

RONALD A. LINDSAY: Humanism and Politics

FREE INQUIRY

CELEBRATING REASON AND HUMANITY

August/September 2012 Vol. 32 No.5



SECULAR HUMANISM WITH A PULSE: The New Activism From Confrontation to Community Service, Finding Ways to Engage

CHRIS MOONEY | ARTHUR CAPLAN | KATRINA VOSS
P Z MYERS | SIKIVU HUTCHINSON

TOM FLYNN: Are LGBTs Saving Marriage?



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Ronald A. Lindsay

Editorial

Humanism and Politics

In the United States, politics dominates the news as we gear up for the fall elections. Not only will we have to decide on a president, but there are contests for Congress and most state legislatures, as well as state referenda on numerous issues, some of which have important public policy implications. It's at times like these when I often hear discussed the question of whether being a humanist commits one to certain political positions. For example, given some of the positions of the Republican Party on social issues, is it inconsistent to be both a Republican and a humanist?

First, let me make clear that I am not asking whether it is inconsistent to be an atheist and a Republican or a nontheist and a Republican. Those questions would be easy to answer. There is no inconsistency. Atheism does not entail acceptance of any political position. (Aside: this is one reason I find the existence of the National Atheist Party more than a little curious.) One can even reject the separation of church and state and be an atheist. As one (cynical) atheist once remarked to me, "Just because there is no God doesn't mean people don't need religion." I suspect many of the Wall Street financiers who donate generously to presidential campaigns of candidates supported by the religious Right have an attitude similar to this: "Of course, religion is just mumbo-jumbo, but we need it to keep the 99 percent under control."

Most humanists are atheists, but they are not merely atheists. As the Council for Secular Humanism proclaims, humanism is "beyond atheism, beyond agnosticism." In other words, being a humanist implies not only rejection of deities and spirits but also acceptance of certain fundamental principles.

Prominent among these principles are commitments to critical thinking, respect for individual autonomy, and an ethics that is broadly consequentialist in nature. Moreover, we humanists are firmly committed to a strict separation of church and state; among other reasons, we value individual liberty, and religious dogma has proven harmful to human interests when it has been allowed to influence public policy.

For these reasons, it would be difficult to reconcile an embrace of humanism with opposition to, for example, contraception, same-sex marriage, cohabitation without marriage, laws and regulations that protect and promote racial and gender equality, freedom of expression, and universal suffrage. If we truly respect individual autonomy, we must allow individuals the freedom to give shape and direction to their own lives, especially with respect to critical, life-altering choices, such as whether and whom to marry and whether or not to bear children. We also must ensure that individuals have the opportunity to pursue a livelihood without restrictions based on characteristics

such as race or sex. It is also important that every adult have the right to participate in political life and have a role in deciding who our legislators and chief executive should be.

There are also issues on which most humanists agree and with respect to which there is at least a strong presumption in favor of a certain position. Legalization of physician assistance in dying for the terminally ill, aka physician-assisted suicide, is one such issue. Certainly, a humanist cannot oppose legalization based on a quasi-religious notion such as the sanctity of life. However, I have known humanists who oppose legalization based on speculation about the harms that might follow legalization, such as pressure on patients to request assistance in dying or a decline in the quality of health care for those with terminal illnesses. The evidence from Oregon and Washington (the two states where assistance in dying is currently legal) indicates that these concerns are probably unwarranted, but it would not be irrational for a humanist to oppose legalization as the evidence cannot be said to preclude completely the possibility of significant harm.

Effectively, that is the key to determining whether a policy position—call it position A—is consistent with humanism: Is position A supported by evidence-based reasoning? To be more precise: Is there an argument supported by some plausible set of facts and sound, secular, evidence-based reasoning that position A will cause less harm than position B, and is position A as respectful of fundamental freedoms and individual autonomy as possible? As humanists may disagree about the facts relevant to resolution of a particular issue, it's not only possible but inevitable that there will be a number of issues on which humanists differ.

This brings me back to my initial question about the consistency of being a humanist and being a Republican. In answering this question, it must be admitted that in recent decades the Republican Party has been heavily influ-

enced by the religious Right and has adopted policies antithetical to humanism. If we limited our examination of Republican Party positions to its stance on certain key social issues and the extent to which government can support religious institutions, then we might be tempted to conclude that there is a severe tension between being a Republican and being a humanist.

However, the Republican Party's position on social issues, such as abortion and same-sex marriage, represent only a fraction of the entire Republican Party platform. The 2012 platform was not completed and approved as of the time of this writing, but a review of the 2008 Republican platform (available online at

“ . . . Given some of the positions of the Republican Party on social issues, is it inconsistent to be both a Republican and a humanist?”

www.gop.com/2008Platform/2008platform.pdf) reveals that only about five of its fifty-five pages were devoted to policies on “Preserving Our Values.” The rest of the platform dealt with national defense, foreign policy, the budget process, fiscal policy, entitlement funding, taxation, government regulation, energy policy, immigration, health care, and about a dozen other issues, including relatively narrow questions such as governance in U.S. territories.

Because humanists place great weight on individual autonomy, it is not surprising that there is a tendency to focus on policies that restrict our ability to make our own decisions about children

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The mission of the Council for Secular Humanism is to advocate and defend a nonreligious life stance rooted in science, naturalistic philosophy, and humanist ethics and to serve and support adherents of that life stance.



and marriage and seek to impose religious dogma on us. We don't like theocrats in our bedrooms. But precisely how much weight one should give to these social issues is not something addressed by humanism. Some humanists might view policies relating to national defense, entitlement funding, and taxation as being relatively more important than policies relating to same-sex marriage or the availability of contraception. It would not be irrational to come to such a conclusion. In other

“If we limited our examination of Republican Party positions to its stance on certain key social issues and the extent to which government can support religious institutions, then we might be tempted to conclude that there is a severe tension between being a Republican and being a humanist.”

words, one can be a humanist and a Republican—although presumably a Republican not altogether pleased with the party's stance on some significant social issues.

I have spent some time on this question because, in my discussions with individuals about the work of the Council and the Center for Inquiry, it is not infrequently assumed—especially during a presidential election year—that humanists constitute a subset of the Democratic Party. As a factual matter, most humanists probably do support Democratic candidates more often than not. But humanism does not compel them to do so. When we say that CFI and the Council for Secular Humanism are nonpartisan

organizations, we do not make that assertion solely to placate the Internal Revenue Service. We really mean it. Humanism is a life stance, but it does not come accompanied by a detailed platform specifying positions on all the issues that a national political party is expected to address.

That's not to say humanism is devoid of public policy implications. To the contrary, both the Council, through the Secular Coalition for America, and CFI, through its own lobbying arm, the Office of Public Policy, have advocated vigorously (and sometimes effectively) for certain specific policies. In doing so, we believe that we have adopted positions that reflect humanist principles and with which most of our supporters would agree. We regard this advocacy work as an important part of our mission, and we also regard the issues that engage us to be important. How these issues ultimately affect an individual humanist's vote, however, is something for that individual to determine. Humanism has no party line.


* * *

Let me turn briefly from domestic politics to a question of international human rights. Again this year, the Center for Inquiry and its affiliates will be commemorating International Blasphemy Rights Day (IBRD) on September 30. When CFI and its affiliates first started to commemorate IBRD in 2009, some tried to trivialize this effort, suggesting that it was worse than pointless (and some of this criticism came from so-called humanists!). Actually, it was very important to call attention to the continuing suppression of speech critical of religion. Events in the last several months have underscored that, if anything, this problem is worse than it was three years ago. In Pakistan, one

can lose one's life by merely suggesting that its blasphemy laws should be reformed, and both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have reacted harshly to “tweets” that were alleged to have defamed “the Prophet.” In Indonesia, a so-called “moderate” Muslim country, Alexander Aan was attacked and beaten by a mob and then placed under arrest on a charge of blasphemy after he declared he was an atheist on Facebook. (The outcome of his trial is not known at this time.) And just a couple of days before I started to write this editorial, it was announced that a new book by Muslim author and activist Irshad Manji was banned in Malaysia for being blasphemous and for causing “disturbance to the public.”

Some CFI branches will be holding events to commemorate IBRD (look for e-mail alerts). In addition, we expect to meet with State Department officials this summer to discuss problems relating to international religious freedom.

What can you do? First, if you are not already “out” as an atheist or agnostic, there's no better time to do it than on IBRD. You may have heard: in most Western countries, it's no longer a crime to be an atheist. Sure, you may risk some ostracism, but if people in other countries are willing to risk jail or death to make an honest statement about their beliefs, you can risk a cold shoulder from a neighbor.

Second, keep informed about the persecution of people like Aan. If his case is still pending, or if he has been convicted and sentenced, contact the Asian Human Rights Commission or some other responsible body to protest the government's action. (See CFI's previous news announcement on his case: http://www.centerforinquiry.net/news/urgent_add_your_voice_to_support_jailed_atheist_in_indonesia/.) People everywhere should have the right to express their views about any religious belief. That's what IBRD is all about. 

Ronald A. Lindsay is the president and CEO of the Center for Inquiry, and he has voted for a Republican once in his life.

The Rise of Islamic Creationism, Part 1

A Conversation with Johan Braeckman

*Last May, science journalist Chris Mooney attended the 2012 World Skeptics Congress in Berlin, where he heard disturbing reports of a new form of creationism—namely, Islamic creationism—gaining traction in Europe. There he spoke with Johan Braeckman, who has been following this development closely. Braeckman is a professor of philosophy of science at Ghent University in Belgium, where his research focuses on philosophical issues in the life sciences, particularly evolution and neuroscience. He’s the author of a number of books and papers, including most recently, *Doubting Thomas Has a Point: A Guide to Critical Thinking*, coauthored with Maarten Boudry.—Eds.*



Photo: Mike Chase

CHRIS MOONEY: Islamic creationism is something that you’ve studied a lot. What is the state of affairs? Would you say it’s growing in Europe in particular?

JOHAN BRAECKMAN: We don’t have exact data yet, although research is going on right now. It’s fair to say that it’s definitely growing. More and more people—especially young people, fifteen-, sixteen-, seventeen-year-olds with a Muslim background but already third or fourth generation living in Europe—identify themselves with the Muslim community and Islam. A particular form of creationism is very popular among these young people.

For them the really important thing is that it’s giving them a group identity. You have to defend your colors, and evolutionary theory belongs to the colors of the other team. You can explain the science all you want. It’s not going to work because it’s not about the science for them; it’s about who they are or the way they think they should look at themselves and each other. This is what I’ve encountered quite a few times: say you’re a young European Muslim. You know the science of evolutionary theory is good and decent and sound, and there’s no way that creationism can be considered to be correct. But it’s very hard to tell that

to your friends, who are also Muslim, because it’s like supporting the other team. So I’m cracking my head on how to handle this. It’s sad to see smart young people who might go to a university or college to study science or medicine or so on—that’s not going to happen, because they’re turning themselves into scientific illiterates.

MOONEY: This sounds like many forms of science denial, where it’s really about a belief system. But surely they must put forward “scientific arguments.” Do the arguments sound the same as what you hear in, say, the intelligent design movement in the United States?

BRAECKMAN: They’ll pick whatever they think is usable to support their ideas. Nevertheless, there is a brand of Muslim creationism, and in Europe it’s coming from a man called Harun Yahya. That’s not his real name; this man is actually working with a whole group of people who have been pouring out huge numbers of books, leaflets, pamphlets, DVDs, and other materials. Especially famous, or infamous, is *The Atlas of Creationism*. It is a huge book—it weighs something like six kilograms (13.2 pounds!) and is full of beautiful pictures. Distributed copies may

be in the several hundreds of thousands all over the world—nobody really knows. Also, nobody knows where the money comes from. It must have cost a huge fortune to produce, print, and ship it.

The book contains thousands of pictures of fossils. On every page, you’ll see a fossil and then another picture of an organism of contemporary species. The argumentation is always very short and always the same. It says, “Well, if you look at these two pictures of the fossil and the contemporary organism, you’re going to see no difference, so evolution just didn’t happen.” It’s full of mistakes and inconsistencies. Apparently the authors weren’t able to catch a real fly to make a point about the non-evolution of flies, so they used an artificial fishing fly with a hook.

If you ask Muslims in Europe whether there’s some scientific background for their belief system, they’ll point to Harun Yahya. Now of course this is quite weak, and some of them do realize this, so then they’ll skip to other arguments that you are familiar with in the United States. They’re going to tell you that what they call “Darwinism” was invented by Western Freemasons to attack Islam.

(Continued on page 46)



Are LGBTs Saving Marriage?

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. . . .” That Dickensian chestnut sums up the state of traditional marriage today. Surveys confirm that Americans have less use for the institution than ever. More of us are now single than married. Few progressives get excited about weddings unless they are between two men or two women—in which case they’re not merely exciting but at the spear’s point of social reform.

Which leads me to an ironic prediction. Before long, cultural conservatives may wind up forced to hail same-sex marriage. LGBTs’ new zest for matrimony may be all that rescues this antediluvian custom from extinction.*

“Before long, cultural conservatives may wind up forced to hail same-sex marriage. LGBTs’ new zest for matrimony may be all that rescues this antediluvian custom from extinction.”

In its May-June issue, the *Pacific Standard*—a West Coast thinkpiece magazine formerly known as *Miller-McCune*—inaugurated its new Obituary department, devoted to chronicling the demise of formerly relevant societal ideas. Its headline: “Traditional Marriage: 1600–2011?” Editor Maria Streshinsky summarized a Niagara of survey data showing to what degree

*This represents partial fulfillment of predictions I made in two past *FI* op-eds: “Mixed Blessings,” December 2003/January 2004; and “Two Cheers for Same-sex Marriage,” August/September 2009. Part of this essay appeared as my Center for Inquiry blog “What We’ve Gained—and What We’ve Lost,” May 10, 2012.

matrimony has lost its hammerlock on our culture. “Single parenthood has skyrocketed” and has lost most of its social stigma, she noted, though the economic and developmental challenges dogging one-parent families remain. In one 2010 Pew Research Center Study, four in ten respondents said they already considered marriage obsolete.

Increasingly, matrimony has lost its power as the default state/religious apparatus for sanctioning pair-bonds. “The institution is dying—for the poor,” Streshinsky declared, while for wealthier Americans it has come to serve less as a normative rite than a design platform for celebratory excess.

As I’ve often written, secular humanists—indeed, Enlightenment individualists generally—should hail these developments. There’s something deeply wrong with the idea that free individuals should require the public sanction of the state—or even of their

families and friends—to make their choice of a life-partner “legitimate.” And we should be no less queasy with matrimony’s historic cargo. At its roots it’s a disturbing amalgam of state and religion, a separationist’s nightmare entangled in its pedigree as a sacrament of the church. Anyone who views women as men’s equals should recoil from marriage’s origins as an arrangement for transferring property rights in the bride from her father to her husband. (Which is why the father traditionally “gives away” the bride.) For all these reasons, since the nineteenth-century Golden Age of Freethought, a strain of dogged resistance to matrimony has

run through much atheist and, later, secular-humanist activism.

So, is traditional marriage taking its final blindfolded random walk through a potter’s field of open graves, the lawn between them thickly strewn with banana peels? Surprisingly, probably not. And the institution’s rescue may come from the unlikeliest of quarters: the LGBT community.

However clumsy its timing, however guarded its language, President Barack Obama’s May 9 declaration that he favors same-sex marriage underscored how far the marriage-equality movement has progressed. As several pundits noted, no expansion of rights championed by a sitting president has ultimately failed to become the law of the land.

Fifteen years ago, no LGBT advocate could have imagined that we would be where we are today. Back then, gay activists hoped not to reform marriage but to respond to its presumably irredeemable bigotry and narrowness by supplanting it. They dreamed not of same-sex marriage but of civil unions.

To be frank, civil unions had much to recommend them. Given time and focused activism, it is likely that they would have grown to confer most or all of the same rights granted by traditional matrimony: parental rights, sickroom visitation, health-care decision-making, community property, the right to inherit, and so on. What secular humanists especially liked about civil unions was that they would represent a brand-new institution constructed entirely within the domain of secular law. Civil unions would be as free of matrimony’s tangled roots as they were of its historical negatives. The activists of fifteen years ago dared to

(Continued on page 47)



Gag Me with a Spoon

For doctors, the old saw “Gag me with a spoon” no longer applies. Today it is “Gag me with a (a) toxic chemical, (b) gun, or (c) transvaginal ultrasound probe.” This appears to be the new ethics of medicine for doctors in America. Why are we letting state legislators, religious zealots, and big business tell doctors what they can and cannot talk about with patients and with other doctors? Since when is a government official welcome to dictate the nature of the conversation that goes on between you and your doctor? Since the past few years, which have seen an explosion in both legislative restrictions and mandates on what your doctor can say.

A new law in Pennsylvania, modeled after existing laws in Texas and Colorado, restricts what doctors can say about chemicals used in natural gas drilling or fracking that might be making people sick. Let’s say you think you or your child is sick because of exposure to chemicals in the water or soil near a fracking operation. And let’s say some of those chemicals being used are trade secrets. The law says your doctor can, with some effort, get access to information about the identity of these trade-secret chemicals but can’t tell anyone else—you, your family, or even other doctors—about what he or she thinks it is that might be making you sick! So business, not your doctor, is dictating what is best for your health.

Last year, the Florida legislature passed, and Governor Rick Scott signed, the Firearms Owners’ Privacy Act. That

law made it illegal for physicians to ask patients whether there were guns in their homes. This despite the fact that pediatrics groups recommend that physicians ask patients whether they keep guns at home and discuss gun safety with those who do, in order to prevent shootings involving children. In 2009, according to the CDC, almost four hundred children younger than fifteen years old were killed by the mishandling of firearms.


This muzzle on doctor speech was challenged in court, and a federal judge in Miami ruled the law unconstitutional, but the governor and legislature have vowed to pass another law. So the legislature and the gun lobby are in charge of telling your doctor what to say about how best to protect children’s health in Florida.

And let us not forget about the endless stream of efforts to make doctors do invasive tests and report the results to women seeking abortions. Republican majorities in both chambers in Virginia’s legislature last February passed one of the strictest mandatory pre-abortion ultrasound bills in the nation—a measure that would require women seeking early-stage abortions to submit to being vaginally penetrated by a condom-covered electronic probe and hear a speech about the fetus before an abortion is allowed to proceed. Oklahoma passed a bill allowing abortion providers or those prescribing abortion-

inducing drugs to be sued by if they fail to follow state law that requires that ultrasound imaging and heart-monitoring be done before an abortion is performed, accompanied by the mandatory informed consent speech about the fetus. So even if the woman does not want either the test or the speech, the solons of the Sooner State know better than her.

Such third-party intrusions on the sanctity of the doctor-patient relationship bode ill for both the trust patients have in

“ . . . The past few years . . . have seen an explosion in both legislative restrictions and mandates on what your doctor can say.”

their doctors and for doctors’ ability to do what they deem is best for their patients. The exam room is too small to fit greedy corporate titans, gun nuts, religious zanies, and state officials alongside the doctor and patient. Allowing them to dictate medical practice is simply bad medicine for all of us. 

Arthur L. Caplan is the Sidney D. Caplan Professor of Bioethics and the director of the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

“It is error only, and not truth,
that shrinks from inquiry.”
– Thomas Paine

3
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Atheism's Third Wave

The gods are all dead. Science killed them. When beliefs are tissues of fantasy papering over ignorance, all it takes is honest inquiry to destroy them . . . and what we're seeing now in the centuries after the Enlightenment is an erosion of god-belief. As a scientist, it's hard to avoid bursting out in laughter at the absurdities of sacrificial gods, gods that wobble between interfering pruders who fuss over your sex life and benign cosmic forces that helpfully hold your atoms together. Every public debate on the existence of gods that I've seen is a great joke, consisting of one side sensibly arguing for the obvious, that there is no evidence for divine beings, while the other cavorts entertainingly in twisty flights of convoluted rhetoric and naked appeals to hoary traditions and wishful thinking. It would be hilarious if it weren't for the sad spectacle of so many believers taking bad logic so seriously.

Religion is ridiculous and corrupt. Beyond the concept of a god, the institutions supporting god-belief seem to be imploding in embarrassing ways. The Catholic Church has been exposed as a monstrous organ of depravity that cultivates child rapists. The Protestants have splintered into a thousand sects, most of which seem Elmer Gantryish, dedicated to fleecing the flock and reinforcing their own privileges. Islam spends its time trying to wind the clock back to medieval ignorance, trying to prove that it can be more barbarous than the West, then lashing out violently every time someone points out that it has a habit of lashing out violently. All religions seem focused on enforcing the morality of a century ago, railing against the morality of the now and insisting that they are in charge of morality.

If gods and religion are dead issues, then the activist atheist might wonder, "Well, what are we going to argue about now?" The old arguments will still be useful and important as long as there are believers. Which, I fear, means that the fight will go on forever . . . and it's a good fight, one that steadily exposes people to the unreason of faith and the strength of reason. But there are also new battles to be fought, and I want to argue here that atheists should take these battles seriously and engage in the struggle for social justice—not just as an avocation but as part of our identity as freethinking, rational human beings.

Classical atheism is a narrowly defined style—we focus on the logic of religion and argue in a very bounded way about, for instance, biblical exegesis or internal contradictions of dogma. The "new atheism" (which isn't actually new) invokes science heavily, not just to demonstrate that religious beliefs are wrong but also in a positive, celebratory way—who needs myths when we've got an awesome reality to enjoy? The new atheists also added strong public advocacy to our tactics: religious beliefs matter, they do harm to our culture, and we must oppose them.

I propose that we adopt a third wave of atheism, a socially conscious, activist atheism that combines humanism with the assertiveness of new atheism, that joyfully embraces science and reason and uses them to advance society. And by advancing society, I mean much more than the material advancement of science and technology—we need greater

equality, and we need a deeper appreciation of diversity. We need everyone to participate in building a stronger, more peaceful, more progressive culture—one that recognizes that all of us should have equal opportunities.

