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## **ATHEISM WITH A SMILE**

**By David Gibson**

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**W**hen Ellen Johnson walks into the room the first thing you notice is that she looks nothing like the last grande dame of free-thinking atheism, Madalyn Murray O'Hair. Johnson is a tall, blonde, Angie Dickinson-slim "soccer mom" (her words) from Rockaway Township who is dressed, on a spring day in Piscataway, where she has convened a national gathering of American Atheists Inc., in a pastel outfit with matching pumps. O'Hair was an unkempt, bullhorn of a woman who reveled in her role as the most hated woman in America, an epithet she earned for winning the 1963 Supreme Court case that banned prayer from the public schools and made her a celebrity.

From then until the day she mysteriously vanished four years ago, O'Hair was atheism in America, and her creation, American Atheists, was a major force in keeping religion out of public life—and in tweaking America's delicate religious sensibilities. "We find the Lord's prayer to be that muttered by worms groveling for meager existence in a traumatic, paranoid world," O'Hair wrote in a typical salvo published in *Life* in the early sixties. For decades, O'Hair was a cantankerous favorite of the TV talk-show circuit who could curse like a sailor and counted pornographer Larry Flynt among her allies. Then in August 1995 she vanished from her Texas home along with her son, Jon Garth Murray, 42; her granddaughter, Robin Murray-O'Hair, 32; and \$629,500 in American Atheists' funds.

Enter Ellen Johnson. A longtime member of American Atheists' executive board and a personal friend of O'Hair's, Johnson was drafted to lead the organization out of the wilderness where O'Hair had dumped it—to tone it down, polish it up, and make it newly palatable to the mainstream. "We're civil rights workers, is what we are, working for a cause that's very important," Johnson says, pitching hers as a defense of a besieged minority in a religion-mad world. "It's not something I want to do for the rest of my life, but I will if I have to. I wouldn't abandon it." But the question is whether anyone, even this Martha Stewart of atheism, can save what used to be the most venerable, visible manifestation of unbelief in the nation's history.

Johnson has made a promising start, bringing the organization's shaky finances under control, stanching the hemorrhaging membership, and reorganizing some of the state directors that O'Hair had swept aside in her mania for total control. And in the most public sign that life for American Atheists will go on after Madalyn, Johnson moved the group's headquarters from Austin, Texas, the buckle of the Bible Belt, to what she hopes will be more receptive environs in Cranford, New Jersey. "People up here are less inhibited," says American Atheists' treasurer Dick Hogan, a pleasant, good ol' boy from Texas who is, all accounts, as wily as a card sharp when it comes to stewarding the organization's shaky finances "People here are more intelligent."

The new office is close to New York, the nation's media center, and to Washington, where American Atheists hope to establish a political foothold. Just as important, it is an easy commute for Johnson, who many atheists look to as the savior of their band. "We're changing our image," says John Obst, the group's Maryland state director. "Madalyn had her way, Ellen has her way. There's a very positive attitude now. The organization is more upbeat."

**A**nd so it was that on Good Friday, when most of the country is solemnizing the Crucifixion, Johnson unveils the new and improved version of American Atheists in a meeting room at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Piscataway. At first, it feels a lot like the old version, complete with O'Hair's acute sense of both persecution and privilege and her unapologetic disdain for faith. Bumper stickers still proclaim "Jesus is Lard" and posters show a God-like figure sodomizing Uncle Sam. "Religion is really the culture of death," Ron Barrier, the national spokesman for American Atheists and its savviest promoter, tells the 75 attendees during a rambling attack against Christianity's sacred holiday. "This weekend is a zombie festival predicated on death."

Johnson's keynote address is largely a polemic against the prevailing religious culture. "From cradle to grave, religious superstition pervades our lives and it is not by accident, my friends," she says. She warns the delegates against believing stories of deathbed conversion by atheists who are "totally blitzed" on morphine. "The incidence of atheists becoming religious is about as frequent as that of homosexuals going straight," Johnson says. And she ridicules the notion that students might want school prayer. "The very same students who go to schools with rings in their tongues and lips? Oh, puh-leeze!"

Flashing the techniques and scorn of a southern televangelist, Johnson runs down the standard litany of school prayer abuses, reading testimonials from victimized atheists and, to the delight of the 75 delegates scattered in half the available seats, making easy fun of religious belief.

But hints of a new tack were also discernible, from the baby boomer-friendly theme Johnson chose for the gathering—"Supporting Our Atheist Youth and

Families”—to her insistence on setting aside a room for day care, where an atheist Mrs. Doubtfire tenderly watches over the next generation of free-thinkers, keeping them occupied by playing a video of *Ghostbusters* over and over.

In this post-Madalyne era the difference is style rather than substance. In place of a bilious O’Hair stands a 44-year-old housewife with the demeanor of a den-mother and the determination to run the convention her own way. She banishes two protesters from PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), not because their sign billing Jesus as a vegetarian might offend but because they’re tacky. One protester dressed like a cow.

