions therefore remain among the few places in which ethical inquiries are regularly made about the way we want to live our lives.

Of course, religion commoditized as dogma can be as harmful or useless as any other unrecyclable product. In particular, religion concerned more with the after-life than with the world in which we live can actually distract us from the conversations we need to be having. Humanistic religion, however — which places “God” to the side and is worldly rather than other-worldly — is vital today. Rather than surrendering the label “religion” to the forces of religious reaction, I think the Ethical Culture society should proudly and loudly call itself a “religion” — while explaining to whomever is listening that “religious” is shorthand for the conscious exploration of issues of meaning, aspiration, dignity, and social responsibility. What do you think?



**Women for Afghan Women  
2009 Peace Site Award  
Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture  
June 21, 2009**

Every year, the Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture recognizes the strength of some group or person struggling for peace. The 2009 Peace Site award, given by the Ethical Action Committee on behalf of the Brooklyn Society, will be awarded on Sunday, June 21, 11am, to Women for Afghan Women, a Queens-based organization committed to ensuring the human rights of Afghan women.

Women for Afghan Women is a grassroots organization that promotes and protects human rights for Afghan women. Having worked in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban, they have been direct witnesses both to the post-Taliban revitalization of Afghan society and the current deterioration of conditions in the country.

With most of its staff in Afghanistan, Women for Afghan Women (WAW) creates and helps support schools for girls where there were none, and the development of vocational training and education for women, as well as, health facilities, counseling, and safe spaces for women threatened with violence. They "advocate for the full inclusion of women in all aspects of Afghan life" and hope to "keep alive and vibrant the discourse of human rights for women in an Islamic context."

As *Nation* columnist Katha Pollit, an advisory committee member of Women for Afghan Women, noted in January, "The vast majority [of Afghan Women] are still desperately poor, lacking in everything needed for a decent life, from healthcare and food to human rights and employment. On a tiny budget, this group of Afghan and non-Afghan women from the New York area funds an impressive variety of grassroots projects," Including the following:

- ★ ninety-eight literacy classes for girls and women all over Afghanistan;
- ★ five primary schools in refugee camps;
- ★ emergency aid for 3,000 refugee families;
- ★ educational scholarships;
- ★ carpet-weaving classes for women and various projects of the Ministry of Women's Affairs;
- ★ in the works are plans for computer classes and for income-generating projects like beekeeping and poultry raising.

With all the news about war in Afghanistan, it is hard to gain clarity about what war really means. It's difficult for us here in the United States to imagine what it means to be a woman in Afghanistan, a country where women are widely viewed as the property of men and as such can be raped, tortured, sold, traded, enslaved, trafficked, murdered—all with impunity.

Women for Afghan Women has responded to this situation by starting not only schools and clinics but Family Guidance Centers in Kabul, Mazar and Kapisa. These Family Centers are filled with women and girls—children really—who have been subjected to all these horrors and have little if any recourse to law. The group has formed cooperatives where women so that women barred from employment by Taliban and tribal traditions can make a living from their sewing and embroidery skills, weaving, canning and baking. All learning and working together do so under grave threat from those who do not want girls and women to be educated or be self-supporting.

How will progress be achieved in Afghanistan? Listen to the words of Women for Afghan Women:

"How do we progress from women who are property and without rights to women who are respected as human beings? Certainly not by giving up. Certainly not by expecting deep and lasting change in a few years. Not by arming the militias or negotiating with the Taliban. We get there over decades and with patience, not by military means alone, but by heeding the immediate needs of the people, which have been largely ignored for eight years. By demanding a government in Afghanistan that is free of corruption. Afghans desperately want this. By giving people work so they can support their families and aren't forced by dire poverty into the arms of welcoming Taliban. By building schools for girls, by developing public health, especially for women, by promoting the rule of law throughout the country. By making sure that a portion of the funding allocated for Afghanistan finds its way to the children begging on the streets, to the women who turn to prostitution because they have no place to live, who die in childbirth in greater numbers than anywhere on earth because there is no doctor for them or because they are too young to bear children. The Afghan people do not want the Taliban. They want these things. If we waste more time before helping them as they need to be helped, we hurt them and we hurt ourselves. And we will surely come to regret our foolish mistakes once again."

This powerful sense of urgency, touches our hearts, compels us into action and challenges our ethical sense and moral vision, it is, indeed, time to counter the foolish mistakes of the past. This is why we support Women for Afghan Women.

— Greg Tewksbury and Abby Scher, Co-Chairs  
BSEC Ethical Action Committee





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