I know from experience that such a suggestion will be opposed—"atheism is only about the denial of the existence of gods," some will say, and they will insist that atheism should not be involved in anything beyond opposing god-belief, as if atheism has no deeper implications of any kind. Atheism is treated as a kind of

"I want to argue here that atheists should . . . engage in the struggle for social justice—not just as an avocation but as part of our identity as freethinking, rational human beings."

abstract philosophical exercise, a form to be followed, a debating society where the reward is entirely to be found in demonstrating that you are right and the other person is wrong. (It's curious how, right now, many atheists simultaneously want to claim that they are good without gods while also asserting that atheism is nothing but a simple answer to one question.)

Well, those kinds of atheists are wrong. Atheism is profound in its meaning. How can your life not be affected by

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The State and the Marriage Business

Here in Australia, as in many other parts of the world, there is an ongoing public debate about proposals to extend marriage to same-sex couples. As marriage falls within the federal jurisdiction under the Australian Constitution, this has led to public consultation processes involving the federal houses of Parliament (the House of Representatives and the Senate, not unlike the structure of the U.S. Congress). Predictably, religious organizations have been active in opposing any extension of the concept of marriage to same-sex partnerships, but they do not appear to have popular sentiment on their side.

“Predictably, religious organizations have been active in opposing any extension of the concept of marriage to same-sex partnerships, but they do not appear to have popular sentiment on their side.”

During this debate, I have consistently argued in favor of same-sex marriage, as, indeed, I do in my new book, *Freedom of Religion and the Secular State*. Under current circumstances, the issue of same-sex marriage is an obvious and urgent focus for political attention. In the American context, the urgency is even greater than in Australia, since many important legal rights hinge on the presence of a valid marriage. Industrially advanced countries other than the United States—Australia among them—have been quicker to

extend the same legal rights to *de facto* opposite-sex and same-sex couples. This takes some of the sting from political leaders’ unwillingness to recognize same-sex partnerships as marriages, but still, something smells bad about having a double standard even if all legal rights end up being the same.

Thus, I support moves for liberal democracies to recognize same-sex marriages for those who want them. In our current historical circumstances, the case seems very strong.

At the same time, the current debates have been raising more general questions about the role of the state in the area of marriage and family. Even as I write this, some news coverage is being given to a submission to the Australian Senate by Rebecca and James Dominguez, supposedly the “power couple” of the polyamory community in Australia. They argue for state recognition of same-sex marriage but also, in the longer term (perhaps over a period of decades), for increasing social and perhaps legal recognition of relationships involving multiple parties.

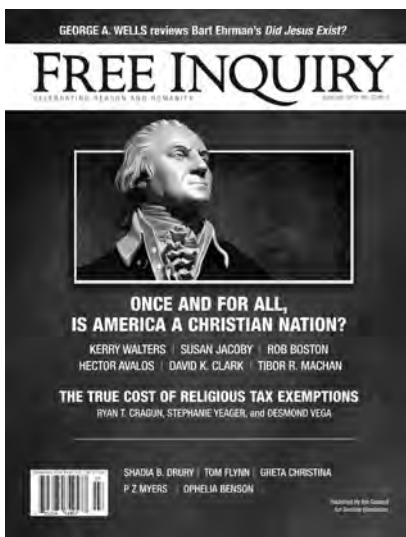
Even before we get to this possibility, there is a lurking question about traditional polygynous marriages, such as those permitted by Islam or those originally authorized by nineteenth-century Mormons (and still by some breakaway Mormon groups). Should these marital arrangements be recognized by the state? Not obviously, to say the least. One powerful reason for recognizing same-sex marriages is that they are likely to resemble the kinds of heterosexual partnerships that are celebrated in the contemporary practice of marriage. Given what marriage has become in

recent centuries—largely a matter of intimacy and companionship—it is now difficult to make a rational distinction based on purely secular reasoning. The equation changes when we start to talk about polygyny.

The state should be very wary about recognizing relationships that tend to involve arranged relationships and patriarchal notions of authority, with little emphasis on romantic love or intimacy or the sort of long-term one-to-one companionship that many of us hope for when we marry. While I don’t argue that polygynous arrangements in themselves, as opposed to the more obvious abuses that are often associated with them (child brides, coercion, and outright rape), should be illegal, there is an important distinction between mere legality and official recognition. After all, same-sex partnerships are not actually illegal in countries such as Australia and the United States (in the latter, this would actually be unconstitutional); nor, however, are they usually recognized as marriages. While we have reached a point where it is anomalous for the state to give its recognition and (secular) blessing to opposite-sex couples who want it but not to same-sex couples, there is no such anomaly in refusing to recognize arrangements that go beyond couples to involve three or more people. Indeed, the state has every reason to be suspicious that women are pressured into polygynous arrangements by families and communities. Public policy should lean toward the protection of women from abuses and unconscionable pressures.

Still, do Rebecca and James Dominguez have a point? Apparently this couple is actually part of a happy and stable group of four or five people (I’m not sure I understand, from the media reports,

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Faith Behind Bars

In "Triple Play: Faith Behind Bars, Measurement in Chains" (*FI*, June/July 2012), Tom Flynn writes that there may be greater than expected religious affiliation reported in the prison inmate population. Much as I would find a wry satisfaction in evidence that religious affiliation correlates positively with crime rates, or at least with conviction rates, I fear that there is a simpler explanation for the apparent religiosity of our incarcerated brethren. Prisoners are as aware as anyone else that the establishment still equates religious affiliation with "good guy" status. It is a simple assumption that the prison administration will look positively upon prisoners who "find God" while incarcerated. Many prisoners sign up for religious affiliation, services, prayer meetings, etc., just to look good to their keepers with the expectation of more favorable treatment, better progress reviews, earlier parole, etc. In short, it is unfair to expect our prison population to be any less hypocritical about religious membership than the population at large.

Ronald Ventola
Flushing, New York

Tom Flynn lets confirmation bias run wild in contriving his far-fetched interpretation of incomplete data supplied by prison chaplains seeking to "measure" inmate religiosity. He follows a line of reasoning that goes something like this: chaplains have observed that inmates are almost certainly more religious than the general population. By implication, religion seems to appeal more strongly to the "criminal" mind than to the "normal" mind and presumably "proves problematic for religious conservatives . . . who claim that faith is necessary for morality."

Curiously omitted from the discussion is any foundational data that fleshes out the demographic profile of the actual inmate population in the United States. This population is 70 percent nonwhite and 40 percent black; only 40 percent have a high-school diploma while 60 percent are deemed functionally illiterate.

Since the early 1970s, the prison population has quintupled to become the largest among world nations because law enforcement has targeted disproportionate numbers of African Americans and Latinos for drug offenses committed in low-income, high-unemployment, inner-city neighborhoods. It seems more reasonable to correlate religious orientations expressed by incarcerated populations with the high levels of religious belief consistently recorded by pollsters within the deprived, dysfunctional and often racially oppressed underclass from which they emerge.

Jim Valentine
Woodland Hills, California

Tom Flynn replies:

There is no question that many prisoners affect religious zeal in the hope of securing better treatment or winning parole. Still, in the small number of surveys that have been able to measure religious belief/affiliation among prisoners, the number of declared believers has been vastly larger than in the general popula-

tion. Typically the divergence is so large as to beggar belief that religious "posing" by advantage-seeking convicts, however widespread, could account all of it. The same was true during the early twentieth century, when outside polling regarding prisoners' religions was still permitted. Despite divergent methodologies, those studies too found levels of piety far in excess of then-current norms. Obviously the ethnic makeup of the inmate pool was far different then, which may or may not speak to reader Jim Valentine's objection.

Humanists on Death

Greta Christina is spot on when she asks "Do we concede the ground of death too easily?" (*FI*, June/July 2012). While I agree with what she says it seems her arguments are unnecessarily complicated and she misses a much simpler point. My question is: What do you *do* in an eternal afterlife? To spend eternity wanting to do something but not having eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and hands to see, hear, smell, taste, and feel so that I can change things seems like the worst possible nightmare. On the other hand, if I had no desire to do anything I might as well be dead.

Vic Arnold
Westerly, Rhode Island

Support for a Nuclear Iran

Apparently, in Shadia Drury's eyes ("American Conceit: The Case of Iran," *FI*, 2012), it is OK for Iran to possess nuclear weapons because the United States has thousands of them and apparently Israel has two to three hundred of them. It would be "suicidal" for Iran to attack Israel because of Israeli retaliation. Furthermore, Ahmadinejad "Hasn't threatened to wipe out Israel, only to put an end to the Zionist state." Furthermore, she alleges that he has not

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Sloppy-Seconds Atheists

Sometimes evolution seems to bestow a sort of karmic recompense upon certain hard-working members of a species. Sometimes the individual who demonstrates the greatest Protestant work ethic will, in fact, reap the greatest reward. A male Australian redback spider who courts a female for fewer than one hundred minutes may get a chance to enjoy a tryst with the object of his affection. However, as punishment for his lackluster foreplay, his paramour likely will gobble him up as her next meal as soon as he gets his penis-like organ into the required spot. On the

“ . . . Having experienced relatively little harassment for daring to admit and even flaunt my godlessness, I am . . . happily satisfied and yet guiltily free from having had to do any real work for the privilege I enjoy.”

other hand, if he puts just a little more effort into the courtship, if he spends just a bit more time on the “date,” the female is likely to show her appreciation by sparing him the cannibalistic finale.

Sometimes, however, one’s good fortune is more a matter of stealth than perseverance. Some Australian redback males have figured out a very clever trick: how to get “free” sex—that is, how to get it not only safely but cheaply, taking advantage of the set-up work of their more industrious fellows. After a more diligent male has spent the requisite time schmoozing the female—plucking on her web, making

contact with her abdomen, and eventually copulating (and risking becoming her next meal, depending on her mood)—the lazy sex thief can pop in for sloppy seconds with the previously warmed-up female. Not only does he spare himself the lengthy courtship dance, he avoids being eaten, despite the brevity of his flattery.


Well into my fourth decade of life and having experienced relatively little harassment for daring to admit and even flaunt my godlessness, I am much like the sloppy-seconds spider—happily satisfied and yet guiltily free from having had to do any real work for the privilege I enjoy. Great strides

in civil liberties have been accomplished in just this way. Campaigners for a worthy cause expend vast energy and take enormous risks, sometimes living long enough to delight in the fruits of their labor, sometimes not. Then, like the spider sex-thieves, later generations reap the real reward—at worst, a slightly more accepting and comfortable world; at best, a world wholly changed. Thanks to the work of gay-rights activists

before him, Harvey Bernard Milk (1930–1978) became the first openly gay man to be elected to a public office. Likewise, Milk advanced the cause of gay rights for future generations with his bravery, while not living long enough to fully enjoy the slightly less homophobic world he helped to create.

Similarly, we in the nontheist community are descended from a long line of brave rule-breakers. Those of my parents’ generation (including my parents themselves) dared to question the tired maxim that a church-

less child was bound for social decay, that even nontheist parents were better off accepting a church’s kind offer to serve as moral babysitter. Now, later generations have been brave enough not only to eschew religion but to criticize it openly and publicly among family members and work colleagues. Despite what may seem like frustrating setbacks (anti-evolution bills continue to pop up across the country; the word *atheist* continues to be synonymous with *immoral* among religious laypeople; a godless politician still has little chance at a successful career), atheism is flourishing. The Four Horsemen’s books sold in record numbers, and we even have a president who makes the occasional kind remark about “nonbelievers.” We can pat ourselves on the back for these victories all we like. But were it not for the long-dead-and-forgotten trailblazers—those assiduous spiders who groomed the web for our arrival—we might, for our own survival, still be hiding in the proverbial closet.

This is not to say that my generation or those to come can afford to relax. The Western world may be drastically more tolerant, indeed more intellectually sophisticated, than it was even twenty years ago. Still, changes don’t always stick. Like chronic illnesses, belief in creationism, school prayer, and discrimination against atheists are conditions that are never truly cured, only temporarily suppressed. After all, even the shrewdest sloppy-seconds spider knows he risks getting his head ripped off. Who is to say when the spider queen will wake up with a renewed appetite or simply be in a bad mood? 

Katrina Voss worked for ten years as a bilingual meteorologist at Weather Channel Latin America and AccuWeather. She is now a science and research writer at Penn State’s Eberly College of Science.



Who Cares What Happens to Dropouts?

In all the continuing debates, pledges, and dead ends involved in education reform, the many ever-present school dropouts are seldom urgently dealt with. What happens to those youngsters?

When I cover the imprisonment of youthful offenders, I find one answer. The majority are dropouts. The others? Who knows or cares, except maybe their families?

In a few school systems, however, troubled administrators and teachers do give a damn. One notable program has been launched in the Indianapolis Public Schools (“IPS Initiative to ‘Reclaim’ Former Students Draws Nearly 100 Back to School,” *Indianapolis Star*, August 9, 2011). “These students,” reported *Indianapolis Star* reporter Kristine Guerra, “are part of a new and ambitious ‘reclamation’ campaign the district launched in early July.”

I wish one of the popular television “reality shows” had covered this story. Writes Guerra: “Every day for a month, about 40 district staff and volunteers, wearing blue shirts with ‘Reclaim Your Future, It’s Not Too Late to Graduate’ scrawled on the back, swarmed neighborhoods and knocked on doors. Their goal: persuade dropouts and former students to come back to school.”

This first rescue sweep was intended to reach five thousand people. After 4,212 were contacted, ninety-one agreed to come back in the fall. According to school officials, this start was a “huge success.” But, commented Guerra, the number of returning students “certainly does little to improve IPS’s plummeting enrollment rate.”

Ah, but Guerra went on to reclaim her story’s significance by quoting School Superintendent Eugene White: “The expectation was to get out and get the mes-

sage about IPS and attempt to keep the kids we have and seek out those we have lost and those who have dropped out years ago.” White added: “Based on feedback, we also had a number of students who [since] came back to school. They also have gotten people to come back to basic education programs.”

Significantly, in view of the still shad-owy prognosis for the Indiana and national economy, the project offers economic as well as educational benefit, notes reporter Guerra: “Reclaiming lost students means recovering lost money. Over the past few years, IPS has lost millions of dollars in state funding—about \$8,000 per student—because of declining enrollment.”

Enter the Superintendent again: “When we lose money, we lose programs and people. And we can’t have the kind of district we want if we cut our programs.”

Reporter Guerra then brought a reclaimed student into the conversation: twenty-year-old Darryl Chapman, who said he’s glad the campaign workers came to his house as he was pulling up in his driveway. Chapman’s story is typical: school just didn’t seem appealing to him. He was unmotivated. So he dropped out of Tech High School after ninth grade.

“Years later,” Guerra noted, “he had no stable job and no high school diploma. But he does have a 1-year-old daughter. He wants to go back to school. Then, more school. He’s doing this for his daughter.”

Added student Chapman: “There’s nothing really out here without an education. I want her to be better than I was.”

The fact that students are coming back to school may well attract the atten-

tion of those increasingly thinking of leaving. If the reclaimed seem more comfortable and more engaged in class, other out-of-step students could begin to see a wasteland rather than a promised land outside of school.

Across America, more parents are organizing to turn public schools into more welcoming places for their kids by protesting—and increasingly boycotting—standardized testing. Students learn much more

“ . . . How many of the evaluation procedures being discussed . . . identify the teachers who get their students debating and arguing among themselves about what more they want to find out now that they’ve been turned on to learning?”

from those tests about dealing with stress than how to become lifelong learners.

And more parents—especially in low-income neighborhoods of color whose public schools are noted for their “racial gap” in achievement—are lining up to compete for seats in more flexible charter schools.

Parents whose children remain in regular schools could usefully expend some reformist energy by welcoming back the

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CFI Gives Women a Voice with ‘Women in Secularism’ Conference

Attending the Center for Inquiry (CFI)’s “Women in Secularism” conference in Arlington, Virginia, May 18–20, 2012, was an inspiring experience. Having worked for CFI for six years, I have become used to the male-dominated culture that is prevalent in secularism. It was therefore refreshing to hear so many women speaking one after the other on why more women are not involved in the secular movement. The subject has felt like the elephant in the room for years—

“It was refreshing to hear so many women speaking one after the other on why more women are not involved in the secular movement.”

talked about among feminists in the movement, sure, but not at major meetings. The website for the event so succinctly hit the nail on the head: “until now.” CFI’s “Women in Secularism” conference was the very first national one dedicated to the subject—a historic event. As Ronald A. Lindsay, CFI president and CEO, put it during his opening remarks, “Some say it’s about time that we have a secular conference dedicated to women. I say it’s past time.”

One of the highlights of the conference was the very first talk, given by Susan Jacoby, author of *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, on Saturday morning bright and early at 8:30 A.M. Jacoby was funny, passionate, and engaging right out of the gate. “Richard Dawkins is not the pope, Sam Harris is not a cardinal,

and the late Christopher Hitchens is not the Holy Ghost!” she quipped after noting that some women seem to be turned off by the idea of trading in religious patriarchy for a secular one.

Another highlight on Saturday was a lively panel discussion on the intersection between nontheism and feminism moderated by Annie Laurie Gaylor, cofounder of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, with FREE INQUIRY columnist Ophelia Benson, Blackfemlens.org editor Sikivu Hutchinson, *Blag Hag* blogger Jennifer McCreight, and Skepchick.org founder Rebecca Watson. The general discussion seemed to focus on the observation that both religious belief and sexism are so entrenched in our society that people take them completely for granted for the most part. Noted Mc-

Creight, rather astutely, “religious belief and sexist belief are alike in a lot of ways: it’s the little things that matter.” While people may realize that the big things, say the murder of someone for their lack of religious belief or the rape of a woman, are definitely bad, they’re less likely to think that smaller infractions, such as posting the Ten Commandments on public school grounds or saying “ran away like a little girl” as an insult, are a big deal. But it is the little stuff that adds up and keeps sexist and religious beliefs so pervasive in our society.

Gaylor presented an appealing and informative PowerPoint on “The History of Women in Freethought.” Her presentation spanned from Anne Hutchinson in the seventeenth century to high-school activist Jessica Ahlquist today and dozens

of women in between. It really brought home the point that women have *always* made contributions, big and small, to the secular movement. It’s just that they haven’t been recognized in the same way that many men’s contributions have been.

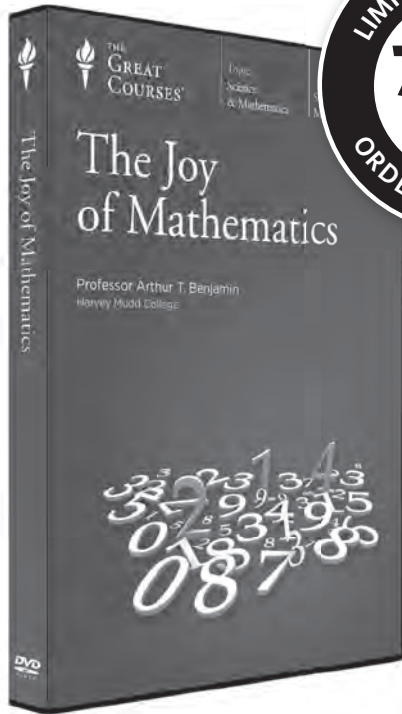
Another very memorable moment of the conference came during the “Why Women Need Freedom from Religion” panel, moderated by Jacoby with FREE INQUIRY columnist Greta Christina, human rights activist Wafa Sultan, Gaylor, and executive director of the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science U.S., Elisabeth Cornwell. During the Q and A portion of the session, an audience member asked the panelists how they respond to the claim that spreading secularism among oppressed religious women, like those under *sharia* law in Islamic countries, is being imperialist. Christina responded, “Tell that to the girl who had her clitoris cut off, or to the girl with the acid thrown in her face. And all I have to say to them [those who say we shouldn’t spread secularism because it’s not respectful of that culture] is *fuck you!*,” which she accentuated with a double flip of the bird. What I loved about that moment was it seemed to embody a lot of what the “Women in Secularism” conference was about. Women are passionate about secularism and the rights of our fellow human beings, and that passion does not need to be expressed in a demure and “ladylike” fashion. The harm that religious oppression can do *really* pisses us off.

Sunday was dedicated to the future of women in secularism. The highlight of the day was the panel discussion on the topic moderated by Jennifer Michael Hecht, author of *Doubt: A History*, and

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Relaunching the International Academy of Humanism

In the United States, atheists and humanists are among its most vilified and distrusted citizens. One of the most effective ways of countering this prejudice is to offer a vivid reminder that some of the world's leading moral, cultural, and scientific figures are indeed humanists. A good place to start is with the past and present members of the International Academy of Humanism (IAH).

The Academy should be better known than it is. An honorary body comprising up to eighty Humanist Laureates, the IAH was founded in 1980 by Paul Kurtz to recognize and honor distinguished humanists and to disseminate humanistic ideals. Once elected, members retain their status for life. Currently there are sixty-six Laureates, and steps are being taken to bring the membership roster back to full strength. The members of the Academy themselves decide who should be invited to join their ranks.

What qualifies someone to be a Laureate of the IAH? Laureates must have made an important contribution to scholarship or to the production of work of outstanding artistic or literary merit or have other significant achievements. In addition, Laureates should (1) be devoted to free inquiry in all fields of human endeavor, (2) be committed to a scientific outlook and the use of the scientific method in acquiring knowledge, and (3) uphold humanist ethical values and principles.

Cast an eye down the list of current and previous members of the IAH and you cannot help but be impressed. Laureates past and present include some extraordinary individuals. You will find the writers Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Kurt Vonnegut, Salman Rushdie, Gore Vidal, Christopher Hitchens, Umberto Eco, and Ann Druyan. There are leading scientists such as Francis Crick, Richard Dawkins, Stephen Jay Gould, Carl Sagan, Steven Pinker, Elizabeth Loftus, Lionel Tiger, and Harry Kroto. Other past and


present Laureates include world-leading philosophers such as Daniel C. Dennett, W.V.O. Quine, Ernest Nagel, Jürgen Habermas, Peter Singer, Isaiah Berlin, and Richard Rorty. Business figures such as George Soros and Miramax founder Harvey Weinstein are also represented, as are biblical scholars, including G.A. Wells and Elaine Pagels. And then there's comedian Steve Allen, the creator and first host of *The Tonight Show*. Given that the Academy comprises such incandescent individuals—including my boyhood hero Carl Sagan—I was baffled but of course delighted to find myself made a member last year.