Johnson’s style is especially eye-catching because atheists tend to be a geeky bunch—scientists and computer technicians whose fashion sense runs more to Trekkies than Talbot’s. Not so Ellen Johnson. On the second day of the convention she wears a striking pink suit, and at the banquet that night stunning evening attire.

But the charm offensive has also worked in substantial ways. Johnson has established a Washington lobbying office and earlier this year she snared New Jersey Congressman Russ Holt, the Democrat and physicist who defeated Christian rightist Mike Pappas, to address the organization. Last year the federal government flew Johnson to Seattle to testify on religion and public schools at a hearing of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. “We think we can appeal to people in a way that we didn’t before,” Hogan says. “We don’t want to be as harsh a movement as we were before.”

**A**t first blush there seems little in Ellen Johnson’s résumé to herald her role as O’Hair’s successor, and Johnson she doesn’t shed much light life. She won’t tell you where she lives, much less allow you near her house, and she gets really bugged if you ask about her children or her husband. “If I say two words about him he’ll freak,” she says, freaking a bit herself.

But from interviews with Johnson and a variety of other sources and records, her background can be sketched in. She grew up in Midland Park, New Jersey, in the late fifties and early sixties—the high-water mark of churchgoing in the United States. Her hometown remains 96 percent white and largely Republican despite the changes in America’s social topography; Midland Park has at least nine churches for its 7,000 residents. “We were surrounded by Lutherans and Catholics,” Johnson says. “I was happy that I wasn’t what they were.” She says her parents were atheists, even if though they didn’t label themselves that way. “It’s almost like growing up gay,” she says. “You know you’re different...” In high school she sang in the chorus but mainly worked on population and women’s issues. Her senior picture in the 1973 yearbook shows a post-Twiggy blonde with the studied allure of the wannabe adult, and beneath a quotation from a famous—and famously irascible—humanist, George Bernard Shaw: “The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them but to be indifferent to them.”

Indifference wasn't Ellen's problem; She wanted to save the world. She majored in environmental science at Ramapo College and earned a second degree in political science and a master's from the New School. She was headed for law school when, as she says, "I got tired of school." It wasn't until she saw O'Hair on television in 1978 that she discovered herself. "Oh, that's what I am," Johnson recalls thinking. "She was absolutely right on everything she had to say. I was hooked." O'Hair had won another convert, and when the two women met at the home of a mutual friend in New Jersey, they took a shine to each other.

Today Johnson lives in an elegantly appointed home on a winding road in predominantly white and Republican Rockaway Township and drives her two children to soccer games, piano lessons and dance classes in a sport-utility vehicle. She swears that it wasn't her plan to be American Atheists' savior, post O'Hair. After O'Hair disappeared the board drafted Johnson to take over, telling her that the organization wouldn't survive without her leadership. It was still a close call.

**B**y the time O'Hair vanished, her best days and those of American Atheists were behind her. She was a ponderous, ailing and bitter 77-year-old who many believed had driven her organization into the ground. In fact, her disappearance quickly became as enthralling as her presence ever had been. Countless news reports put O'Hair in Mexico, New Zealand, even Tahiti, living the good life on money donated by credulous freethinkers. O'Hair loyalists prefer a conspiracy angle, noting that she disappeared just before the Pope's arrival in New Jersey, an event she had planned to picket, "which leads one to believe something happened," says Piscataway atheist Lance Wilhelm, a lab technician whose favored scenarios include a government-inspired plot or one orchestrated by the Vatican.

The most likely theory is the simplest: Madalyn, Jon and Robin were killed for money, according to the assertions of some authorities. Whatever happened, it left American Atheists rudderless, and while everyone speculated and snickered about O'Hair's whereabouts, Johnson stepped in to remake the organization in her own image. She has made inroads; she says that American Atheists now has 2,500 members, an increase from the group's low of 1,400, though still a far cry from the fanciful 70,000 that O'Hair liked to claim. But further gains may be hard to come by.

For one thing, America remains a fiercely religious country. Forget what the Religious Right tells you, and for that matter, what American Atheists says about its alleged 25 million humanist sympathizers in the United States. In reality, 95 percent of Americans consistently profess a belief in a higher power. A recent review of general social surveys from the past twenty years indicate that less than one percent of Americans consider themselves real atheists, certain that God and an afterlife do not exist. And atheism, like Marxism and pacifism,

remains a luxury of the privileged. Atheists are largely white, older, and well-educated; hardly any minority members or anyone under 50 attended the Piscataway convention last spring, and they don't like to get their hands dirty. "American Atheists has thousands of members but very few activists," concedes Dave Silverman, the group's New Jersey state director.

The movement has also been damaged by nasty squabbles among various secularist groups, feuds once fomented largely by O'Hair, who managed to alienate even her own followers. Tensions erupted in the early eighties when O'Hair, during the last American Atheist national convention held in New Jersey, disbanded all state chapters, ordering them to liquidate their assets and send her the money. "She stormed in and excommunicated everyone," recalls Marie Castle, who witnessed what became known among atheists as the Jersey Massacre. "Madalyn and Jon were really obnoxious. The chapters said 'The hell with you' and left."