The Academy has not been a particularly active body: its role, to date, has been almost entirely honorary. The Council for Secular Humanism and the Center for Inquiry, recognizing the valuable resource that such an extraordinary body offers, have relaunched the Academy with an eye toward revitalizing it and giving it a more prominent position in humanist life. To get things moving, a set of bylaws has been drawn up and a Secretariat established to take care of the running of the Academy. The Secretariat comprises myself, Steven Pinker, Ann Druyan, and Elizabeth Loftus. I have agreed to act as chair for the time being. A new Secretariat, elected by the Laureates themselves, will be appointed every three years.

One of the few stated functions of the Academy is to issue occasional public statements on matters of particular significance to its members. Among the first actions we took was to explore the possibility of the IAH issuing a statement on the popular uprisings across the Middle East. The uprisings and their aftermath are obviously of great concern to many humanists and secularists around the world, and the Academy decided to issue a public state-

ment in support of those working to promote progressive secular thought and attitudes across the Middle East. The resulting statement, approved by the Academy, was announced at the joint Council for Secular Humanism/Center for Inquiry conference "Moving Secularism Forward," held in Orlando, Florida, in March 2012. The statement appears in the text box on the next page.

At the Orlando conference, the Academy sponsored a three-hour session during which Laureates could speak about their work. Anthropologist Lionel Tiger gave a provocative lecture on the subject of "Male Original Sin." Nobel Prize-winning chemist Sir Harold Kroto, armed with one of the most eye-catching PowerPoint presentations I've ever seen, gave a rousing talk on religious belief. To open the session, I presented a succinct version of my philosophy paper "The Evil God Challenge" (published in 2010 in *Religious Studies*), which has received quite a bit of attention recently, not least because of the use I made of it in a debate with Christian apologist and philosopher William Lane Craig. (It also appears in my *Very Short Introduction to Humanism* [Oxford University Press, 2011].)

Given the range and depth of talent the Academy has to offer, it presents humanists with a valuable and largely unexploited resource, including role models for future generations of humanists—and also the potential to inform, and perhaps even influence, public opinion around the world. My hope is that the International Academy of Humanism will develop into one of the better-known jewels in the crown of the global humanist movement. 

International Academy of Humanism Secretary Stephen Law is also senior lecturer at Heythrop College, University of London and editor of the Royal Institute of Philosophy journal *Think*.

Laureates of the International Academy of Humanism

1. Pieter Admiraal (MD—Netherlands)
2. Shulamit Aloni (Minister of Education—Israel)
3. Ruben Ardila (Univ. de Colombia—Colombia)
4. Margaret Atwood (author—Canada)
5. Etienne Baulieu (French Inst. of Health & Medical Research—France)
6. Baruj Benacerraf (Dana-Farber Cancer Institute—USA)
7. Jacques Bouveresse (Collège de France—France)
8. Paul D. Boyer (Univ. of California, Los Angeles—USA)
9. Mario Bunge (McGill Univ.—Canada)
10. Jean-Pierre Changeux (Collège de France—France)
11. Patricia Smith Churchland (Univ. of California, San Diego—USA)
12. Richard Dawkins (Oxford Univ.—UK)
13. José M. R. Delgado (Univ. of Madrid—Spain)
14. Daniel C. Dennett (Tufts University—USA)
15. Jean Dommange (Royal Observatory—Belgium)
16. Ann Druyan (author, lecturer, producer—USA)
17. Umberto Eco (Univ. of Bologna—Italy)
18. Luc Ferry (Sorbonne—France)
19. Yves Galifret (Union Rationaliste—France)
20. Johan Galtung (Univ. of Oslo—Norway)
21. Murray Gell-Mann (Nobel Laureate, Sante Fe Inst.—USA)
22. Rebecca Goldstein (philosopher and author—USA)
23. Adolf Grünbaum (Univ. of Pittsburgh—USA)
24. Jürgen Habermas (Univ. of Frankfurt—Germany)
25. Margherita Hack (astronomer, astrophysicist—Italy)
26. Alberto Hidalgo Tuñón (Univ. de Oviedo—Spain)
27. Donald Johanson (Inst. of Human Origins—USA)
28. Sergeï Kapitza (Moscow Inst. of Physics and Technology—Russia)
29. George Klein (Karolinska Inst.—Sweden)
30. György Konrád (author—Hungary)
31. Sir Harold W. Kroto (University of Sussex—UK)
32. Ioanna Kuçuradi (FISP—Turkey)
33. Valeriï A. Kuvakin (Moscow State Univ.—Russia)
34. Gerald A. Larue (Univ. of Southern California—USA)
35. Richard Leakey (activist and conservationist—Kenya)
36. Jean-Marie Lehn (Université Louis Pasteur—France)
37. Elizabeth Loftus (professor, Univ. of California/Irvine—USA)
38. Adam Michnik (author—Poland)
39. Jonathan Miller (OBE, MD, author—UK)
40. Taslima Nasrin (MD, author—Bangladesh)
41. Elaine Pagels (Harrington Spear Paine Professor of Religion, Princeton Univ.—USA)
42. Jean-Claude Pecker (Collège de France—France)
43. Steven Pinker (Harvard Univ.—USA)
44. Dennis Razis (MD—Greece)
45. Salman Rushdie (author, MIT—USA)
46. Fernando Savater (philosophy educator—Spain)
47. Peter Singer (Princeton Univ.—USA)
48. Jens C. Skou (Univ. of Aarhus—Denmark)
49. J.J.C. Smart (Australian National Univ.—Australia)
50. Wole Soyinka (Nobel Laureate, author—Nigeria)
51. Barbara Stanosz (Inst. *Ksiażka i Prasa*—Poland)
52. Jack Steinberger (physicist—Switzerland)
53. Thomas S. Szasz (State Univ. of New York—USA)
54. Sir Keith Thomas (Oxford Univ.—UK)
55. Rob Tielman (Univ. of Utrecht—Netherlands)
56. Lionel Tiger (Rutgers Univ.—USA)
57. Neil deGrasse Tyson (scientist, Hayden Planetarium—USA)
58. Mario Vargas Llosa (author—Perú)
59. Simone Veil (former president, European Parliament—France)
60. Gore Vidal (author—USA)
61. Mourad Wahba (Univ. of Ain Shams—Egypt)
62. James D. Watson (author, biologist—USA)
63. Steven Weinberg (Univ. of Texas, Austin—USA)
64. Harvey Weinstein (cofounder of Miramax—USA)
65. G. A. Wells (Univ. of London—UK)
66. Edward O. Wilson (Harvard Univ.—USA)

Recently Deceased

- Kurt Baier (Univ. of Pittsburgh—USA) d. 2010
- Sir Hermann Bondi (Churchill College—UK) d. 2005
- Elena Bonner (human rights advocate—Russia) d. 2011
- Vern Bullough (Univ. of Southern California—USA) d. 2005
- Arthur C. Clarke (author, Sri Lanka) d. 2008
- Bernard Crick (Univ. of London—UK) d. 2008
- Antony Flew (Reading Univ.—UK) d. 2010
- Betty Friedan (founder, NOW—USA) d. 2006
- Vitaly Ginzburg (Moscow State University—Russia) d. 2009
- Herbert Hauptman (Nobel Laureate, State Univ. of New York—USA) d. 2011
- Christopher Hitchens (author, lecturer—USA) d. 2011
- Thelma Lavine (George Mason Univ.—USA) d. 2011
- José Leite Lopes (*Centro Brasileiro de Pesquisas Físicas*—Brazil) d. 2006
- Paul MacCreedy (AeroVironment—USA) d. 2007
- Conor Cruise O'Brien (Univ. of Dublin—Ireland) d. 2008
- Marcel Roche (Inst. de Investigaciones Científicas—Venezuela) d. 2003
- Richard Rorty (Univ. of Virginia—USA) d. 2007
- Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (City Univ.—USA) d. 2007
- Svetozar Stojanović (Univ. of Belgrade—Yugoslavia) d. 2010
- Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (author—USA) d. 2007

Institutions listed for identification only.

Statement from the International Academy of Humanism

The recent uprisings across the Middle East (often referred to as “the Arab Spring”) are of immense significance. Will the states involved come to embrace progressive, secular (that is to say, religiously neutral), liberal values and democracy, or has the removal of the old political regimes paved the way for religiously conservative and authoritarian movements to gain control? Will we see a flourishing of freedom of speech, or growing religious intimidation and oppression, including an erosion of those rights and freedoms that women have previously enjoyed in countries such as Tunisia?

This is a pivotal moment. The outcome of these uprisings will not only affect the lives of the millions of people living in the countries experiencing revolutionary transformation but also affect relations between East and West for generations to come. It is of utmost importance that fundamental freedoms, including freedom of speech and conscience, be recognized and respected by the new regimes. The International Academy of Humanism wishes wholeheartedly to voice its support for, and forge constructive relationships with, those working to promote progressive, secular thought and attitudes across the Middle East.

—Issued at the “Moving Secularism Forward” Conference, March 2012

Secular Humanism with a Pulse: The New Activists

Introduction

Lauren Becker

Every two months, subscribers to FREE INQUIRY magazine enjoy reading a new issue filled with enlightening articles about secular humanism and related topics. As the director of outreach for the Council for Secular Humanism's supporting organization, the Center for Inquiry, I am fortunate to encounter people every day who are *living* the values of secular humanism, people for whom secular humanism is much more than a magazine, a philosophy, or an academic position. For these individuals, secular humanism is a way of living that compels them to stand up and become part of their communities, encourages them to offer their hands to strangers, and inspires them to do what they can to improve the lives of their fellow human beings.

"If our goal is to educate and advocate for a secular and more humane world, the default to argument can sometimes be a problem."

Secular humanists, skeptics, freethinkers, and the like are famously fond of evidence and facts. This is admirable and valuable, of course, but this predilection often expresses itself in argumentation, confrontation, and lots and lots of words. If our goal is to educate and advocate for a secular and more humane world, the default to argument can sometimes be a problem. As secular humanists, we have compassion and respect for our fellow human beings, but most people don't interpret an argument as an expression of compassion. There is most definitely a time and place for disagreement, or even all-out battle (see EllenBeth

Wach's story on page 35), but it's important to remember that winning an argument is not necessarily the same thing as changing someone's mind. Simply being right doesn't necessarily right a wrong.

To the extent that secular humanists are concerned with humanity—to the extent that we have compassion for others and a desire to make this life, our only life, the best it can be—many activists feel that we need to be more in the business of helping people win with us and less in the business of beating them. *The challenge to those of us who want to see a more secular and humane world is to find an effective way to diminish errant and dangerous beliefs and ideologies without diminishing the people who hold them.* Secular humanism should not be about defeating one's fellow humans. Yes, of course we need to win arguments, but the point of winning the argument should be winning the person, holding onto the person while he or she lets go of the harmful beliefs.

One of the most proven and effective ways to do this is to translate our good arguments into good actions, which can often speak louder than words. The way we live and treat one another can be one of the best arguments for our worldview. For the times when our words aren't effective, *we ourselves* can be the best evidence for the value of secular humanism.

The authors in this section are not professional writers, journalists, or academics. They are a small sample of thousands of secular humanist activists who in many ways exemplify secular humanism. All of them have found a way to put their secular humanist values into practice; they translate their life stance into action to become ambassadors and promoters of the secular humanist worldview.

Though some secular humanists blanch at the idea of getting together with other secular humanists to do service work, others enjoy the camaraderie and effectiveness of working as a team. Also, sometimes it's simply safer to act in numbers. James Croft spends a lot of time bringing good people together to do good things, and he explains how this can induce and spread humanist values. Mindy Miner and other CFI-Michigan Secular Service


Program members gather regularly to contribute to their local community, from making sandwiches for needy school kids to participating in local environmental cleanup and restoration projects. In addition to many other service activities, Franklin Kramer and other members of his campus group found a way to raise money for a secular adoption agency when a local Catholic agency chose to shut down rather than place children with gay couples. Alix Jules has taken the lead in founding the Dallas–Fort Worth Coalition of Reason’s Diversity Council to help make his local atheist group more responsive to the broader community. And Bill Cooke describes brave groups affiliated with the Center for Inquiry who are working in Kenya, Uganda, India, and Egypt to counteract dangerous superstitious beliefs with sound science and secularism.

Other authors saw a need and took it upon themselves to fill it. Rebecca Hensler created Grief Beyond Belief to provide a place for nonreligious people to find support and comfort after the death of a loved one. Bob Stevenson realized that his Daytona Beach neighbors were struggling with addiction and has spent the past seventeen years hosting secular recovery meetings to provide an alternative to higher-power-oriented twelve-step programs.

Sometimes helping one’s community is defined by lobbying to change it. Reba Boyd Wooden describes how she and the members of CFI–Indiana have joined coalitions to advocate at the Indiana State House for public policy based on science, reason, and secular values.

Occasionally, however, all the compassion and respect in the world won’t win the argument or the person. EllenBeth Wachs has risked personal safety and property to challenge the blatant harassment and unconstitutional actions of her local police and government. Her story is a perfect illustration of a situation in which it is imperative to not only win the argument but also defeat the people and their beliefs.

Finally, Hemant Mehta reminds us that while we work to improve our broader communities, we should not forget to look after the people in our own humanist, freethought, skeptic, and atheist communities. Like all values, secular humanist values begin in the home, where they can be demonstrated, practiced, and absorbed. The people in our movement are an extended

family of sorts. Together we are working to give expression and life to a positive and hopefully world-changing philosophy, so we need to extend to each other the same compassion and concern that we profess for humankind in general. After all, when one of us wins, we all win. This is secular humanism with a heart; this is secular humanism with a pulse. 

Lauren Becker is vice president and director of Outreach at the Center for Inquiry, and an associate editor of FREE INQUIRY.

A Note from the Editor

Several articles in this section take a strong position in favor of shared charitable or social-service work as a platform for secular humanist activism. It is not the intent of FREE INQUIRY or the Council for Secular Humanism to advocate this variety of activism for all. We recognize that some readers will view the idea of bringing together secular humanists as *secular humanists* for charitable service with distaste. For some, it will be uncomfortably reminiscent of activities in the churches they abandoned with relief. Others will find the idea at odds with their understanding of secularism as an individualistic and cosmopolitan framework that encourages men and women to connect to the highest levels of society as directly as possible, relying on their community of belief for nothing that does not immediately concern their life stance. Other secular humanists, of course, will find these essays stirring, even empowering.

The reader is invited to view these articles as a cluster of bold statements on one side of what is recognized as a vital and ongoing debate. Your comments are welcome in our Letters column. Please address Andrea Szalanski, Letters Editor, P.O. Box 664, Amherst NY 14226-0664, or e-mail aszalanski@centerforinquiry.net.

—Tom Flynn

Sparking a Fire in the Humanist Heart

James Croft

In 1877 at the age of twenty-six, Felix Adler founded the Ethical Culture Society, a humanistic congregational social movement dedicated to ethical practice. His founding address spoke of the need for communities dedicated to moral action and ethical improvement—congregations that, without reference to God, would work together to solve the social ills of the late nineteenth century. Adler knew how to get freethinking hearts pumping: he used to sell out Carnegie Hall with his lectures, and the press spilt ink liberally whenever he spoke. In a few decades he built a social movement that, although small, had an enormous impact in the service of humanistic goals. The Ethical Culture movement he launched founded the Visiting Nurse Association (which still provides home health and hospice services to people around the country), the Child Study Association, and the Encampment for Citizenship and played a role in establishing the Legal Aid Society, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the American Civil Liberties Union.

“Ethical Culturists, although always few in number (it is estimated there were never more than a few thousand members), had a big social impact.”

Ethical Culturists, although always few in number (it is estimated there were never more than a few thousand members), had a big social impact. Their humanism had a pulse, and the pulse beat strongly. How did they achieve this, and how might today’s humanists achieve similar feats today? In his 1905 book *The Religion of Duty* (he considered his form of organized humanism a religion), Adler wondered how we might motivate people to act absent the books and creeds of traditional religions and gave us a clue to the answer:

... How is it possible to induce [people] to make the effort [to be ethical], there being no authority of book or creed to lean upon? The answer to that is that the method we must pursue is to put [people] in the midst of crowds. We may not rely on

books, we must rely on [ourselves]. [People] who are themselves aflame with the desire for the good can kindle in others the same desire. What a [woman] feels [she] can make others feel; what [she] sees [she] can make others see; when [she] supremely wills the right [she] can make others will it. Ethics is propagated just as art is. The artist is a man who loves the beautiful, and loves it so much that he can make others love it; who sees the beautiful and can open the eyes of others to see it. So morality is propagated. [Gender language has been modernized by this essay’s author.]

Adler’s insight was a powerful one and is borne out by contemporary research. Sociologists Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, in the enormous study of American religion detailed in their book *American Grace* (2010), discovered that religious people are indeed more socially engaged than nonreligious people: they vote more, give more money to charity, volunteer more of their time, and run more often for civic office.

However, this didn’t seem to be related to the intensity of a believer’s faith. Rather, higher levels of civic engagement were related to *engagement with a religious community*. Thus, they found, someone who isn’t so intensely religious will tend to show the same civic-mindedness if, for whatever reason, he or she is engaged in a religious community as much as someone who has greater religious conviction. Conversely, a deeply religious person who is not a member of a church community doesn’t display the same level of engagement. Therefore, Putnam and Campbell suggest, “close, morally intense, but nonreligious social networks could have a similarly powerful effect [on civic engagement].”

Adler would not have been surprised. He understood that putting people “in the midst of crowds” and surrounding them with others “aflame with the desire for the good” would work to reinforce and deepen their commitment to ethical action. He knew that for humanism to have a pulse, you first need to set a fire in the heart, and that begins with community. At the Humanist Community at Harvard—the humanist community that I am a member of—we take Adler’s insight (and Putnam and Campbell’s research) seriously and even created a Humanist Community Project to help build moral social networks.

I myself have felt the power of a strong moral community. For

the past three years I've spent my spring break (a precious March week that serves as a respite from studying) on a service trip with other humanists, flying to New Orleans; Eagle Butte, South Dakota; and Los Angeles to put humanist principles into practice. I've filled potholes in Louisiana roads, thrown Frisbees with Lakota children, and handed out food packets to homeless kids on the L. A. beaches. Closer to home, I've exchanged old light bulbs for newer, more efficient ones in the suburbs of Boston (an initiative we called "Green Without God") and cooked food for our local food bank. As I type, my feet are still throbbing from the twenty-mile Walk for Hunger, which saw a team of Harvard humanists dragging themselves around Boston to raise almost two thousand dollars for Project Bread. I like to think of myself as a good person, but I certainly would not have done all this—and I definitely wouldn't have done it all so *cheerfully*—without the encouragement and organization my moral community provides.

I've also grown as a person. Adler, an educator as well as an orator and activist (he founded a school and was influential in the school-reform debates of his time) hoped that Ethical Culture communities would serve to develop individuals in their understanding of, and appreciation for, the ethical life. He hoped that the spark humanist communities would light in the hearts of their members would grow into a raging roar. And it has in me. The humanist community at Harvard has been central to my development as a humanist and as a person. I understand more about my own beliefs and commitments as a humanist (you could say I've "grown in non-faith"), but I have also been affected more personally: it was in the loving embrace of my humanist community that I was able to come out of the closet and accept myself as a gay man.


This community has given me much. And, as a result, I am more committed to it—I want to give something back. It's no stretch to say that my activism on behalf of humanism (I now travel all over the country talking about building humanist communities) is a direct result of the growth I have experienced at my Harvard humanist home. I am aflame with desire for the good.

To me, this is what humanism with a pulse means: it means a vital humanism, a lifelong commitment to a set of noble princi-

ples that you endorse in theory and express through your deeds. It means getting up every morning and thinking, "How can I be a better person, a better humanist, and what can I do to help others?" It means making the high words of the Humanist Manifestos a reality in your everyday life. It means that humanism runs through everything you do, that it pulses through the veins of your life.

Sometimes when I'm asked what a humanist is, I give the American Humanist Association's fifty-word definition. I say it is being "good without God" or refer the questioner to the third

"...Someone who isn't so intensely religious will tend to show the same civic-mindedness if, for whatever reason, he or she is engaged in a religious community as much as someone who has greater religious conviction."

Humanist Manifesto—I refer them to our "creed." Adler had a different idea. The motto of Ethical Culture is "Deed before Creed," placing the emphasis on ethical action rather than beliefs. So here's a challenge: next time someone asks you what a humanist is, tell them to spend some time with you as you live your life. If your humanism truly has a pulse, he or she won't need to read a manifesto—your deeds will describe the fire in your heart. 

James Croft is the Research and Education Fellow at the Humanist Community at Harvard and has worked on the Humanist Community Project since its inception. He is a Cambridge and Harvard graduate and is currently studying for his doctorate in the philosophy of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He was raised on Shakespeare, Sagan, and *Star Trek* and is a proud, gay humanist.

Secular Service in Michigan

Mindy Miner

Who cares? We do! “The happiest people I have known have been those who gave themselves no concern about their own souls, but did their uttermost to mitigate the miseries of others.” These words, spoken by social activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton around the turn of the twentieth century, still ring true today. It is exactly this sentiment that inspired the Michigan branch of Center for Inquiry to form a Secular Service Program. After years of discussion about how we would like to “give back,” “get involved,” “socialize,” and “strengthen our presence as a group,” we put our good intentions into action in 2010.

To get our endeavors underway, a committee of interested individuals was formed and drafted the following vision state-

ment: “The CFI-Michigan Secular Service Program provides opportunities to support the mission of the Center for Inquiry by translating humanist values into action for the common good of humanity. The Secular Service Program is working to provide opportunities for members to engage in community service and outreach throughout the year.”

To better manage the workload, we divided into subcommittees. Each subcommittee had a theme: Health, Children and Education, and Environment. These topics were chosen because group members felt we could find plenty of suitable volunteer activities in these categories that fit CFI’s mission. We also felt we could involve a larger number of members by exploring a wide range of activities.

Our first service adventure was in the Health category, for which we organized a CFI-Michigan team to participate in a community walk for multiple sclerosis. We also hosted a successful Red Cross blood drive, which we continue to hold annually.

One of our most successful projects fell into the category of Children and Education. In 2010 we packed sandwiches for an organization called Kids’ Food Basket, which works to provide sack dinners daily to over 4,800 children who live in poverty. We spent two hours making hundreds of sandwiches to help achieve their mission: “that lunch is not the last meal of the day” for these children. It was a CFI family affair, with parents bringing their children for a day of service, and a good time was had by all. We had such a good turnout that this has become an annual CFI service event.

The Environment category has offered plenty of opportunities for volunteering. Our group has twice participated in the Grand River Cleanup with good member participation. A smaller group spent a day at Saul Lake Bog, a local nature preserve, helping pull invasive plants for a prairie restoration project. We also spread mulch at a county park for a children’s playground, and we’ve hosted a work day at the Long Lake Outdoor Center for several years to help

“After years of discussion about how we would like to ‘give back,’ ‘get involved,’ ‘socialize,’ and ‘strengthen our presence as a group,’ we put our good intentions into action in 2010.”



Photo by Cathy Seaver

CFI—Michigan Secular Service Program volunteers worked on the playground at Millennium Park in Grand Rapids.

restore and maintain the historic campground for the benefit of numerous community organizations.

All in all, in two and a half short years, we have participated in at least twenty-five projects involving over three hundred volunteers who have put in more than one thousand volunteer hours of service. These projects have reaped many benefits, both planned and unintended. Aside from “doing good for goodness’s sake” and having fun in the process, we have become stronger as an organization. We wear our CFI T-shirts when we work and often have the opportunity to explain to others what we’re about, which has led to new memberships and increased awareness of CFI-Michigan. The Service Program has also allowed us to engage entire families in more events, not just the adults who attend the regular meetings. We often gather for breakfast or lunch before or after an event, which helps us develop a sense of community among our members.

It is this feeling of becoming a family that spurred our most recent and ongoing project, Food for Comfort. This is a central database created by one of our members designed to support our CFI community with meals during times of life change, such as the birth of a child, an illness, or the death of a loved one. Any member may sign up to receive one or more meals during a time of need. One of our members recently lost his wife to a lengthy illness. Phone calls were made, lists were organized, and fresh food was prepared and personally delivered by some of our Service Program volunteers to the memorial service. Afterward, Cathy Seaver, one of our member-volunteers, summed it up best: “I believe we made today a little less painful for the family by showing them the love

and support that our group is so good at providing. This is the type of outreach I am proud to be a part of.”

Organizing atheists is often likened to “herding cats” because we aren’t inherently united by a belief system. Consequently, a strong, social network of caring, like-minded people often seems missing in atheist organizations. For me, this was one of the most compelling reasons to become part of the Secular Service Program. It affords me a sense of belonging and an opportunity to grow as an individual by helping others. The focus surrounding an atheist organization is often about what we *don’t* believe. I feel strongly that if we spend more time focusing on what we *do* believe, we can present a more positive face to the general public and unify ourselves as a group.

I believe in the power of human kindness and compassion to change the world. The CFI-Michigan Service Program gives me a place to begin. It’s a small beginning in a small corner of the world, but just as Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s efforts blossomed into a woman’s right to vote, I hope our efforts will perhaps prompt other atheist groups to show the world that there is a real heart to secular humanism. 

Mindy Miner lives in Rockland, Michigan, with her husband, Jon. Raising their two children has been her primary occupation, although in addition to being a CFI-Michigan Secular Service Program committee member, she has held both paid and unpaid positions with various local nonprofits. In her free time, she pursues her passion of gardening and restoring native habitats.

Campus Service Work

Franklin Kramer and Derek Miller

As atheists and skeptics, we face a unique problem in that we are among the least-liked and least-trusted minority groups in America. You’re probably familiar with the statistics, but it is worth reviewing a few of the more startling ones. A study from the University of British Columbia suggests that Americans find atheists less trustworthy than rapists. According to a Gallup poll from last year, half of all Americans would not vote for an atheist candidate for president under any circumstances. A study by the University of Minnesota shows that atheists are considered the group “least likely to embrace common values and a shared vision of society.” It goes without saying that if you’re looking to change the way people feel about atheists, you have your work cut out for you. But what is the most effective means of actually achieving that goal?

Atheist and secular groups have been pushing the “Good without God” message for some time now, and we think that’s great. Perhaps we need a direct attack on the frequently held notion that the nonreligious are somehow inherently less moral than their religious counterparts. But unfortunately, in terms of raw numbers, we still fall behind. When it comes to actually doing good work, empirical evidence tells us that religious individuals, on average, are more engaged in their local communities, give more to charity, and are more active in volunteering (see the 2010 book *American Grace* by Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell).

If you ask us, the most obvious reason for these good acts can be summed up in one word: community. Religious people are active in communities that encourage (or even mandate) doing good

work, and the nonreligious currently do not have that. If we as a movement want to stand by the words we display on highways across the country, we're going to have to start in our communities.

If there's one place for atheists to start to organize and do good work, it is on our college campuses. In terms of communities, student groups are way ahead of their more "adult" counterparts and understandably so, because college is a time in our lives where community comes naturally. Your next question might be, "How can student groups do good?" To answer that, we'll give a couple examples of things our group, the Illini Secular Student Alliance, has done in this past year.

"Perhaps we need a direct attack on the frequently held notion that the nonreligious are somehow inherently less moral than their religious counterparts."

We had our first big service project of the year in October 2011. After reading a post on Hemant Mehta's blog *The Friendly Atheist* about Catholic adoption agencies shutting down to avoid placing children with gay couples, we were moved to support a secular agency that was stepping up to care for hundreds of kids who had been left behind. We went out to an intersection in the heart of our campus nightlife scene and started selling hot dogs to the hard partiers, and in just a couple nights we managed to raise about two hundred dollars. We were amazed at how easy this was to do. As you might imagine, hot dogs practically sell themselves.


Then, in December, we teamed up with our local Interfaith in Action affiliate and the biggest Catholic group on campus to make the holidays brighter for some families in need. The church had a list of families that were going through rough times, along with the ages and interests of their children. From there, it took only a quick trip to Walmart and a hundred dollars to make these kids feel really special. Seeing their faces when we arrived with presents was by far the most meaningful experience we've had doing any service project.

Once per semester (for about two years now), we host a Red Cross blood drive on campus and encourage all of our members to donate. This project is feasible for most groups to carry out because the Red Cross has local branches almost everywhere, and it doesn't cost the groups a dime to organize. It's also an easy event to coordinate with other campus groups to improve turnout and make some new friends. Of all the things you could

do to improve the image of atheists in society, giving up your precious life fluids to potentially save the life of a stranger has got to be high on the list.

If you're looking for more ideas, we encourage you to get in touch with your local churches or any organization that promotes some kind of interfaith work. We know the idea of atheist or humanist organizations involving themselves with interfaith organizations is controversial, but we've had a lot of success by breaking into their preexisting model for service projects. We were also lucky enough to have an Interfaith in Action chapter on our campus that was open to critical debate and discussion, so we didn't run into the kind of problems that other groups have reportedly had. Regardless, if that kind of structure is not available to you, go out of your way to find other ways to improve your community.

This is just a very small sample of the kinds of things we have done, but many student groups across the country have been doing other awesome things too. Our secular friends on the campus of Indiana University turned their blood drive into a protest against the U.S. Food and Drug Administration policy not to allow blood donations from homosexuals. The University of Northern Iowa Freethinkers and Inquirers recently organized a 24/7 Service Week to run alongside their religious community's 24/7 Prayer Week. The opportunities are endless, and you should never underestimate the power your college group has. It is up to us, as college students, to be role models for the atheism movement as a whole. We are at an amazing point where the things we do, as atheist student groups, will permanently shape the future of the movement as a whole.

When you serve your local community, you have the greatest opportunity to change the way people view you because you can show them with your actions that you are committed to social justice. And once they see that, maybe they'll stick up for you next time someone makes an offhand comment about what atheists are like and what they believe. We are convinced that we will win respect, not by working to make a better world for ourselves but by working ardently to build a better world for everyone—and we hope that you're willing to join us to make that happen. 

Franklin Kramer is a graduate student studying library and information science at the University of Illinois. He is a former president of the Illini Secular Student Alliance. Derek Miller is a junior studying political science at the University of Illinois. He will be serving as the president of the Illini Secular Student Alliance in the 2012–2013 school year.

Diversity and Secular Activism

Alix Jules

Ilove the beauty of stained-glass cathedrals. They evoke fond memories of smiling family during my First Communion. Unlike many of my black friends who were Baptist, I don't have the stories of revival and rebirth. I had ritual. It was tied to a repeated narrative of freedom through suffering, a familiar tale. Although I wasn't Jewish, I too was promised a Messiah whose incarnations I saw in the civil rights movements and various social-justice causes. Though I occasionally questioned the goodness of a god who would allow the numerous atrocities aimed at a people because they were different, clergy and family were quick to remind me that "you just have gotta believe." As one of the many victims of "spare the rod, spoil the child" doctrine, I knew not to press.

In the African-American community, regardless of denomination, being religious and accepting Jesus is almost a prerequisite to being black. It's more than pigmentation. It's a shared cultural experience that often comes with a religious test. Religion and cultural identity are nearly inextricable from one another. Though African Americans will reluctantly accept separation of church and state, they will not willingly accept separation of church and race.

It wasn't until I became hell-bent on disproving secularists' claims of moral equity and relativism—on addressing the challenges to my scripture—that I came to understand the fallacies of my own arguments. My very journey to validate my faith undid it. By the end of my exploration, I found I had given up my faith but also unwittingly signed over my "black card." I went from being a Doubting Thomas to also being an Uncle Tom.

I remember the feeling of abandonment when grappling with the realization that it was my belief (or lack of it) that caused the rift in my relationships. I recall receiving a text: "write back when you've found Jesus." There's no more belittling feeling than being told that your lifelong congregation had been asked to pray for your safe passage and deliverance from Satan, yet watch the church say nothing to condemn priestly pedophilia. I had to come to grips with the harsh truth that because my wedding was nonreligious, many of my friends would refuse to attend. A marriage without God, I was told, is invalid in the eyes of the Lord.

Eventually, I set my grief aside and set out to find other non-believers. When I did, I noticed that most didn't look like me and

did not share many of my cultural experiences. I was a minority within a minority. My story is not unique; many atheists and secular humanists of color share similar stories.

In 2008 I went to my first secular Meetup. I was terrified and felt alone. The lack of diversity didn't help much either. My children had begun feeling ostracized for not belonging to any of the local Dallas churches. At that time there was very little to do with children at these Meetup events, yet I kept bringing them along hoping they'd find children their ages. Eventually, other local atheists and families befriended us and went out of their way to make us feel welcome. As the need continued to present

"In the African-American community, regardless of denomination, being religious and accepting Jesus is almost a prerequisite to being black. . . . It's a shared cultural experience that often comes with a religious test."

itself, many of our families created an organization (the Fellowship of Freethought Dallas) that would grow to become the largest atheist group in North Texas. Its primary focus was on building a strong, diverse secular community based on family, outreach, and education. More important, my children found friends they needn't hide their disbelief from. My son, who happens to be autistic, often reminds me how hard it was to "pretend to believe" among his peer group. He no longer has to. My daughters got to play and explore, at an age where everything was and is a testable hypothesis, all without deferring to a god for explanation.


In 2010, after attending the African Americans for Humanism conference hosted by the Center for Inquiry—Washington, D.C., I set my sights on addressing the greater problem of diversity in my secular home while also setting out to build new levels of

understanding of secular humanism and atheism within the African-American community. That year I asked the leaders of the Dallas-Fort Worth Coalition of Reason to stand up and live diversity with me. We implemented a Diversity Council, where minority voices and issues would always be heard and always have a spot at the local table. Our coalition billboards, advertisements, and messages shifted from ideas to faces—all showing the diversity we knew existed. We featured a wide array of ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality. Our local coalition ballooned to over two thousand members (represented by over a dozen organizations), nearly 20 percent ethnically diverse and over 40 percent female (we're still working on that). We continue to see a steady increase in diversity interests at the local level, as well as increased secular activism on behalf of food banks, book drives, and school-supply drives for minority communities. Many of us

believers, which garnered support from across the country. We've seen upticks everywhere in interest and group affiliation, and online discussion groups regarding minorities and religion are emerging.

At March's Reason Rally in the nation's capital, we experienced unparalleled diverse representation from the likes of Jamila Bey, Ronnelle Adams, Victor Harris, and Indra Zuno. Many of our national groups are beginning to take notice and are themselves becoming more diverse.

In Atlanta, Mandisa Thomas, AAH activist and cofounder of Black Non-Believers, is challenging the atheist stereotype of academic elitism and working to reshape the local image of an open secular humanist movement—with a human face. Her AAH billboard was well received, and she continues promoting discourse in the South. Other AAH activists are steadily pounding the pavement at conferences and local Meetups, increasing visibility to a growing but sometimes overlooked segment of the population. In Chicago, Kimberly Veal, spokesperson for the AAH Chicago billboard campaign and cohost of Black Freethinker Radio, dares to take on even more challenging topics of faith and diversity, often spotlighting black humanists nationwide, connecting those that need connecting, and challenging the black religious standard. And in Dallas, we recently launched another billboard and movie theater ad campaign featuring images of secular families and taking back the phrase "family values."

Through heightened outreach and visibility, we hope to address the growing cluster of issues that many of our colleagues in academia tend to overlook. The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking that created them, so we're hoping to bridge the gap between secular scholarship and secular activism, bringing solutions to our communities wherever we can. Many of us believe in the same things that our best and brightest do. We also put education first, but translating that into a daily plan or purpose that is relevant to people's lives remains somewhat elusive. The human experience for the secular activist is not defined by how many debates are won but rather by how many lives we've touched and changed. 

"There's no more belittling feeling than being told that your lifelong congregation had been asked to pray for your safe passage and deliverance from Satan, yet watch the church say nothing to condemn priestly pedophilia."

volunteer at women's health clinics. We've taken the sanguine challenge (blood drives). We literally donate by the busload, and we jokingly wonder how many of the pious are walking around unknowingly with atheist blood pounding through their evangelical veins.

In February 2012, through the generosity of the Stiefel Freethought Foundation and the extraordinary hard work of Debbie Goddard and the CFI staff, the African Americans for Humanism (AAH) campaign launched a new awareness initiative during Black History Month. It showcased historical and modern African-American secular humanists on billboards. "Doubts about Religion? You're One of Many" was the theme. Our message was aimed nationally, yet we got responses from around the globe. The initiative allowed us to take the discussion in the minority community to a new level, from whispered taboo to (sometimes) verbal assault and denunciation from the pulpit. But *we are talking*. Social media has allowed countless segregated or displaced minority atheists to connect, and they are doing it as never before.

In Houston, AAH contributor, author, and former Baptist deacon Donald Wright launched a Day of Solidarity for black non-

Alix Jules is the chair and founder of the Dallas-Fort Worth Coalition of Reason's Diversity Council, founded with the mission of addressing the role of diversity in the local atheist community. He is also executive director for the Fellowship of Freethought Dallas, an organization based on providing community-building opportunities to freethinkers and secular families in North Texas.

Live Well and Help Others Live Well

Bill Cooke

The key insight that comes from being an atheist is that this life is the only one we have. We don't have religious people's luxury of explaining away real-time misery as a test of eligibility for a comfortable afterlife or as just retribution for an ignoble previous incarnation. This life is all we have. From that key moral insight of atheism comes the practical commitment of humanism. Mario Bunge rewrote the Golden Rule into the even simpler maxim, "Live well and help others live well." At first glance this might sound like a bland thing to say. Nothing could be further from the truth. If we care to look hard enough, the call to live well and help others live well has pulse-quickenning implications. Consider these examples.

Across Africa, many infants are left as orphans because their parents have died prematurely of HIV-AIDS. The attitude of the churches in this matter is shameful. Incredibly, rather than being brought before the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity, the church leaders responsible are promoted to archbishop and praised as moral exemplars. The Vatican's anathema against contraception is the single most important impediment to bringing the HIV-AIDS epidemic under control. What becomes of the most vulnerable victims, the children? Some are taken away by criminal gangs and brought up as pickpockets, beggars, or prostitutes. Some are purposely disfigured to make their begging seem all the more urgent. Others are sold overseas to childless couples. A few find their way to local orphanages. Quite a lot are simply left to fend for themselves as best they can.

George Ongere from the Center for Inquiry-Kenya has decided to do something about it. He started up a humanist adoption program and is in the process of getting official recognition from the government. Under this program, infants are housed safely before being adopted by selected local families. In this way, the children have as good a chance of a normal life *within their own society* as they would have had before the deaths of their parents.

Then there's the problem of superstition. In India recently, the Center for Inquiry arranged a series of talks for nursing students so they might be equipped to deal with the legion of fraudulent gurus and "godmen" who so bedevil the lives of the

poor, particularly in the countryside. The Center for Inquiry-India arranged for some respected medical and scientific personnel to speak to the nurses about the shabby tricks the godmen play on vulnerable people in the hope that the villagers will not fall for their tricks the next time one comes to the village.

I have seen this phenomenon firsthand, both in India and Africa. In Uganda I heard from a man who had been a witch doctor for fifteen years. He went around the villages and, so long as they paid, fed, and housed him—and ministered to whatever other needs he had—he would ensure that the rains came and would protect them and their crops from evil spirits. Eventually he tired of living this life of lies, threats, and extortion. He turned to help CFI show how the tricks are done and to warn people not to fall for them. In India, science teachers do this sort of work on their holidays. They go to the villages and show people the cheap tricks the godmen use to persuade them of their holiness.


"The next time you hear someone dismissing the battle against superstition as 'intolerant' or 'so twentieth century,' you will know that person is more interested in parading postmodern sophistication than in understanding and alleviating the suffering of millions of vulnerable people."

The next time you hear someone dismissing the battle against superstition as "intolerant" or "so twentieth century," you will know that person is more interested in parading postmodern sophistication than in understanding and alleviating the suffering of millions of vulnerable people. Superstition is a real danger that can scar people's lives. It can even kill people. The Atheist Centre in India has been involved, at the request of the Andhra Pradesh state government, in helping to damp down periodic witch crazes, during which innocent people suspected of witchcraft have been murdered. There's nothing "intolerant" or "twentieth

century” about being incensed at such unnecessary suffering.

Sometimes living well and helping others live well revolves around what one is thinking and saying. As Egypt slowly emerges from dictatorship following the Arab Spring, many young people have become disillusioned with the primitive Islamism being touted as the only alternative to the former government. Ideas of this sort are dangerous in Egypt, as they are in most Middle East countries. But that’s not stopping the Center for Inquiry–Cairo from pushing them as far as they can within the limits of their resources. Ideas have consequences, and CFI is doing its best to ensure those consequences involve freedom and democracy.

It’s imperative we don’t let the religionists walk off with the presumption that living a purpose-driven life is the exclusive pre-

serve of their faith. Around the world there are courageous humanists, many of them in the various Centers for Inquiry, who are doing incredible things with little or no money. These are good people doing good things. It’s that simple—there is no need for lengthy philosophical disquisition. Live well and help others live well. What a call to arms that is, if only we look far enough. 

Bill Cooke is director of International Programs at the Center for Inquiry and a senior editor of FREE INQUIRY. His most recent book is *A Wealth of Insights: Humanist Thought Since the Enlightenment* (Prometheus Books, 2011).

Grief Beyond Belief

Rebecca Hensler

Caretaking, the most traditionally feminine of roles, was not the way I expected to enter a movement. I’ve been an activist my entire adult life. And yet, I find myself joining the uprising of unbelievers not as a firebrand or organizer but as founder of a community of comfort and compassion.

Grief Beyond Belief (GBB) is an online grief-support network—currently simply a Facebook page—for those who do not believe in any god or any form of life after death. Within this community, members share the struggle of mourning the death of a loved one without the false comforts of heaven or spiritual-

return to faith when I learned at almost five months that Jude was growing inside me with congenital diaphragmatic hernia, a birth defect that left him with a one-in-ten chance of survival.

Friends and family offered to pray for him, and I let them—to a wide variety of deities: Christian, Jewish, Hindu, pagan. But I knew that if my son survived it would be due to the extraordinary medical care he received and his innate will to live, not to the intercession of any supernatural power.

Doctors, nurses, and medical technology gave us ninety days with our son. Those days were filled with terror but also with the joys of feeling my baby’s hand holding my finger, seeing curiosity in his eyes, watching him recognize cause and effect in the swaying of his favorite toy above his hospital bed. Then, on September 7, 2009, his tiny lungs unable to supply his growing body with oxygen, Jude died in my arms.

I don’t remember much about the weeks that followed. Our family held a secular memorial with the friends who

had fed us and supported us and rooted for Jude throughout his short life. I returned to my job as a school counselor. I worked through the days and I cried at night.

Three months later, I discovered online grief support. It was, so to speak, a mixed blessing. A daily Facebook post from The Compassionate Friends, a mainstream parental grief-support organization, gave me a few minutes every day to be with my own grief, to write about my sorrow, and to discover how many

“I found myself alienated by other grieving parents’ constant talk of being reunited with their children someday. I had no patience with credulous stories of signs from beloved sons and daughters.”

ism—and safe from the intrusion of other people’s religious beliefs. Had GBB existed in the fall of 2009, it would have been just what I needed.

I was raised a secular Jew, interpreting the Torah as mythology rather than gospel. In my teens and twenties I developed my own cobbled-together brand of spirituality; in my late thirties I dismissed it for lack of evidence. By the time I became pregnant with my son Jude, I had let go of spirituality entirely. I made no move to

bereaved parents shared my feelings—from my dread of the drugstore baby aisle to the soothing warmth of hearing Jude’s name spoken. At the same time, I found myself alienated by other grieving parents’ constant talk of being reunited with their children someday. I had no patience with credulous stories of signs from beloved sons and daughters. Every time a mother referred to the day her child died as his or her “angelday” brought me one step closer to the obvious conclusion: what I really needed would not be found through mainstream grief support.

“I’m thinking,” I told my friend Greta Christina one evening, “that maybe I should start an online group just for grieving atheist parents.” She said it was a good idea. Atheist bloggers had been writing recently about the question of how to support those in the atheist community who were mourning. She suggested that I think about expanding the idea beyond parents to other grieving nonbelievers.

While I knew that made sense, I also remember thinking, “I’m not trying to serve a community. I just want a place that doesn’t exist. I want it badly enough to build it myself.”