Castle went on to found the Atheist Alliance, while other dissidents coalesced into groups like Atheists United. Both are larger than American Atheists, which under Johnson has reestablished only seventeen state directors. None of the three groups is as large as the two other main rationalist movements, the American Humanists Association and the Council for Secular Humanism. And no one seems eager to join forces with American Atheists—not that Johnson's group is making overtures.

Most urgent for her now is straightening out the financial mess O'Hair left behind. "I want money and power and I am going to get it," O'Hair once wrote in her diaries, and she allegedly fulfilled her ambition on the backs of her followers, plundering the organization's accounts to support a lifestyle that included \$1,000-a-day vacations, mink coats and expensive cars. Yet she still owed more than \$250,000 when she vanished.

Johnson says that the group's finances are under control and that she can attract more members by focusing American Atheists' agenda on the church-state issues that have critical to lobbies like the American Civil Liberties Union. But she may be too late. While American Atheists floundered, the other secularist groups established themselves as the serious advocates of the cause. They set the free-thought standard, advancing secularism's serious intellectual, educational and political traditions. In contrast, Johnson's group comes off like a bunch of wacky cousins. "If the separation of church and state were left up to the atheists, we wouldn't have separation of church and state," says Rob Boston, assistant communications director for Americans United For The Separation of Church and State. Anne Gaylor, head of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, echoes that view: "We stay at arm's length from American Atheists," she says.

**I**n the end, success for American Atheists may depend upon a reinvention of the O'Hair formula: relentless self-promotion. History shows that atheist movements

in America usually grow up around charismatic leaders then die with them. Johnson hopes to avoid that fate by courting the public without offending. "I was very much influenced by their style in the beginning," Johnson says, referring to O'Hair and her son Jon. "Then I realized I'm not them and I can't be like them. Right or wrong, I'm just not comfortable being antagonistic."

She needs to work on her execution, though. When Johnson was rebuffed by *Nightline* producers because she attached a series of conditions to her planned appearance, she fired off a dense four-page protest that included remarks like, "Why should American Atheists provide ABC with millions of dollars in advertising revenues?" Any whiff of criticism of her or O'Hair provokes complaints about society's dislike of strong women. "The emphasis is always on the negative...It's like how Barbra Streisand always gets trashed," Johnson says during an interview at the Staten Island studio where she tapes *Atheist Viewpoint*, a cable show she and Barrier host several times a year. Primped and polished as always, it's easy to see why Johnson has been likened to a television host. The studio is the only venue where she has agreed to answer questions, and only after lengthy efforts to secure her cooperation. She explains that the burdens of being a working mother leave her no time.

"It's seven days a week, morning, noon, and night," referring to her job with American Atheists, which pays a meager \$10,000 a year. "It just doesn't stop. It's constant. In your free time you're reading. It's just a whole lot of people."

Complaints notwithstanding, Johnson vows to keep the faith. "My atheism is something that I hold very dear to my heart. It has enriched my life and made me a better person, which is why I have spent the last twenty years of my life working to share the 'good word' or 'good news' of atheism, to put a twist on a typical religious phrase."

**O**n Easter Sunday, while the FBI tries to dig up Madalyn Murray O'Hair on a cattle ranch in Texas, Ellen Johnson is in Cranford doing her best to bury her. It is the closing day of the New Jersey American Atheists convention, and Johnson is determined to make it special by hosting a ribbon-cutting ceremony to inaugurate the group's new national headquarters. "What you see before us is a very real symbol of the new direction our organization will take in the months and years ahead," Johnson tells the group before snipping the silver streamer.

Her role seems akin to the harried social director for the *Love Boat*. She chartered a bus to bring the delegates from Piscataway to Cranford for a tour of the new facilities, still being prepped to house Johnson's office and a "free-thought" library with 68,000 volumes and a lighter from Bertrand Russell. "Come on in, walk around!" she urges the delegates.

During a buffet lunch, two veteran atheists waiting on line for food decry the Salvation Army soup kitchens that make the destitute sing hymns for their

supper. "It's a tragedy," says one man, dressed in a gentlemanly tweed vest and rep tie. After the meal, Johnson shouts to the milling assemblage. "We'll be getting back on the bus at 3 pm, but do one thing first: Help me clean up."

Before pitching in, Roland Gervais, a 30-year member of American Atheists, pauses to savor Johnson's orderly, camp-counselor style. "Every movement needs a confrontational leader at the beginning," he says, defending the contentious O'Hair. "We don't need that now. We're more about acceptance."

Over Gervais' shoulder, Johnson rattles off a schedule of upcoming events, including protests, meetings and a summer solstice barbecue. "Oh, one more thing," she says. "We're going bowling tonight! Anyone interested should meet in the lobby at 5:30 pm."

Atheists? Bowling? The delegates exchange worried glances, and you have to believe that whatever her fate, Madalyn Murray O'Hair never figured the afterlife to be like this.

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