But I recognized the need, and not just in people who already identified as atheists. If anything, it was even more raw in those who had been believers until the death of a loved one—often a particularly unjust-feeling death, such as the death of a child or a death by homicide—compelled the rejection of faith. For those new nonbelievers, especially those surrounded by religious friends and family members, the support of other grieving nonbelievers might ease the transition to rational thought despite the overwhelming pain of bereavement.

A year passed before I had healed enough to help others. I spent the spring of 2011 wrestling with the details of creating a space that would welcome a range of nonbelievers, from lifelong atheists irritated by the slightest intimation of an afterlife to lifelong Christians struggling to let go of long-held faith in God and heaven.

On June 19, 2011, with invaluable support from atheist bloggers, GBB went online as a Facebook page. In eight days, over one thousand people had “liked” the page, some simply to show encouragement but many to seek support. They posted moving tributes to dead loved ones and frustrated rants about the ways believers made grieving harder for them. Commenters responded to the former with prayer-free sympathy and to the latter with sympathetic anger. People were actually using the space for the purpose for which it was built: to take care of each other. One year and 3,800 “likes” later, they still are.

But building a sound structure without blueprints isn’t easy; I never know where cracks will occur. Abuse and evangelism are the easy problems, solved with the “Delete” button. Sometimes it must be explained that faith-free means no reincarnation, no psychic communication, and no spirits as well as no heaven or angels. While I feel compassion for the “not religious but spiri-

tual” who feel equally unserved by mainstream grief support, GBB remains free of mysticism as well as mythology. More difficult are the moments in which the needs of those struggling with the temptation to believe in some sort of afterlife conflict with the needs of those who require the absolute absence of such ideas in order to feel safe.

When GBB began, the majority of members, having learned about the page through atheist and humanist websites, identified strongly as nonbelievers. When an article about the page ran in *USA Today*, awareness of faith-free grief support spread to a much wider range of people.

Following its publication, a painful situation arose. A father, in agony at the death of his beloved son, began posting about his obsession with a theory of quantum physics he believed might allow for his son to still exist somewhere in the multiverse, an idea both scientific-seeming and comforting. However, for a widow who had been participating on the page for months, this man’s posts verged on evangelism; at GBB, she sought complete

“Every time a mother referred to the day her child died as his or her ‘angelday’ brought me one step closer to the obvious conclusion: what I really needed would not be found through mainstream grief support.”

freedom from any concept of life-after-death. Had the conflict been about anything other than the most painful experience in either of their lives, they might have engaged in an interesting debate about the border between belief and science. As it was, even with my best efforts at mediation, neither felt the sense of solace and safety that GBB was created to provide.

Under the best of conditions, mutual grief support still has its limitations. Ultimately if our community is to address the “complicated grief” of some losses, trained secular grief counselors will be required. Not just counselors who leave questions about faith out of their practice, but counselors who incorporate research-based knowledge, secular humanism, and the successful grief-management strategies of other nonbelievers into their practice. If secular grief counselors are not available outside of certain urban centers, we must find ways to make sure that training in secular grief counseling is available. At the very least, we can increase awareness of the needs of the growing secular population at hospital and hospice-based counseling programs.


One of the future goals of GBB is to help those who are grieving find professional support by providing a directory of secular

therapists as well as secular support groups and secular funeral officiants. Thus, in the future, GBB will grow beyond Facebook to establishing its own independent website, including discussion boards and a blog, as well as this directory.

In the meantime, we will take care of each other, learning along the way that the growing secular support movement requires not merely the absence of comforting mythology but the presence of rational compassion.

Atheist and skeptical writers, speakers, and scientists already excel at making logical arguments and pointing out fallacies. Now we must learn to listen as well as we speak, to comfort as well as we dispute. In this way, as a community, we are beginning both to better address the emotional needs of those within the atheist world and to provide what Greta Christina calls a “safe place to land” for those leaving religion, including those whose rejection of religion involved death or loss.

And something new is happening at Grief Beyond Belief. In the past two months, members have started posting links to new Facebook pages and groups they have formed. “If you’re tired of being told ‘It’s God’s plan!’ then this page is for you,” states Coping With Illness & Disability, Without Faith. Another page offers “Secular Support for victims of domestic abuse.” And a grieving mother has founded a warm, empathetic network in the group Baby Loss Support for Agnostic & Atheist Moms.

It’s just what I needed. 

Rebecca Hensler majored in political activism at Brown University and earned her master’s degree in Counseling at San Francisco State University. She works as a middle-school counselor in the Bay Area. Following the death of her infant son, Jude, in 2009, Hensler founded the online secular grief-support network Grief Beyond Belief.

Humanists Care about Humans!

Bob Stevenson

One of the greatest pleasures in life is to be able to help those we care about, even if it’s a stranger on the street or a stray cat. And conversely, one of the greatest torments is to be unable to help those we care about—we may lack the knowledge, talent, money, or opportunity to step in. It’s an experience common to all.

Many years ago, after I retired and moved to Daytona Beach, Florida, I was very happy to enjoy the sun, sand, and leisure and to travel a bit. But I soon discovered that Daytona Beach—with its auto races, bike weeks, and spring breaks—was a party town, and “party” was defined as getting drunk or high or both. I was also amazed to find that even many of the locals (not just the tourists) believed that the point of life was to party.

Of course, there is a downside to hedonism, and many of these people were in serious trouble—they had lost jobs and families, had been convicted of DUIs and served jail time, and had health problems and suffered emotional vacuums. So to find some purpose for myself, I began working with people with addiction problems.

A few years later, in 1995, local activists Jim Strayer and Mimi Cerniglia and I attended a secular humanist group monthly lunch meeting in Winter Park, Florida. The group was affiliated with the Council for Secular Humanism and led by André Spuhler. We were told about a humanist meeting to be held at Rollins College

in Winter Park and decided to go. One of the presentations was about Rational Recovery (RR), and for the first time we realized there was an alternative to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and the other twelve-step religious recovery programs. We were determined to ensure that our community was offered a secular alternative for addiction recovery from alcohol and other drugs.

After that meeting, we established Rational Recovery of Daytona Beach. Our work immediately gained credibility by being associated with an international organization. Later, when the founder of Rational Recovery, Jack Trimpey, decided to eliminate RR groups, we changed our affiliation to SOS (Secular Organizations for Sobriety/Save Our Selves), which was founded by James Christopher and is affiliated with the Council for Secular Humanism. Now, seventeen years later, we still meet weekly—currently at the City Island Library in downtown Daytona Beach.

SOS is a nonprofit network of autonomous, nonprofessional local groups dedicated solely to helping individuals achieve and maintain sobriety. SOS is not a spin-off of any religious group; there is no hidden “higher power” agenda. We are concerned with sobriety, not religiosity.

Most of the “experts” on addiction believe that the most important factor for recovery is motivation. Does the person want to overcome the compulsion? “Want” comes from the emotional part of the brain, not the intellect, and is very power-

ful. Statistically, most who overcome an addiction are approaching middle age, and although the addictive behavior was fun and exciting in the beginning, it now causes serious problems and pain, and they want to quit. We try to remember that it's impossible to change someone's mind—only he or she can do that. The most we can do is to offer some verifiable facts and hope to encourage an "Aha!" moment.

In 2003, we began weekly meetings at the Volusia County Correctional Facility (VCCF), and the results have been phenomenal. Our classroom has only twenty-five chairs, and from the beginning we've had to turn people away for lack of space. Unlike other recovery groups where most people are forced to attend (by judges, probation officers, employers, spouses, etc.), all those taking part in our SOS meetings are there *by choice*.

In both SOS and Rational Recovery, the groups are independent. Program presentation can vary significantly from group to group. The addiction program we present is unique in many respects. It covers all addictive behaviors and is not restricted to just alcohol or drugs. It is not based on old books or "sure-cure" formulas but rather on the latest scientific information. The materials we bring to the jail each week consist of numerous books and periodicals and seven folios of current reports and articles relating to different aspects of addiction, from cigarettes and alcohol to cannabis, meth, and prescription pills. Other resources range from Albert Ellis and his rational-emotive psychology to Ronald A. Ruden, whose 2000 book *The Craving Brain* details the results of his research with functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI).

DVDs are shown (in part) at meetings. They include *Hidden Motives* from Scientific American; *SOS—Save Our Selves* by SOS founder James Christopher; *Brains, Rewards and Addiction* from the University of California at San Diego; *Addiction*, a four-hour HBO documentary; a four-hour documentary from A&E, *Hooked—Illegal Drugs and How They Got That Way*; the Nova episode "Search for a Safe Cigarette"; the ABC News feature "The War on Drugs," and more.

We begin each session by stating that SOS presenters do not claim to be experts on any subject—especially addiction. Those who write the books and articles we recommend claim to be experts but still should be read skeptically. At each meeting we present a short overview of SOS for the benefit of those who have not attended before. We also tailor the meetings to the needs of those who attend, which currently seem to center on prescription medications, meth, and pot.

We never tell anyone to quit any substance, but if they have reached the point where they wish to overcome an addiction, we


offer some suggestions that may be helpful. We stress the biology of addiction and the fact that each individual is unique genetically and in the experiences that he or she has had. Therefore, every individual must craft a unique solution. If one solution fails, he or she is encouraged to try another.

VCCF is a valuable venue for us. Outside of penal settings, many SOS attendees are still using and fear the discomfort of discontinuing their drug of choice. At VCCF all attendees are drug-free and not currently addicted. For them the challenge is to remain that way after release. This takes planning and commit-

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ment; we hope they can gain some of the skills they will need while participating in our SOS meetings.

SOS is about achieving and maintaining sobriety through personal responsibility and self-reliance. Those of us who present the SOS program are not experts: we simply attempt to deliver facts about addiction and let the members arrive at their own conclusions. We try to avoid discussing any of our personal views, and we encourage healthy skepticism. We can't take responsibility for the recovery of others, but SOS is a very satisfying endeavor for me because we give people the facts and help them recognize that only they can craft a meaningful plan and carry it out.

For more information on SOS, please visit www.sossobriety.org.
—Eds. 

Bob Stevenson is the volunteer coordinator of CFI—Daytona Beach and the founder of Rational Recovery of Daytona Beach, now affiliated with SOS (Secular Organizations for Sobriety/Save Our Selves). He shared his sophomore year at the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce with Warren Buffett. Noam Chomsky attended Pennsylvania State University at the same time; Stevenson regrets that he does not remember meeting either of them.

Not Enough Marthas

Reba Boyd Wooden

In my years of attending church services, I heard the following story many times:

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42)

I always thought that Jesus had it backward. I identified more with Martha and thought she was doing the right thing by being the action person rather than just sitting around and listening.

"I was especially proud of the participation of other organizations in our first Indiana Civic Day at the Indiana State House in February of this year."

I first discovered secular humanism about fifteen years ago. I attended some national events and learned that there were local groups in some communities but none in Indiana. So I started the Humanist Friendship Group (a secular humanist group affiliated with the Council for Secular Humanism), which has since evolved into the Center for Inquiry-Indiana.

Discussions about philosophy, religion, skepticism, books, magazines, blogs, national conferences, and billboards are important in order to define and promote our mission and our ideals. However, if we are going to promote science, reason, and freedom of inquiry to the general public—to the average voter, to those who elect our officials and shape the tone of our country's public opinion—we must continue to develop local groups, communities, and centers. We must take the proactive approach and show the world that we have something positive to offer.

To this end, CFI-Indiana, like many other CFI branches, offers a full roster of programming for our diverse membership. One aspect on which I have worked hard over the past thirteen years

is raising the profile of our group by networking with other local organizations that share specific goals. By joining coalitions and the boards of other organizations, I have been able to put a face on CFI-Indiana. We are recognized, known to the people in these organizations. We are involved in supporting each other, and we work together to achieve our public policy goals.

I was especially proud of the participation of other organizations in our first Indiana Civic Day at the Indiana State House in February of this year. CFI-Indiana organized this event, and we impressed those in other organizations by illustrating what we could achieve. We invited the local chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AU) to cosponsor with us. Barry Lynn, AU's executive director, was one of the speakers. We also had presenters from Planned Parenthood of Indiana, Jewish Community Relations Council, Indiana Equality Action, and Coalition for Public Education.

We have worked with all these groups on issues for which we share a common goal, and we are now recognized by all of them as a major ally and supporter. The purpose of Indiana Civic Day was to educate our members and others about the public policy issues we face in Indiana and encourage them to be active in trying to influence the political climate in our state.

CFI-Indiana is a member of the Health Access and Privacy Alliance (HAPA), a coalition concerned principally with reproductive issues. Certain lawmakers introduce many bills every year that would curb the rights of women to make choices about their own health care. Members of CFI-Indiana and I have attended hearings on these bills and have written e-mails and letters expressing our point of view.


A proposed amendment to the Indiana Constitution would outlaw same-sex marriage in the state, even though an existing law already does so. Indiana has one of the most extensive school voucher laws in the country; predictably, most of the money goes to private religious schools. In addition, this year an Indiana senator introduced a bill to allow the teaching of "creation science" in public school classrooms.

I testified before the Senate Education Committee against the creation-science bill and before the House Education Committee against a bill that would extend the already problematic school-voucher program. CFI's Public Policy Director Michael De Dora, CFI President and CEO Ronald A. Lindsay, and I drafted a letter that was sent to the members of the Senate Education

Committee opposing the creation science bill. Many of our CFI members also wrote letters and e-mails. Other organizations in Indiana, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, spoke out against it. One senator acknowledged that he had received a lot of e-mail opposing the bill and that he even received a letter from an "atheist organization." The bill passed the Senate, but the speaker of the House, now aware of potential lawsuits that might be filed because of it, refused to hear it in the House.

I consider our Indiana Civic Day at the statehouse a high point, as was our work against the creation science bill. At the international level, the recent Reason Rally attended by twenty thousand people in Washington, D.C., in March was a real milestone. I think our time has come. People not affiliated with any religion are the fastest growing demographic according to pollsters. We need to be there for these people. This time has been

hailed as the New Enlightenment. Only a few brave people have the courage to lead the charge, to be an active and vocal part of the minority. Soon there will be a critical mass; on that day, others who were not courageous enough to be in the minority will move our way, and we will become the majority.

All we need are more Marthas. 

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The Making of an Angry Atheist Advocate

EllenBeth Wachs

"I'm sorry, Your Honor, but I haven't been sworn in yet." As I stood in the courtroom in Bartow, Polk County, Florida, in August of 2011, the judge looked at me in utter confusion. His clerk had administered the typical religious oath to the mass of defendants awaiting their turn at the bench. My attorney interrupted, "My client would like to affirm, Your Honor." With that out of the way, the trumped-up criminal charges that had been brought against me were dismissed. The state attorney for the Tenth Judicial Circuit sought a quick resolution of the nonsense, because he realized that it was not in the state's best interest to move forward to trial. Instead, he offered a settlement agreement that dismissed the felony charges against me and averted convictions on all charges. I had to plead no contest to a paraphernalia charge, but adjudication would be withheld. I had turned the offer down flat the first time it was made, but after two more months, thousands of dollars more in legal fees, and my life on hold, it seemed silly not to accept. I had been facing twenty-two years in prison if convicted on all the charges.

The arrests were part of a retaliatory strategy by the evangelical Christian sheriff of Polk County, Grady Judd, to suppress my activism in church-state separation matters: specifically, my investigation into Judd's transfer of jail basketball goals to eight area churches. Sheriff Judd has proudly stated that he is on a "mission

from God" and keeps a Bible prominently displayed on his department's office desk.

I was arrested on the first felony in March 2011 for "practicing law without a license." The charge stemmed from my use of "Esq." (an honorific used by practicing and retired attorneys) with my signature on public records requests to Judd, which asked for information about the jail sports equipment transfers. I discovered that the basketball equipment that was taken from the jail was not the same equipment that was given to the churches. Judd whipped out the sheriff's department credit card and purchased new equipment to give to religious facilities, all as a publicity stunt for himself. He saw that I was not going away and was making quite the news story about this issue.

Sheriff Judd dispatched over a dozen deputies in SWAT attire to arrest me at home and to conduct a search of my residence while deputies held my two part-time employees at gunpoint. They left my house in shambles with furniture overturned, car doors left open, every single light and fan left on, and my underwear drawer pulled out and obviously rifled through. (I understand lawyers are known for their briefs, but this was taking it too seriously.) They seized all of my business computers, my cell phone, my driver's license and, ridiculously, my iPod and *Buns of Steel* workout video. Most telling, they seized all of the docu-

ments that I received in response to my records requests about the jail basketball transfers. These documents revealed a more serious church-state violation that was occurring within Sheriff Judd's department. I had discussed this violation with members of my organization, and strategy about this was on my computer that had been seized.

In May, I was again arrested at my home. Obviously, I was a threat. Based on a neighbor's report that he and his child had allegedly heard a sexual sound coming from the privacy of my home forty-eight days prior, I was charged with "lewd and lascivious conduct within the vicinity of a minor" (emphasis added), a felony. Can you imagine the ramifications of this charge if I had been convicted? Parents would have had nightmares figuring out how to have sex. My bail from my previous arrest was revoked and I was detained in solitary confinement in Sheriff Judd's jail for six days without my multiple sclerosis medication, until a bail hearing determined I would be released under certain conditions. I had to call in to the county twice a week and had an 8:00 P.M.–9:00 A.M. curfew. Because I work from home, I was basically under house arrest.

"Obviously, I was a threat. Based on a neighbor's report that he and his child had allegedly heard a sexual sound coming from the privacy of my home forty-eight days prior, I was charged with 'lewd and lascivious conduct within the vicinity of a minor' (emphasis added), a felony."

Most members of the local community were outraged. I had support from the local paper, which published multiple editorials lambasting government officials for their persecution of me. The atheist/humanist community rallied support fairly quickly as well. Bloggers chimed in from around the world. Some were rather amusing, some not so much. Of course, there was the predictable response from those that didn't bother to gather any facts but jumped to conclusions. When this happened within the secular community, I was the most disappointed. A petition was started on my behalf and close to five thousand people from around the world signed it within months. As to be expected, the hate mail poured in. The support mail came as well.

My arrests were very curiously timed. I am the lead plaintiff in ongoing civil litigation against the City of Lakeland seeking to stop Christian prayers at City Commission meetings. Each arrest came right before I was to testify in my deposition. Furthermore,

the affiants in the arrest warrant were Mayor Gow Fields, the defendant in my lawsuit, Anne Gibson, Grady Judd's legal affairs coordinator, and Stacy Butterfield, who works for the county clerk, used to work for Gibson, and is treasurer of my homeowner's association. My next-door neighbor, who was responsible for the second arrest, works for Mayor Fields and the City of Lakeland as a firefighter, and his brother is a Lakeland police officer. The players in this drama are so intertwined, a flowchart would be necessary to keep them all straight. For brevity and, to some degree, clarity I have left a few conspirators out.

It later came to light that prior to my first arrest, a large prayer event had been held in Lakeland called Polk Under Prayer (PUP), in which Grady Judd, Gow Fields, and Sherrie Nickell, the superintendent of the Polk County School District, participated. Two weeks prior to this, I had been at a Polk County School Board meeting and protested the board giving Christian prayers there. Nickell and Kay Fields, the board chair and Gow Field's wife, were responsible for having me thrown out and given a trespass warning.

PUP was organized by Richard Geringswald, a man who has been hounding me since I appeared on the scene as an activist.

He has come to every event I have put on, even going so far as to put up a blockade at a planned photo shoot of my "One Nation Indivisible" billboard. At one meeting in which I participated, he informed the Lakeland City Commission that "atheists have no right to speak" and slammed his fist for emphasis as he declared "this is our house," meaning that the City Commission meeting belonged to its Christian residents and not to atheists.


During PUP, participants went to multiple county borders with the following purpose: "A strip of anointed oil has been placed over all lanes of highway at the county line and a prayer has been given at each location asking God to bring them to have angels inspect every vehicle that travels into or out of this county and to bring under conviction to those who seek evil and we asked God to bring them to a state of submission and repentance. *If they will not submit to God's way of living, then the prayer is to have them incarcerated or removed from the county*" (emphasis added). I was arrested two days later.

To stop any further religiously motivated persecution against me, I sued Sheriff Judd in Federal District Court in June, seeking an injunction and asserting that his actions, which included the two arrests and a search of my home, violated my civil rights. Immediately after this lawsuit was filed, the state attorney approached my attorney seeking a resolution. When the charges were dropped, I voluntarily ended my lawsuit. If Judd harasses me again, I can reinstate it.

In March 2012, after hearing about PUP from my talk at the joint conference of the Center for Inquiry and the Council for Secular Humanism in Orlando, an outraged supporter and friend

organized the “Un-Anointing of Polk.” Representatives from multiple atheist/humanist groups went to a Polk County line to symbolically “wash” away the anointed oil and open the county to all. The response was immediate and outrageous. The story went viral and was picked up by news outlets around the country and even overseas. The Christian community was horrified that their sacred spot had been desecrated. The salient point lost on them was that the spot in the road had been picked at random, since there was no way to know where the oil had been placed previously. So much for symbolism!

What is the moral of my story? Atheists and secular humanists sometimes lament the effect of people they call “angry atheists.” They assume that we’d be more effective as a movement if we’d all put on a happy face and work with religious people in support of our common goals and values rather than focusing on

“delusions” and the ruinous effects of religious beliefs. This may work in some areas of the country, but it is misguided to think it is possible everywhere. The hostility that atheists face is not always caused by the tone the atheists take. I wasn’t really an angry atheist until the Christians of Polk County started persecuting me. Now I’m damn near apoplectic, and I will continue to fight back—angrily. 

EllenBeth Wachs is a retired attorney, the president of Humanists of Florida Association, and the acting president of Atheists of Florida, Inc. Her personal philosophy can be summarized as “Treat cats like gods.”

Taking Care of Our Own

Hemant Mehta

Last October, the thirty-member-strong Mid Ohio Atheists decided to run a billboard campaign in the city of Mansfield in order to let other atheists know they weren’t alone. Director of Communications Michael Adams posted a message on both the group’s blog and Facebook page asking for design submissions but received no responses. While members were quick to suggest the wording for the sign, no one had the skills necessary to design the actual billboard.

That didn’t deter Adams from giving it a shot himself. After all, what was more important: the message or the way it looked? Eager for his group to make its mark, he created a design himself, modeling it after one frequently used by the United Coalition of Reason—with a cloud background, a Scarlet A, and the message, “Don’t believe in God? Neither do we!” At the bottom of the billboard was the group’s web address. Adams was proud of what he had accomplished and hoped others (especially closet atheists in the area) would take notice.

The group then faced the difficult task of raising \$2,200 to put up the billboard (plus additional boards that had already been planned in advance). Incredibly, they raised the money. The idea of letting the community know atheists were a part of it was too good to pass up. Everyone in the group seemed excited about the signs.

After the contracts were signed—but before the billboards went up—I posted an image of the design on my website. And then the criticism began. There weren’t suggestions about how to make the sign look better or how an alternative message might have been more effective but rather just unhelpful attacks on the group’s best attempt.

Commenters denounced the lack of professional design, calling the signs “tacky,” “hideous,” and “low-rent.” Adams was stunned—his group had already raised over \$2,000 to put the billboards up, and getting to that point already represented several months’ worth of work. The last thing he was going to do was ask members for an additional \$500 to hire a professional designer. It’s not like any of the critics were offering to hand over the money! Where were they when he had asked for help? he wondered. And why weren’t people appreciative of the effort to simply get the message out?

Other people barraged with that kind of criticism might very well decide never to manage such a campaign again. Or worse, eager activists subjected to such vilification could end up leaving the movement altogether. After all, why bother with activism when your best efforts aren’t supported by the people who are supposed to be on your side?

This isn’t just a case of some people lacking thick skins. This is a case of people who likely believe themselves to be kind and compassionate to others—but put them in front of a computer and they are anything but humanistic to people with whom they find fault. Make an honest mistake, and they’ll come after you.

It seems like this is a common occurrence in the online secular community these days—and since that’s the area I’m most familiar with, I’ll limit my comments to that. As soon as there’s a disagreement with other atheists—over sociopolitical views, the way we interact with religious people, activism methods, or even the nature of elevators—we turn on the “demonize” switch without a second thought. It’s true that atheists are alike only in the fact that we don’t believe in God, but one would hope more of

us would treat each other with respect when we disagree. It's not enough, it seems, to use reason and logic to pick apart another person's argument. We also have to resort to name-calling or imply that the person is a traitor to our cause. I've heard atheist "firebrands" say that they support having more diverse voices in the conversation only to throw those attempting an alternative approach under the bus. Forget any potential merits to the alternatives; the battle is won only when you've made yourself feel superior.

"After the contracts were signed—but before the billboards went up—I posted an image of the design on my website. And then the criticism began."

When atheist philosopher Alain de Botton suggested that atheists could benefit from co-opting traditions that religious groups had mastered over the centuries (like eating together at communal tables), blogger PZ Myers explained why he had problems with some of de Botton's ideas—but not without also letting everyone know they could "take a moment to retch" after hearing them ("Oh, Please," *Pharyngula*, January 26) and not without tossing in a "fuck you very much" to de Botton ("I Am Officially Disgusted with Alain de Botton," *Pharyngula*, February 28). I guess that's how reasonable, respectful discourse works.

Not everyone does this, of course, but it's prevalent enough in the blogging community to be a serious problem. (I'm sure readers who disagree with me are already plotting out how they'll call me a "tone troll.")

Republican strategist Edwina Rogers's selection as the new executive director of the Secular Coalition for America was obviously an unorthodox choice. But there was also a notable advantage to having a nontheistic Republican as the face of the "atheist lobby"—she knew the very people the SCA had struggled for years to make inroads with, and she felt she had the potential to get them on our side regarding issues concerning atheists. I expected to hear people say, "Let's wait and see what she'll do," or "Let's give her the benefit of the doubt." Some did, but even many of those comments seemed like they were made with gritted teeth and a subtext of "I can't believe the SCA did that." Some didn't even wait for results and suggested that the SCA had

"gone off the deep end" or called Rogers a "despicable right-wing political hack." All that before she ever took any significant actions in her new role.


Where's the humanism in all this? Where's the compassion? Where's the respectful disagreement based on evidence and reason? Why must every critique be laced with sarcasm and mockery? Why are some atheists resorting to the very tactics we abhor in our cultural enemies?

No doubt there are legitimate reasons to criticize others within our movement. For example, blogger Greta Christina's criticism of Rogers's statements indicating ignorance of the GOP's hard-Right stance on social issues such as abortion and gay rights were specific and measured. I'm not opposed to calling out atheists when they say something wrong. When Sam Harris said on his website that we ought to profile Muslims (somehow) at the airport because they are the most likely terrorist suspects, many critics explained the flaws in his logic in a calm, rational way. It was an actual debate on the merits of a politically incorrect idea. (And, in my view, Harris was on the losing end of it.) But, as you can imagine, many atheists immediately filed Harris under their mental list of bigots without actually disputing any of his claims.

We're supposed to be better than that. We have a "post first, ask questions later" mentality when we could (in many cases) just write the other person an e-mail or call them to hash out disagreements. But part of being in an Internet-based community is that we air our dirty laundry for the world to see even when it hurts us all in the long run.

Is that an exaggeration? Perhaps. But the symptoms of that mentality are all over the place. We end up with Pyrrhic victories, alienating many people who are still on the fence and who are hesitant to speak up lest someone tear them down for making an unwitting mistake. There's no reason we can't point out the problems in others' arguments in a gentle, helpful way. So why do so many of us choose a different path?

After the first billboard campaign ended (abruptly, after billboard owner Lind Outdoor found the statements to be "offensive to much of the community"), the Mid Ohio Atheists decided to hold a contest for their next one. They would accept designs from anyone, hold a vote, and pay for the winner's submission to be featured on a billboard. They received twenty-nine entries. I posted some of my favorites on my website.

As soon as I did, the first comment came in: "Graphically, they all look terrible. . . ." 

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A Tale of Two Tomes

Michael B. Paulkovich

The original *Catholic Encyclopedia* (which I shall hereafter refer to as *CE1907*) was published in fifteen volumes over the period 1907–1913. It is an impressive, respectable production. Largely, I cannot argue with its introductory claim, to be a work of “the foremost Catholic scholars in every part of the world . . . with the accuracy that satisfies the scholar” (Preface, v–vi). The list of esteemed contributors is more than just impressive. Yet one surprising thing (perhaps) is that the *Encyclopedia*, while hopelessly dogmatic, is so intellectually honest that its venerable volumes often (seemingly unwittingly) shoot the Christian magisterium directly in its own faithful foot, reducing Jesus stories to mere myths and conceding their plagiarisms from other belief systems with exhaustive research and unimpeachable citations.

CE1907 offers both ends of the spectrum, from mythical to historical. It admits to dozens of diabolical church-begat forgeries. It confesses many Christian-led atrocities wherein thousands, even millions, of innocent people were murdered by religious forces, including by burning at the stake. (Note that the 1907 set was updated and republished in 1967. We shall, as we must, touch upon the reworked volumes later.)*

Then there is a modern namesake, largely unrelated, edited by Robert C. Broderick and first issued in 1986 by Thomas Nelson Publishers (*CE1986*). It is subtitled *Revised and Updated* but is of kinship to *CE1907* in name only, comprising one shameless volume. I acquired a barely worn paperback copy secondhand for about the price of a bag of kitty litter. Surely, eighty years after *CE1907*, and in less credulous times, a book appropriating such a lofty moniker would have progressed to the point of even more enlightenment and historical and scientific accuracy.

Let us explore some articles in the original multivolume work, compare it to *CE1986*, and see how each stands up regarding scholarship, honesty, and verity.

Sorcerers

“Jesus,” proclaims *CE1986*, “empowered the Apostles to drive out devils” (161); in addition, the Israelites practiced “magical arts” (366), citing Jeremiah 27:9, Micah 5:11, and Malachai 3:5. According to *CE1986*, “Christ has the power over the devil and evil spirits and can free souls and bodies from their domination.” Yet *CE1986* refers to *magic* as “superstition” and says that it is “contrary to the

*Sixty years after its publication, *CE1907* was vastly updated and issued as the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, first published in 1967 in fifteen volumes, with a second edition in 2002.

virtue of religion and the theological virtue of hope.”

Missing from *CE1986* is any article specifically on witches, wizards, or sorcerers. Yet millions were caught up in the Christian maelstrom over the centuries, accused of witchcraft or sorcery, then tortured and murdered with full papal precedent and sanction. The reason for all this, throughout the centuries, lies primarily in Exodus 22:18, “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” Yet, Exodus is not the only biblical authority promoting hatred of the fictional entity called the “witch” (or wizard or sorcerer, depending upon which of the many Bible versions you might choose). You will find the same malignant beliefs promoted in Deuteronomy 18:10–12, Leviticus 20:27, 2 Chronicles 33:6, Micah 5:12, and 1 Samuel 28:3.

Paul, in Galatians 5:19–21, joins the Old Testament anti-witchcraft credo. But let’s face it, Paul was a pious Hebrew full of credulity and misogyny. Paul will also “suffer not a woman to teach.” Neither would St. Cyril, it seems—torture and death being Hypatia’s punishment for teaching science, math, and philosophy, as discussed later.

“The original Catholic Encyclopedia . . . while hopelessly dogmatic, is so intellectually honest that its venerable volumes often (seemingly unwittingly) shoot the Christian magisterium directly in its own faithful foot.”

CE1907 on Witchcraft

“It is not easy to draw a clear distinction between magic and witchcraft. Both are concerned with the producing of effects beyond the natural powers of man by agencies other than the Divine,” our *CE1907* admits (vol. 15, 674), “but in witchcraft, as commonly understood, there is involved the idea of a diabolical pact or at least an appeal to the intervention of the spirits of evil.” It claims that “witches or wizards . . . entered into a compact with Satan” and “paid Divine honour to the Prince of Darkness.”

CE1907 hypothesizes that magical powers of witches must really exist, simply because the Bible does not state otherwise. It is honest (and naïve) in its admission: “Supposing that the belief in witchcraft were an idle superstition, it would be strange that

the suggestion should nowhere [in the Bible] be made that the evil of these practices only lay in the pretending to the possession of powers which did not really exist" (vol. 15, 674).

CE1907 confesses many witch-related atrocities performed by the church throughout history, as in volume 15 (675): "In the third century, the punishment of burning alive was enacted by the State against witches who compassed another person's death through their enchantments." The Council of Ancyra (314 C.), in canon XXIV "imposes five years of penance upon those who consult magicians."

The church's mad and genocidal oppression of the Cathars is alluded to here: "At Toulouse, the hot-bed of Catharan infection . . . we meet in 1275 the earliest example of a witch burned to death after judicial sentence of an inquisitor." The woman was "probably half crazy," and she confessed to "having brought forth a monster after intercourse with an evil spirit," claims our 1907 work. It is honest again in admitting that the "possibility of such carnal intercourse between human beings and demons was

deadly peril of their own souls, whereby they outrage the Divine Majesty and are a cause of scandal and danger to very many."

You may be wondering: "But witch hunts ended long ago, didn't they?" According to the humanitarian news service IRIN, in places such as Indonesia, Tanzania, the Congo, and Ghana, fundamentalist Christians still pursue and execute "witches." They even murder child "sorcerers." To this day in Malawi, accused witches are routinely jailed.

Like many Christians, a born-again friend told me that "Jesus came along and changed everything." Only a very selective reading of the New Testament can adduce this assertion. I must point out that Jesus believed in a number of unlikely biblical events: Noah's ark (Matt. 24:37 and Luke 17:27); Adam and Eve (Luke 3:38); Jonah living in a fish or whale (Matt. 12:40); and Lot's wife turning into salt (Luke 17:31–32). Jesus even bought into the absurd notion (John 3:14) that a magical pole proffered in the Old Testament (Num 21:9) could cure snakebites merely by one gazing upon it. Was Jesus no smarter than a fifth grader?

Virgin Birth Prophecy

CE1986 insists that Mary "did not lose her virginity, either physical or spiritual" (601). It claims "rationalists and others" attack the virginity story "because of reference in the gospel to the 'brethren' of our Lord." Thus, it not only claims Jesus was born of a virgin mother but that Mary never had sex with her husband even after the birth of Jesus, their firstborn. It proposes that any reference in the New Testament to Jesus's brothers actually meant cousins; yet no evidence is given to support that claim. Mary "had no other children after the virginal birth," we are told. One must wonder, then, who "James the Lord's brother" might be (Gal 1:19); and, especially, what a frustrated and confused husband Joseph must have been! Moreover,

Matthew 1:25 implies that after Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary did, in fact, get it on.

Fortunately, our *CE1907* contains a wealth of material regarding the origins of the Virgin Birth "prophecy." In its lengthy treatise on the sources of the Old Testament, it exposes—almost—this prediction as being based on ancient forgeries. The *CE1907* must, of course, stop short to remain true to its faithful target audience. It claims, for example, that it is "probable that God should have chosen for Mary a name suitable to her high dignity" (vol. 15, 464–464A) and enumerates several supposed prophecies for the Virgin Mother of the Divine Prophet.* It thus shows its true colors.

Yet its exposition on the cobbling of the Christian Old Testament is brutally honest. As you will see, its investigation is extraordinarily detailed but suddenly trails off at the would-be

**CE1907* notes that the meaning of *Mary* is derived "from Egyptian *Mery*, *Meryt* (cherished, beloved)." It then goes on at great lengths about other possible meanings and origins of the blessed name.

"CE1986 insists that Mary 'did not lose her virginity, either physical or spiritual.' . . . Thus, it not only claims Jesus was born of virgin mother but that Mary never had sex with her husband even after the birth of Jesus, their firstborn. It proposes that any reference in the New Testament to Jesus's brothers actually meant cousins . . . what a frustrated and confused husband Joseph must have been!"

unfortunately accepted by some of the great schoolmen, even, for example, by St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure." It lays much of the blame for witch-hunts on Heinrich Kramer and Jakob Sprenger: "Probably the most disastrous episode was the publication . . . by [Kramer and Sprenger], of the book *Malleus Malificarum*. . . . There can be no doubt that the book, owing to its reproduction by the printing press, exercised great influence . . . professed (in part fraudulently) to have been approved by the University of Cologne, and it was sensational in the stigma it attached to witchcraft as a worse crime than heresy and in its notable animus against the female sex" (*CE1907* vol. 15, 676).

Note that Kramer and Sprenger attached the papal bull *Summis desiderantes affectibus* to the front of their *Malleus*, indicating the church's approval of witch-killing. Wrote Pope Innocent VIII therein: "many persons of both sexes . . . have abandoned themselves to devils, *incubi* and *succubi*, and by their incantations, spells, conjurations . . . [witches] have slain infants yet in the mother's womb . . . they do not shrink from committing and perpetrating the foulest abominations and filthiest excesses to the

climax—a rude *candor interruptus*. This is where the truly objective observer must take over the wheel and navigate around just one more corner.

Modifying Mythology

Around 250 BCE, after Alexander's conquests, thousands of Jews settled in Alexandria, the intellectual center of the Western world. Greek was the universal language; Hebrew had lapsed into a *lingua mortua*, a language dead even in synagogues. As our *CE1907* (vol. 13, 723) avers, Alexandrian Hebrews desperately desired a Greek version of their holy laws and "histories." Various resident Jews, fluent in both tongues, translated the Torah (itself, of course, a book of myths) into the new *lingua franca*. The results: unofficial scrap-versions rendered in Greek. They were rogue and ordinary—merely translations from Hebrew.

You may well ask: "merely" translations—what is wrong with that? Well, in those times and among those peoples, only the *mystical* could truly impress. You know: a talking donkey, a burning bush, Yahweh handing Moses a tablet. Even earthquakes, droughts, and rainbows were, to them, "signs of God." *Ordinary men* translating a *sacred book*: that bordered on blasphemy!

Later, around 200 BCE, an anonymous Jew came to this realization and forged a letter supposedly from an Alexandrian official, Aristeas, to the Greek king of Egypt. It claimed that religious leaders had commissioned a Torah translation by seventy-two men (thus the Septuagint: "sept" from "seventy"). The letter alleged that a Greek Torah translation was proven divine, reviewed by priests, princes, and laity, all agreeing perfect conformity with the Hebrew original. All this is admitted by *CE1907* (vol. 13, 722–723). This (untrue) story was related as if factual by Flavius Josephus late in the first century in his *Antiquities of the Jews* (Bk. XII, ch. 2).

This is a momentous pivot-point. The Septuagint, 250 years before Christ, sabotages the future Jesus concept, the immaculate maternity, and *magical* paternity, as it is all later discovered to be a fakery. This is Christianity's vatic *fount*, its mainspring, broken long before the cult even poked its haloed head out of its mythical manger. The Septuagint version—not the Torah—was incorporated into our Bible as the Old Testament, as conceded in *CE1907* (vol. 13, 722–723).

How accurate was the translation of the Hebrew Torah into Greek, presenting the world with the sacrosanct Septuagint? Harshly honest with itself to this point, *CE1907* abruptly aborts its analysis. Within this narrative, it dare not continue to the next, obvious step: claiming that the Christian Old Testament, derived from the Septuagint forgery, offers a falsified prophecy, the supposed savior *born of a virgin*. Over the many centuries, linguists and Bible scholars have compared the original Hebrew to the Greek translation; *CE1907* largely ignores the unfortunate conflicts these comparisons reveal.

The Septuagint altered the Hebrew tales in several prime convictions, forming the bogus basis for Christianity's Virgin Mary, as

well as its monotheistic (later, triune) dogmas. The original Hebrew text, in Isaiah (7:14), reads (in transliteration): *Hinneh ha-almah harah ve-yeldeth ben ve-karath shem-o immanuel*. This may translate as "a young woman is with child, and bears a son naming him Immanuel." It was altered in three important ways, concocting three lies.

Lie number one: virgin. The word *almah* means young girl/woman who has reached puberty (if virgin, in the physical sense). "Virginity/virgin" in Hebrew is *bethulah* (the social condition of virginity; under her guardianship of her *ba'al*). The Septuagint changed *almah* to the Greek *παρθενος* (*parthenos*, virgin) and changed the definite article *ha* (English: *the*) to the indefinite *a*. They thus changed "the young woman" to "a virgin." Why would they alter their holy texts in such a way? It seems the Septuagint forgers (as well as later New Testament writers) were forlorn in their need for a messiah to match up against so many previously revered sons of God, also born of virgins: Attis, Dionysus, Prometheus, Horus, Hercules, Buddha, and Krishna, for example.* Thus they might concoct a story of the *newest* messiah that is more believable if the mother of their savior had procreative plumbing that was somehow "one-way."

"[CE1907's] exposition on the cobbling of the Christian Old Testament is brutally honest. As you will see, its investigation is extraordinary detailed but suddenly trails off at the would-be climax. . . . This is where the truly objective observer must take over the wheel and navigate around just one more corner."

Lie number two: prophecy. Isaiah spoke in the present participle—not future tense—of "*ha-almah*" (the young woman) who is (not "would become") with child; she later named him "Emmanuel." In this fiasco of forgeries, we cannot ignore the fact that Jesus was not named "Emmanuel." It seems Jesus was named "Jesus." Christian apologists navigate through the craziest of hoops and labyrinths in attempt to square both the false prophecy and the obvious moniker mistake. (See *CE1986*, 187 [mendacious about "alma"]; and *CE1907*, vol. 15, 464C and vol. 5, 404.)

Lie number three: monotheism. It seems that ancient Hebrews had become suspect of their worship of more than one deity. Perhaps the "real" God was mad at them, they thought.

*In its "Virgin Birth" article (vol. 15, 448–451), *CE1907* professes Catholic dogma holds Christ "incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary" but later admits Isaiah does not contain a "real prophecy" of the virgin birth; that "Jesus was really the son of Joseph and Mary"; and that there are theories that the Christ/virgin claims came from pagan fables and "extraordinary births of the heroes of other nations."

The Septuagint forger(s) attempted to “fix” Hebrew polytheism. When the word *elohim* (plural, *god*) was used in their Torah, they changed it to Θεός (*Theos, God*; plural would be Θεοί). The original Genesis 1:1, in Hebrew, reads: *Bereshith bara elohim et hashamayim ve’et ha’arets* (In beginning *gods* created the heavens and the earth).

These pseudo-septuaginters were not 100 percent successful in washing away polytheism, however. Their revamped scripture retains traces of the Hebrew God referring to himself in the plural (all examples from KJV). Genesis 1:26: “And God said, Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness” (emphasis added) Genesis 3:5: “and ye shall be as *gods*.” Genesis 11:7: “let *us* go down, and there confound their language.” Exodus 15:11: “O Lord, among *the gods*.” Exodus 18:11: “the Lord is greater than all *gods*.” Deuteronomy 10:17: “For the Lord your God is God of *gods*,” et cetera. The Old Testament is thus a poly-monotheist blend.

Remnants of pagan polytheism and celestial deification are evident—even rampant—in Genesis, later interpreted by Josephus in *Antiquities* (Bk. 2, II:3). In a “vision” supposedly sent by God to Joseph, son of Jacob, “the sun took with him the moon,” writes Josephus, “and the rest of the stars, and came down to the earth, and bowed down [to Joseph] . . . the moon and sun were like his

mother and father . . . the stars were like his brethren, since they were eleven in number, as were the stars that receive their power from the sun and moon” (see Gen 37:9). Genesis 6 relates stories of “sons of God” who copulated with mere mortal females (apparently this is where “giants” came from). And, of course, we cannot ignore the supernatural being called “Satan”—a name ubiquitous in the KJV. Just how many gods, god-sons, and god-like demiurges are there, for Christ’s sake?

Mendacities, Uninterrupted

Early Christian fathers accepted the Septuagint forgery when they were too ignorant to know better; later, clerical leaders remained unscrupulous, concealing the truth from the masses after they themselves had finally discovered it. Around 390 CE, St. Jerome translated the Torah into Latin (the Vulgate), as affirmed by our CE1907 (vol. 8, 341), promulgating the Septuagint virgin forgery. So, another pivot-point: if Jerome is instead honest, he ignores the Greek forgery, stays true to the Hebrew original, and nullifies the virgin birth (restoring the original “young woman” and present indicative phrasing); thus rendering Christianity null, mythical, and void and exposing it as the Bronze Age fiction that it was.

Jerome knew he *must* propagate the lies, else the cult of

Three Books, Three Very Different Treatments of the Same Subject

From the original Catholic Encyclopedia, published in fifteen volumes from 1907–1913. The authors were leading Catholic scholars. The excerpt printed below is from a three-page entry on the Septuagint.

Septuagint Version, the first translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, made into popular Greek before the Christian era. This article will treat of: I. Its Importance; II. Its Origin: A. *According to tradition*; B. *According to the commonly accepted view*; III. ITS SUBSEQUENT HISTORY, RECENSIONS, MANUSCRIPTS, AND EDITIONS; IV. ITS CRITICAL VALUE; LANGUAGE.

I. HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE SEPTUAGINT.—The importance of the Septuagint Version is shown by the following considerations: A. The Septuagint is the most ancient translation of the Old Testament and consequently is invaluable to critics for understanding and correcting the Hebrew text, the latter, such as it has come down to us., being the text established by the Massoretes in the sixth century A.D. Many textual corruptions additions, omissions, or transpositions must have crept into the Hebrew text between the third and second

centuries B.C. and sixth and seventh centuries of our era; the MSS. therefore which the Seventy had at their disposal, many in places have been better than the Massoretic MSS. B. The Septuagint Version accepted first by the Alexandrian Jews, and afterwards by all the Greek-speaking countries, helped to spread among the Gentiles the idea and the expectation of the Messiah, and to introduce into Greek the theological terminology and concepts that made it a most suitable instrument for the propagation of the Gospel of Christ. . . .

From a 1986 rewrite of the Catholic Encyclopedia, edited by Robert C. Broderick and issued by Thomas Nelson Publishers. A subtitle, Revised and Updated, was added, but the entries were considerably scaled back to fit within one volume.

Septuagint

Translated from the Hebrew into Greek by seventy Jewish scholars and called the Alexandrian version, this Bible text was most widely used in the early Church. It is commonly referred to among scholars as LXX.

From the 1967 New Catholic Encyclopedia, second edition 2002. Again, fifteen volumes but less depth than in the original.

SEPTUAGINT, the ancient Greek OT. The term is derived from the Latin word *septuaginta* (seventy) and based on the legend that is given in the Letter of Aristeas according to which the Greek translation of the Hebrew Pentateuch was the work of 70 (or rather, 72) translators. The term Septuagint was then extended to include the Greek translations of all the other books of the Hebrew and Aramaic OT and even the OT books that were written originally in Greek. Together with the original Greek books of the NT, the Septuagint is still the official Bible of both the Greek Orthodox Church and Catholic Church of the Greek rite. On the origin, history, nature, and bibliography of the Septuagint, see BIBLE, IV (TEXTS AND VERSIONS), 5.

[L.F. HARTMAN]

Christ would fall like a palace built of parchment, leaving all Christian clerics jobless and homeless. The church continued, supported, and covered up all such unethical and self-promoting behaviors for all centuries that followed. Regarding Jerome, *CE1907* states merely that “it is doubtful whether he revised the entire version of the Old Testament according to the Greek of the Septuagint” (vol. 8, 341). We know, by comparing the original Hebrew Torah against the Septuagint and against Jerome’s Vulgate translation, that he retained Matthew 1:22–23, perhaps parroting the faked prophecy in the New Testament in order to shore it up with (the Septuagint version of) the Old Testament.

The Myth That Was Made into Law

In 391 CE, the Roman Emperor Theodosius I declared Christianity the only “legitimate” religion of the world, under penalty of death. The *myth* was rendered *law*. This decision by Theodosius is possibly the worst ever made in human history: what followed were centuries of torture and murder in the name of this false, faked, voted-upon “prophesied savior.” Within a year after the decree by Theodosius, the crazed Christian monks of Nitria destroyed the majestic Alexandrian Library. Why? Because philosophy and science—not the Bible—were taught there. Christianity began to flex its muscles.

As *CE1907* discloses, over the centuries that followed many documents were created by Christian leaders solely to empower the church, such as the *Abgar forgeries*, the *Apostolic Canons*, the *Donatio Constantini*, *False Decretals*, and many others. Let us take a peek.

Abgar forgeries. Early in the fourth century, some shifty Christian forged letters supposedly originating in the first century, claiming to be from King Abgar and sent to “Jesus,” then from “Jesus” to Abgar, Abgar to Emperor Tiberius, and Tiberius to Abgar, attesting to the “healing powers” of Jesus. Honest about this matter, our *CE1907* uses the words *legendary* and *imaginary* to describe the letters (vol. 1, 42–43).

Apostolic Canons. The *CE1907* concedes that these “canons” were “a collection of ancient ecclesiastical decrees . . . concerning the government and discipline of the Church . . . in a word, they are a handy summary of the statutory legislation of the primitive Church . . . they claim to be the very legislation of the Apostles themselves, at least as promulgated by their great disciple Clement. Nevertheless . . . their claim to genuine Apostolic origin is quite false and untenable.” *CE1907* further concedes that the Canons could not have been composed before the year 341 CE (vol. 3, 279–280), concluding that the “strikingly characteristic style . . . makes it evident” that it is “the work of one individual” (vol. 1, 637). *CE1907* admits church authorities forged them to gain power and wealth.

Donatio Constantini. Somewhere between 750 and 850 CE, the *Donatio Constantini* (“Donation of Constantine”) was “a forged document [claimed to be] of Emperor Constantine the Great, by which large privileges and rich possessions were conferred on the pope and the Roman Church. . . . It is addressed by Constantine to Pope Sylvester I (314–335).” The *CE1907* affirms “this document is without doubt a forgery. . . . As early as the 15th century its falsity was known and demonstrated . . . its genuineness was yet occasionally defended, and the document still

further used as authentic” (vol. 5, 118–119). Christian soldiers under papal command thus seized Rome in the ninth century, and the city was not returned to Italy until the nineteenth century (vol. 8, 234). As stated in *CE1907*, “Not until 20 September, 1870, was Rome taken from the popes and made the actual capital of the Kingdom of Italy” (vol. 13, 169).

False Decretals. Around 850 CE, the *False Decretals* were created. These are papal letters that the church used to claim unlimited authority in all matters and to attain selfish goals via unfair and violent means. Our *CE1907* admits their fraudulence (vol. 5, 773–780).

At this point in history, the Jesus myths became turbocharged with the aid of numerous fraudulent texts clearly forged by men in search of power and wealth. Christian leadership would indeed gain immeasurable influence, global puissance, and vast treasures almost beyond belief. I offer Vatican City as proof.

Falseness Discovered

From our *CE1907* we learn that the fakery of the *Donation of Constantine* was first shown by Lorenzo Valla in 1440 CE and the “donation” proven a forgery. Church hierarchs nevertheless continued to use the document as if authentic for centuries (vol. 5, 119 and vol. 12, 768). Who could blame them? Their livelihoods were bettered by fraud and obscurantism, which rendered their church merely morally and ethically bankrupt, not financially so.

One must ask: Is it likely that modern Bible scholars in the Vatican are aware of *CE1907* and the plethora of forgeries perpetrated by their monstrous machine in the claimed service of a fictional, reformed, and further falsified *Deus*?

Now, what does *CE1986* have to say on all of this? The book provides a brief article on the *False Decretals* but is utterly mendacious regarding their purpose, claiming they were “chiefly issued as an attack on the authority of the pope” (155). As attested by any clear-thinking individual, as well as *CE1907*, the opposite is true. (*CE1986* has no articles on the other aforementioned forgeries.)

Obscurantism

Many Christian atrocities are either omitted from or obfuscated by *CE1986*. Elisions, whether intentional or not, include the following.

Cathars. *CE1986* states (29) that the Councils of the Church “condemned” the Cathars of France. It does not elaborate upon what *condemned* means. Chastised? Poked fun at? Excommunicated? *CE1986* then casually mentions that Cathars “disappeared” by the fourteenth century. Ever wonder where all those Cathars went when they disappeared? If you know your history, you know that in 1209 CE Pope Innocent III ordered a genocidal attack against them. In a vile fit of calumny, the pope depicted the Cathars as witches; of being cannibals; of desecrating the cross; and of having “sexual orgies.” Was the pope on to something? *Witches?**

*This same pope, Innocent III, declared himself to be the divinely appointed ruler of the world. Innocent III claimed authority to annul the Magna Carta of 1215, calling it “contrary to moral law.” This is the same revered creed upon which American founders based the Constitution, the *infallible* pope quashing both, from across the sea and across time.

Malefic sounds of sibilance emanated only from the Vatican, not from its contrived enemies living peacefully in France. The church murdered over a million innocent Cathars over the next thirty-five years—men, women, and children. It wiped them from the face of the planet. The Cathars did not merely “disappear” as *CE1986* claims. In an early faith-based initiative, the Christian colossus exterminated them, then annexed much of the beautiful Languedoc region of France. The extravagant *Palais de la Berbie* (construction began in 1228) and the Catholic fortress-cathedral *Sainte Cécile* (began 1282) are just two examples that remain to this day.

In contrast, *CE1907* (vol. 4, 543) at least mentions the “extermination of the Cathars” in its article on the Crusades, using the term *Albigensian heresy* (vol. 4, 543 and 550). I make perhaps a small point here, but clearly this *extermination* is more closely associated with “witch hunts” as well as immoral papal decrees—not “Crusades.”

In its article on the Albigenses, our *CE1907* refers to them as “a Neo-Manichaeic sect,” disclosing that the other name for these peoples, “Catharists,” means “pure.” *CE1907* recognizes that between the 1148 CE Council of Reims and the 1163 Council of Tours, the church excommunicated the “heretics of Gascony and Provence,” declaring that all Albigenses “should be imprisoned and their property confiscated” (vol. 1, 268). That campaign, of course, is what Pope Innocent III would embark upon in 1209, first in a siege against the town of Béziers. The genocide of the Cathars, as divulged by *CE1907*, “spared neither age nor sex” and degenerated “into a war of conquest.”

“The death penalty was, indeed, inflicted too freely on the Albigenses, but . . . excesses were sometimes provoked,” admits *CE1907*. Honest at great length about the corruption and massacres, our original *CE*, like *CE1986*, sums it up simply, vaguely, and innocently, saying, “The heresy disappeared about the end of the fourteenth century.”

Stedingers. There is no article on the Stedingers in *CE1986*. No surprise: maniacal Christians nearly wiped them out. In the thirteenth century, the Vatican proclaimed that German Stedingers were in cahoots with Satan. “The devil appears to them in different shapes,” wrote Pope Gregory IX, “sometimes as a goose or a duck . . . the Devil presides at their Sabbaths.” Christian soldiers almost eradicated the Stedingers, who either died defending themselves or were burnt alive by Christian monks after lost battles. This atrocity—as one would expect from a papally dictated hostility of this period—involved executing everyone who could be found and didn’t repent: innocent men, women, and children. The main difference between the extermination of Cathars and extermination of Stedingers is the numbers involved. The church murdered only about thirty thousand Stedingers.

CE1907 (vol. 14, 283–284) admits to the intolerance and draconian doctrine of the church:

The Stedingers refused to pay tithes and to perform forced labour as serfs. These duties were demanded of them with considerable severity, and Archbishop Gerhard II of Bremen (1219–58) sent troops against them. His army, however, was defeated in 1229, whereupon the Stedingers destroyed churches and monasteries, and ill-treated and killed priests. A synod . . . accused them . . . of contempt for the authority of the Church and for the sacraments, as well as of superstitious practices; it also excommunicated them.

The Emperor Frederick II placed the rebels under the ban of the empire, and on 9 Oct., 1232, Gregory IX issued a Bull commanding the Bishops of Lübeck, Minden, and Ratzeburg to preach a crusade against them. An army was collected and advanced against the Stedingers.

After considerable carnage, a few Stedingers were permitted to live if they converted to Catholicism “after performing penance.”

This Vicar of Christ, Gregory IX, was just one of many superstitious popes. Among other odd practices, Gregory gave his visitors a kind of good-luck charm in the form of a magical talisman to be worn around the neck—he claimed that this apotropaic relic would neutralize all sins. To one Vatican visitor, exalted Gregory wrote: “We have sent you a small key from the most sacred body of the blessed apostle Peter to convey his blessing, containing iron from his chains, that what had bound his neck for martyrdom may loose yours from all sins. We have given also to the bearer of these presents, to be offered to you, a cross in which there is some of the wood of the Lord’s cross, and hairs of the blessed John the Baptist, from which you may ever have the succour of our Saviour through the intercession of His forerunner.”*

Library of Alexandria. On page 29 of *CE1986*, after its article about the Albigenses, one might expect a piece on the Alexandrian library; but there is none. *CE1986* has placed an article there about the “church of Alexandria”—but nowhere does it cover the majestic library.

As you probably are aware, the original library, holding almost a million books, was a center of ancient scholarship and knowledge. It burned accidentally around 48–47 BCE. After a move to the neighboring Serapeum, Alexandrian scholars quickly began to recover their collection, copying every written scroll or book they came across to build up their new repository. The *CE1907* indicates that some two hundred thousand volumes were gifted to the library by Mark Antony (as a favor to Cleopatra) in 41 BCE (vol. 1, 303).

In 391 CE, furious Christian leaders stormed the library zig-zags (the Mithraeum and the Serapeum), toppling statues, slashing artwork, and burning every library text they found—hundreds of thousands of scrolls and books. They razed the most venerable temple of learning and knowledge of their day like drunken soccer hooligans after losing (or winning) the World Cup.

Our *CE1907* attests: “Much havoc was wrought among its treasures when Bishop Theophilus made his attack upon pagan worship at Alexandria . . . and whatever remained of the library must have perished after the incursion of the Arabs in 641” (vol. 9, 228); Theophilus had a Christian church erected on the destroyed Serapeum (vol. 14, 625).

Even our oft-honest and apologetic *CE1907* seems to ignore the writings of Socrates Scholasticus from his *Historia Ecclesiastica* (Bk V, XVI), written c. 435 CE, not long after the siege. Remember to translate the word *heathen* into *non-Christian*. Such “heathens” were typically intellectuals, freethinkers, and leading philosophers:

At the solicitation of Theophilus bishop of Alexandria the emperor issued an order at this time for the demolition of the heathen temples in that city; commanding also that it should be put in execution under the direction of Theophilus. Seizing this opportunity, Theophilus exerted himself to the utmost to expose the pagan mysteries to contempt.

**Epistles of St. Gregory the Great*, Book IX, Letter 122

And to begin with, he caused the Mithreum to be cleaned out. . . . Then he destroyed the Serapeum [which held the library] . . . These were therefore razed to the ground, and the images of their gods molten into pots and other convenient utensils for the use of the Alexandrian church. . . . All the images were accordingly broken to pieces, except one statue of the god before mentioned, which Theophilus preserved and set up in a public place; "Lest," said he, "at a future time the heathens should deny that they had ever worshiped such gods." . . . Helladius however boasted in the presence of some that he had slain in that desperate onset nine men with his own hand.

Hypatia, the beautiful and brilliant head librarian, mathematician, and philosopher, continued teaching well after her library's destruction. In 415, Saint Cyril, pope of Alexandria, concocted vituperative lies and depicted Hypatia as a "sorceress" able to cast "magic spells." Cyril played the proverbial witch card, the Christian ace in the hole.

Fanatical monks eventually caught up with Hypatia when she was about sixty years old. They ambushed her chariot on her trek homeward, dragged her through dusty streets, and tortured her to death by *skinning her alive*. Those Christian leaders then chopped up her body and burned her limbs, torso, and her very recently detached cranium, flowing with lush locks, plopping all onto their pious bonfire—all this to make sure, I suppose, that not only was she merely dead but really most sincerely dead.

Pious Plagiarism

I mentioned in the introduction to this article that *CE1907* reduced Jesus stories to plagiarisms from other belief systems. It's worth appreciating another example: its disarmingly honest article on Mithraism (vol. 10, 402–404). Our revered encyclopedia admits that ancient Mithraists (centuries before Christ) believed in, for example: the principle of heaven and hell; that "shepherds watched [Mithra's] birth"; and that the sun becomes his double, or father, but Mithra "is one god." It narrates a story of mankind subjected to droughts and deluges but "saved by Mithra"; Mithra "returns to heaven" when mankind is well established on earth.

Our *CE1907* writes that Mithra "celebrates a last supper" with his companions and "now in heaven protects his followers" as "the struggle between good and evil continues." It avows that followers believed "Mithra is the mediator . . . between God and man" and also, that "Christ, being God and man, is by nature the Mediator between God and man."

About fourteen centuries before Christianity, followers of Mithra "believed in the immortality of the soul, sinners after death were dragged to hell"—and upon the end of the world, "Mithra will descend to earth" and "make all drink the beverage of immortality. He will thus have proved himself . . . *never conquered*." Our *CE1907* acknowledges that "a sacred meal was celebrated of bread and *haoma* juice for which in the West wine was substituted." And, "Mithraism had a Eucharist"; "Mithra saved the world."

Yet *CE1907* laughs at the notion of Mithraism's *supposed* "similarity to Christianity" (vol. 10, 402), insisting that it "bears no similarity to the religion of Christ" (vol. 10, 404) because it apparently excluded women, unlike Christianity. (Christian women could become members even though they had to stay silent.)

Another key difference from Christianity: *CE1907* admits that the polytheistic Mithraism was "tolerant of every other cult."

Conclusion

Clearly the publishers of *CE1986* would prefer that you are unaware of *CE1907*—as well as of actual history. Both the *1907* and the *1986* are rife with unctuous, bullheaded denial. At least *CE1907* is comprehensive, often scientific, and oft-times quite honest, especially regarding crimes of its legacy church over the ages. Yet *CE1907* still claims the Christ as son of God and savior. As it must.

Now, as promised, a word on the 1967 overhaul of *CE1907*, producing the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. The editors removed almost all mention of resemblances to Christianity in the article on Mithra. There is nothing on the Alexandrian Library, but they agree that "pagan teacher" Hypatia "was killed by a Christian mob" and continue to concede the forgeries of the *Donation, Abgar, and Decretals*. Of the Cathars (Albigenses), the "New" *CE* sticks to the original claim: "nothing was heard from them after the close of the 14th century." Most egregiously, the honest and revealing three-page *CE1907* article on the Septuagint was reduced in the *New CE* to three sentences, being for the most part merely an etymology.

So, there we have the *Catholic Encyclopedias*: I have read them so you don't have to. The back cover of my green paperback *CE1986* advertises that it "contains more than 4,000 comprehensive articles clarifying Catholic beliefs." It was a pleasure discovering, exposing, and putting those into context, as well as bouncing them against the scholarly predecessor. Oscar Wilde precisely expresses my closing thoughts: "Truth, in matters of religion, is simply the opinion that has survived."

I believe that the day will come when the "Jesus" character will be consigned to the same pious pile of other mythical, smoldering gods, all such deities worthy of little more than quotation marks around their appellations: "Zeus," "Mithra," "Thor," "Wotan." Next, the fabled "Christ" person. Unfortunately, I doubt that this brave, freethinking new world we envision will arrive during my time. ☒

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I've discussed this with several imams who were very kind people but not very sophisticated. They don't know much about science and so on. But they do fall for the arguments of the Harun Yahya books and articles that say Darwinism has been used to defend racism. Now, in a certain sense, this is complicated issue, because that did happen in the 1920s and 1930s. But of course no evolutionary biologists nowadays working at universities looks at evolutionary theory as a way to defend racism.

MOONEY: Are they getting some of their ideas from the "intellectuals," the "scientists" in the United States who make these arguments? Harun Yahya's beliefs seem very different from what we are used to here.


BRAECKMAN: Yes, Harun Yahya's ideas are much less sophisticated than what you will find in, say, the writings of Michael Behe or other intelligent design authors in the United States. What Muslim creation-

ism is all about is that there has been no such thing as evolution, period. Muslim creationists like it, of course, that there's a Christian brand of creationism, because they feel supported by that. But they're not really tapping into Christian creationism's so-called scientific arguments.

MOONEY: Is there a particular part of the Qur'an that they refer to? U.S. young-Earth creationism is actually based on particular ways of reading Genesis.

BRAECKMAN: There are lines or parts in the Qur'an that make it possible for Muslims to accept that the Earth and life is really old, that Allah created life and the universe a long time ago. They don't want to have anything to do with young-Earth creationism. But apart from that, the problem is that in their belief system, when science says something is right, it must be already in the Qur'an because the Qur'an contains all the knowledge that you can possibly have as a human being. If something in science appears

that is not to be found in the Quran, then it cannot be true. So that's why they don't have a problem with some contemporary scientific findings, because somehow they will find a line in the Qur'an and read the science into that. You know how that works; you see meaning in random patterns. These are very old texts, of course, and you can give an interpretation to them; you can stretch it, right?

But it's different with evolutionary theory. There are a few lines, and some people in the Muslim world argue that the idea of evolution is already in the Qur'an. But the huge majority doesn't believe that, and they feel supported by the argument that Allah created man in the form that he is now. This is also a Christian argument; if you believe that people evolved from apelike creatures, it's degrading to humanity—like turning humans into beasts or just animals. 

To be concluded next issue.—Eds.

the knowledge that this life is your one life, your only chance, and that there will be no others? How can you realize that every single person on the planet is in exactly the same position as you are and not want everyone to have the same shot at happiness you have?

Children are raised with a fear of hell and eternal punishment. Women are told their purpose is to serve their husbands as their god and to raise more children to serve as arrows in the quiver of the Lord. People are told to reject science and "Man's reason" because it contradicts God's word. We are right to oppose these abuses, and in part it is my atheism that informs my opposition.

But there are so many injustices in the world, and they are not all driven by religion. When poor urban children are

denied a good education because their district hasn't budgeted for new schoolbooks in ten years—while the affluent suburban district next door has the latest

"Atheism sensu stricto may be a specific assertion about a fact of the universe, but atheism as practiced is a defining idea in a mind and a powerful foundation for a human community."

texts—I'm appalled at economic inequities. When I see children turned away from science careers because they are told that "girls can't do math," I'm appalled at gender inequity. When our government bombs poorer nations to quiet the populace, when children starve or suffer from treatable diseases and parasites, when young girls are sold in the sex trade, when boys are given guns and told to kill and be killed in civil wars, when so many live lives of desperate scrabbling for basic sustenance, I cannot be consoled by dreams of amends made in an afterlife or the karmic futility of arguing that people get what they deserve—I'm an atheist. There is no benign, paternal source to which I can appeal to take on the responsibility of caring for the unfortunate—I'm an atheist, and only we

hope for a future, perhaps a couple of decades ahead, when robust civil unions might be available to same-sex couples across the land.

What was wrong with that vision? Today, civil unions are widely derided as insufficient, as a second-class “gay ghetto” institution that divides same-sex couples from more favored opposite-sex couples. But don’t judge so quickly. Let’s turn back to the past and consider what many civil-union supporters (myself included, in those days) expected to happen *next*. Once robust civil unions were the law of the land for same-sex couples, this thinking went, there would follow legal activism by opposite-sex couples seeking to give *their* unions the protection of law without having to resort to marriage. When that was accomplished, civil unions would be available to all. They would stop being a gay-ghetto phenomenon. And traditional matrimony’s centuries-long monopoly over the authentication of romantic bonding would be shattered. At last there would be a new, wholly sec-


ular, historically untainted way for any couple, gay or straight, to seal shared commitment.

That’s the future many activists expected . . . that matrimony might be replaced rather than reformed. As realization spread that the grand prize—genuine, bona fide *marriage* for all—might be attainable, LGBT activists switched gears. With stunning speed they went from being matrimony’s most formidable enemies to its most enthusiastic advocates.

And so it is the best of times and the worst of times for traditional matrimony. Straights have less use for marriage than ever. Increasingly, only more prosperous couples go through its motions, yet it serves them less as sacrament than potlatch. The groups that now take marriage most seriously are LGBTs—for themselves—and progressives who champion primarily its availability to others.

It now seems all but inevitable that same-sex marriage will become legal across the nation. Of course this is a triumphant

expansion of human rights, a worthy successor to women’s suffrage, the legalization of interracial marriage, and the civil rights movement. Yet it’s also a victory for *traditional matrimony* that is in many ways regrettable. LGBTs having taken up this institution so eagerly before straights could quite finish discarding it, marriage’s monopoly over the authentication of pair-bonds remains intact.

This leads, of course, to the greatest irony of all. The LGBT movement was the only social reform movement powerful enough to have shattered matrimony’s monopoly, and it essentially co-opted itself. As a result, traditional marriage—hoary old church-entwined man-buys-woman institution that it is—ducked a bullet. Decades from now, cultural conservatives will still have matrimony around, and they’ll have the LGBT community to thank for it. 

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humans have the power to act.

So when I hear atheists and skeptics try to delimit our responsibilities, to claim these disciplines only deal with very narrow and specific issues, and that political and social concerns are beyond our purview, I want to rage and tell them that ideas have meaning and power beyond their simplest definitions. Because we are atheists, we have to take care of each other—we know there is no one else to do it.


I hear the same thing about science. Science is neutral on moral concerns; it only describes what is, not how it ought to be. And this is true; science is a tool that can be used equally well for curing diseases or building bombs. But scientists are not and should not be morally neutral, nor should scientific organizations or culture be excluded from defining the

appropriate uses of science. Science without humanist moral standards leads to Mengele or the Hiroshima bombing or the Tuskegee syphilis experiments.

Similarly, atheism may be value-neutral, but atheists and atheist organizations should not be. Atheism *sensu stricto* may be a specific assertion about a fact of the universe, but atheism as practiced is a defining idea in a mind and a powerful foundation for a human community. It has meanings and implications that we must heed and use for achieving our goals.

And what should those goals be? Because I am an atheist and share common cause with every other human being on the planet in desiring to live my one life with equal opportunity, I suggest that atheists ought to fight

for equality for all, economic security for all, and universally available health and education services. Peace is the only answer; extinguishing a precious human life ought to be unthinkable in all but the most dire situations of self-defense. Ours should be a movement that welcomes all sexes, races, ages, and abilities and encourages an appreciation of human richness. Atheism ought to be a progressive social movement in addition to being a philosophical and scientific position, because living in a godless universe means something to humanity.

And now we have something else to argue about. 

PZ Myers is associate professor of biology at the University of Minnesota, Morris. He writes the science blog *Pharyngula*.

exactly how it works!), confirming, perhaps, that one size does not fit all when it comes to intimate relationships. Should this happy gang be able to gain state recognition as a marriage? Well, I have no objection to their arrangement. There is no suggestion that it is patriarchal, involves any kind of coercion, or is in any other way undesirable from a viewpoint grounded in secular values. Apparently it suits the desires of the parties involved, so good luck to them.

All the same, I can't see the state entering this field, even over a period of decades. There is no easy way to establish a legal template for what is potentially a bewildering variety of intimate arrangements. Nor are the parties involved in the Dominguez household seeking state recognition—and this will surely be typical. People involved in such nontraditional relationships are not likely to press for the same sort of legal recognition as is sought by many same-sex couples. It might, admittedly, be troublesome for them to make the exact legal arrangements they want, but that is an almost inevitable outcome of entering into non-standard and uncommon arrangements that don't fit a particular template.

In the longer term, perhaps the state


could recognize a wider range of relationships. Or perhaps not! Perhaps the best approach, long-term, is for the state to withdraw from the marriage business altogether. Surely we can agree that the governments of modern pluralistic democracies ought not to try to enforce a religious morality or to determine the one true way to lead a good life. So why are they still so active in the marriage business, giving a special *imprimatur* to one way of life over others?

The meaning, importance, and prestige of marriage have changed over time and will probably keep changing. Even now, marriage has ceased functioning as a means of allocating who may legally have sex with whom—most modern countries make no attempt to maintain or enforce laws relating to fornication and adultery. I expect that modern societies could function quite smoothly if a time came, down the track, when nobody at all opts for a formal, legally recognized marriage.

As I've stated elsewhere, I don't argue for the state's full withdrawal from the marriage business—not as a priority, and, indeed, not at this point in history. That would not be a realistic policy for any polit-

ical party while marriage remains a socially glorified institution. Very well—as long as that continues, I see no good secular ground to deny recognition as marriage to any loving, intimate relationship between two people, irrespective of their sex.

All that said, will it be so bad if a time comes one day when marriage no longer seems needed as a legal institution? Here in Australia, Senator Eric Abetz has complained that the provision of same-sex marriage will lead to “the complete deconstruction of the institution that is marriage.” But why should it? I would have thought that it might even help shore up the institution if same-sex couples, or many of them, value it so much and start to take part in it.

But if, probably for quite other reasons, a time does come when the institution of marriage no longer seems needed, and when many combinations of people can join in workable and socially valued relationships, why shouldn't we welcome it? 

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featuring journalist and activist Jamila Bey, Christina, McCreight, and Debbie Goddard, executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism's African Americans for Humanism. The general consensus seemed to be that the future of women's involvement in the movement lies with students, Internet activism, and creating a secular humanist community that is welcoming to women as well as men. Goddard mentioned that in order to get more women in secularism and skepticism, we need to broaden our focus to practical matters that will appeal to

women: “As the scope of the movement expands, we can influence people a lot by looking at things like inner-city education.” She continued, “People who have three kids and two jobs don't have the luxury of sitting around for two hours listening to forty-seven reasons God doesn't exist.”

I'd dare to say that the high point of the conference was Wafa Sultan's Saturday afternoon address on women in Islam. *Powerful* is the best word I can think of to sum it up. On her earlier panel, she said of herself, “I was once introduced

as the only female Muslim to tell an *imam* on TV to be quiet. I did not tell him to be quiet. I told him to *shut up!*” Sultan recounted some of the atrocities she witnessed during her thirty-two years in Syria under *sharia* law, including her niece's marriage at age eleven to a man well into his forties who abused her horribly. When Sultan's niece went to her family for help, her own father turned her away so that she would not bring dishonor to her household. When Sultan told her rapt audience that her niece committed suicide when she was twenty-eight, there

dropouts and joining their parents in holding these schools accountable for ensuring that all students there are focused on as *individual learners*. The increasing attention in some classes and schools to “the whole child” makes it less likely that students not understood as individuals will be adrift and unmotivated.

Furthermore, the president of the United States—whether it be Mitt Romney or Barack Obama—should become a motivator to school boards, principals, and teachers by encouraging the reclaiming of dropouts into learning environments that will ensure—by their achievements—that they’ll have no reason to leave again. As a result, the entire school will be energized.

Over the years, having reported inside schools around the country, I can tell pretty soon after visiting a new one—by walking the corridors, listening to conversations in lunchrooms, and spending time in classrooms—whether the kids are being surprised and intrigued by what they’re learning and are eager to find out more of what they didn’t know.

In one such school, an eighth-grader was telling me how different this place was from a previous school he’d been in. “All the teachers I have,” he said with

“Evaluating teachers by the scores their students get in collective standardized tests can’t reveal which teachers galvanize their students to keep learning more about their world and themselves.”

more than a touch of continuing surprise, “know my name. They know who I am.”

I haven’t seen each of his teachers in action, but I expect most of them know what gets him going. Through all my years of schooling in Boston—the William Lloyd Garrison elementary school, Boston Public Latin School, and Northeastern University—I had very few teachers like that. But those are the ones I remember. They got *me* going in what they were

teaching and beyond.

Currently, there’s much bitter strife concerning teacher evaluation, but how many of the evaluation procedures being discussed are designed to identify the teachers who get their students debating and arguing among themselves about what more *they* want to find out now that they’ve been turned on to learning? Evaluating teachers by the scores their students get in collective standardized tests can’t reveal which teachers galvanize their students to keep learning more about their world and themselves.

But I wouldn’t be surprised if students who keep getting low scores on standardized tests are among those who eventually drop out of school because they figure that they’re dumb when it comes to that academic stuff. But they’re not without interests and curiosity. How can we persuade them to stay? **FI**

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was hardly a dry eye in the entire room.

Sultan attributes much of Islamic oppression to the vicious cycle perpetuated generation to generation: “A child who sees his mother abused his entire life, how could he have any other view of how things are supposed to be?” But Sultan holds hope that the cycle can be broken from an unlikely quarter: ten years ago, when the Internet came to her country of Syria, she said to her husband, “this is the beginning of the end of Islam.” The Internet may also be instrumental in getting women in Islamic countries to rec-

ognize the oppression under which they live. “The worst form of slavery is when the slave believes he is free. This is how women under Islam feel,” Sultan explained. Once they see how people in free countries live—something that is impossible to keep from happening with the Internet around—women will begin to reject *sharia* law.

Sultan ended her talk by asserting that “a culture that doesn’t respect half its population will never prosper,” and she received the

only standing ovation of the conference. That is a sentiment that everyone in the secular movement—man, woman, or genderqueer—can agree with. In one sound bite, Sultan captured what CFI’s “Women in Secularism” conference was all about. **FI**

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Vaginas and Vouchers: On to November

Edd Doerr

Vagina. The passage leading from the uterus to the vulva." So says the 1998 *Webster's American Family Dictionary*, a "family" reference work "to record the standard vocabulary of American English in a way that reflects the common ethical, moral, religious, social, and civic values of mainstream Americans." This 1,124-page volume is so prissy that it does not include any of the common four-letter verbs, nouns, and expletives that are all too often used on cable television. Yet *vagina* made the cut.

What, then, are we to make of the mid-June flap in the Michigan House of Representatives when Rep. Lisa Brown (D-West Bloomfield) actually uttered the word *vagina* in a floor debate on Republican efforts to further restrict women's reproductive rights of conscience? GOP Majority Floor Leader Jim Stamas decreed that Brown could not address that august body of solons. Brown, ten other lawmakers, and several actresses then performed Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* on the Michigan statehouse steps before thousands.

"Voucher. A form authorizing a disbursement of cash or a credit against a future expenditure or expense." This from the same dictionary. In today's politics, *voucher* means a school voucher for the transfer of funds from the public treasury to pay for education services at a private, generally religious school operated by a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple. A variant of the voucher idea is the tuition tax credit, also known as a tax-code voucher or back-door voucher.*

Recent years have seen a sharp escalation of the drive to divert public funds to private church-related schools in Congress and state legislatures through vouchers or tax-code vouchers—despite the fact that in twenty-six statewide referenda, tens of millions of voters from coast to coast have rejected vouchers or their

"Recent years have seen a sharp escalation of the drive to divert public funds to private church-related schools in Congress and state legislatures through vouchers or tax-code vouchers."

analogues by the average landslide margin of 2 to 1. A 2011 Gallup education poll registered opposition to vouchers at 65 to 34 percent, the opposite of what one might expect given the unrelenting conservative propaganda assault on public education.

Vagina and *voucher*: two V words that symbolize the coordinated campaigns of the religious Right, Catholic bishops, fundamentalist preachers, piranha pundits, and other ultraconservative extremists

who have consolidated their control over the once-respected party of Abraham Lincoln to make war on women, reproductive choice, religiously neutral public education, religious freedom, and the fundamental American principle of separation of church and state. These campaigns are offensive and threatening not only to the increasingly secular portions of our society but also to most mainstream Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and others. Church-related schools are the tools of the myriads of misogyny.

Recent years have seen a drastic upswing in the well-organized, well-funded ultraconservative efforts in Congress and the states. Myriads of clever, intricate gimmicks have been devised to shrink women's rights—to chip away at the remarkable level of access to contraception and abortion acknowledged (not created) by the Supreme Court in 1973 in *Roe v. Wade* and earlier in *Griswold v. Connecticut* and *Baird v. Eisenstadt*.

This November's elections could be the most important in our lifetimes. If the Republicans win the White House, Congress, and even more statehouses, government will be in the hands of extremists who will accelerate the privatization of education, shred religious freedom, and strangle women's rights.

"The Great School Voucher Fraud" is the title of my 8,500-word position paper available on the Center for Inquiry website. Check it out. [FI](#)

*See Stephanie Saul, "Public Money Finds Back Door to Private Schools," *New York Times*, May 22, 2012; and Sean Cavanaugh, "Tax Credit Strategy Fuels Private School Choice Push," *Education Week*, June 1, 2012.

Edd Doerr is president of Americans for Religious Liberty and a past president of the American Humanist Association.

Slaves Like Us

Sikivu Hutchinson

The black body has always been an object of deep and abiding obsession in the American imagination. Be it cavorting with “funky” abandon on a dance floor, vaulting off a basketball court in dunk mode, suckling apple-cheeked white babies, trotted out in a police lineup, or greased down, poked, prodded, and displayed on a slave auction block, the black body occupies that mystical place between corporeality and supernaturalism.

Recently, Ernest Perce V, the Pennsylvania state director for American Atheists—a predominantly white group with a largely white leadership—slapped up a billboard in a Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, neighborhood featuring a picture of a shackled, naked black slave and a Bible quote that said “slaves obey your masters.” The ad was intended to protest Pennsylvania’s bone-headed declaration of 2012 as the so-called Year of the Bible. Much to the “astonishment” of the organization’s representatives, the billboard was reviled, defaced, and labeled a hate crime by some in the African American community. A complaint was filed with the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission. According to the *Patriot-News*, Harrisburg resident Aaron Selvey said, “If this had been Detroit, there would have been a riot.” Apparently offended black folk just weren’t intelligent enough to grasp the sage lesson that American Atheists, prominent champion of antiracist social justice, was trying to teach them. Instead, some “misconstrued” the message as racist, concluding that, in a country where white nationalists have issued a clarion call to take back the nation from the Negro savage/illegal alien in the White House, “slaves obey your masters” proba-

bly still means them.

In the 2002 documentary *Race—The Power of an Illusion*, Harvard science historian Evelyann Hammonds discusses how much of nineteenth-century scientific inquiry on racial difference revolved around black bodies:

If we just take African Americans as an example, there’s not a single body part that hasn’t been subjected to this kind of analysis. You’ll find articles in the medical literature about the Negro ear, and the Negro nose, and the Negro leg, and the Negro heart, and the Negro eye, and the Negro foot—and it’s every single body part. And they’re constantly looking for some organ that might be so fundamentally different in size and character that you can say this is something specific to the Negro versus whites and other groups. Scientists are part of their social context. Their ideas about what race is are not simply scientific ones, are not simply driven by the data that they are working with. That it’s also informed by the societies in which they live.

Hammonds underscores the political “invention” of the black body through the lens of scientific objectivity. The legacies of slavery and scientific research dovetailed with the popular display of black bodies as the ultimate sites of racial otherness. These legacies shape the experience of walking, driving, and breathing “while black.” They inform the terror of being a carefree teenager out for a casual stroll in the kind of private gated community where seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed in February by a white Hispanic neighborhood watch captain in Orlando, Florida. The case made national headlines due to the “curious” fact that three weeks after the murder, the shooter, George Zimmerman

(who claimed he was acting in self-defense) was not immediately charged. According to Trayvon’s family, he was found with candy and iced tea on his body. Under Florida’s Stand Your Ground law, people who believe they are being threatened can use deadly force to defend themselves without retreating first. Trayvon’s killing is an all too familiar outrage in a nation where black men

“All those churches . . . in the segregated black neighborhoods . . . aren’t there because blacks are ignorant, backward neo-slaves; they’re there in part because urban retail, commercial, and green space development is moribund in the so-called ghetto.”

from Los Angeles to New York have historically been victimized by racist police who shoot first and ask questions later.

Black bodies have always been political texts violently bound by secular laws. Thus the ahistorical, paternalistic approach to “secular” public-service messaging seen in the Harrisburg billboard case is one of the main reasons “new atheism” is still racially segregated and lily-white. Clearly the atheists behind it

don't give a damn about the reality of urban communities of color in the United States *vis-à-vis* the institutional role of organized religion in a white supremacist capitalist context. In my book *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars*, I ground my critique of American religiosity in the social history of residential segregation and the cultural context of actual black communities. Northern and Midwestern cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, Cleveland, Detroit, and Milwaukee rank among the top ten most segregated cities in the United States. All those churches that white folk have the luxury of not seeing because they're in the segregated black neighborhoods they bypass on the expressway aren't there because blacks are ignorant, backward neo-slaves; they're there in part because urban retail, commercial, and green space development is moribund in the so-called ghetto. Take a ten-minute drive from "South Central" Los Angeles (a racist misnomer used to ghettoize any predominantly black neighborhood in Los Angeles regardless of geographic location) to predominantly white West Los Angeles. The storefront churches, liquor stores, check-cashing places, and bail-bond offices vanish while parks, schools, grocery stores, businesses, office parks, and retail centers proliferate.

So is American Atheists on the front lines of providing prisoner reentry resources—the real regime of twenty-first century "enslavement" for millions of African Americans—to families and communities that are permanently locked out of the so-called American dream due to the legal disenfranchisement of former convicted felons in employment, housing, and voting? Did they even deign to consult with local interfaith and secular, humanist, or atheist people of color about the cultural and psychological impact of the legacy of slavery in a nation where black bodies are still the primary targets of violent police suppression, racist criminal sentencing and capital punishment? Of course not. As I wrote in my 2009 article "The White Stuff":

It's cartoonishly pro forma

when white folk, ignorant of these historical traditions, swaggeringly insist that atheist discourse is implicitly anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-heterosexist because one, we white people say so, and, two, hierarchy is something only those knuckle-dragging supernaturalists do. It's paint-by-the-numbers entitlement time when the so-called new atheist "movement" is resistant to the charge that racial and gender politics just might inform who achieves visibility and which issues are privileged in the broader context of skeptical discourse. It's not PC to point out that traditions of scientific racism, secularism, and Judeo Christian religiosity went gleefully hand in hand for much of the West's enlightened history.

In the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass contended that "revivals of religion and revivals in the slave trade go hand in hand together." Douglass prefaced his critique by contrasting the corrupt Christianity of a slaveholding nation and the so-called benevolent "Christianity of Christ" practiced by African slaves in the liberation struggle. Yet he was also critical of the hypocrisy of a nation that rationalized slavery based on secular Enlightenment ideologies of individual liberty and democratic citizenship for white men. Slaves and the descendants of slaves gathered, organized, mobilized, and resisted white supremacy in church communities because they were and continue to be some of the only socioeconomic, political, and cultural spaces widely available to black people. Post-racialists say that's past history, pimping the delusion that "we" can all lock arms in *Kumbaya* and move on, slamming by on the expressway out of the "inner city."

It's a travesty that Douglass, one of the greatest philosophers of the criminalization of the black body, would have chewed up and spit out—but of course Douglass wasn't on that billboard. **EI**

Sikivu Hutchinson is the author of *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars* (Infidel Books, 2011) and the forthcoming *Godless Americana: Race and Religious Rebels* (Infidel Books). She is the founder of Black Skeptics Los Angeles. A previous version of this article appeared on Freethought Blogs.



CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS "35mm Closer to Reality"

The Portland Humanist Film Festival was established in 2010 to be a provocative and enlightening cultural experience for the rapidly growing secular humanist movement in the Pacific Northwest.

This year's festival runs September 21-23, 2012. It celebrates independent film and will be juried. Categories include documentary, narrative, and animation, each in both short and feature length.

Submissions may explore themes such as Reason, Critical Thinking & Skepticism, Cultivating Compassion & Ethics, Science & the Natural World, Freedom of Thought, Speech & Critical Inquiry, and Challenging the Claims & Value of Religion.

For more information, including all deadlines and entry fees, please visit www.humanistfest.com.

**Deadline for submissions:
August 15, 2012
[visit humanistfest.com](http://www.humanistfest.com)**

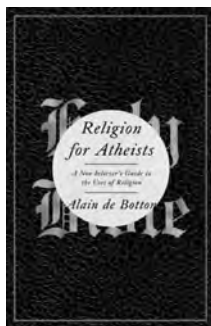
Trains for Astronauts

John Shook

Alain de Botton doesn't think God exists, but he regards thinking about God as only one among many things religion is good for. Subtracting God-belief from religion, in fact, removes something dividing us, and what remains has important cultural and personal value. Of course nonbelievers have never been culturally impoverished; they have enjoyed the same secular educations, public museums, and scientific institutions as believers. But de Botton's heart is uneasy and discontented at the spectacle of so many who have walked away from religion looking contented with their civilized and materialistic lives. To de Botton, cultural flabbiness and shabbiness are making the twenty-first century look much less vibrant and wholesome than preceding centuries. A culprit must be identified and quick. He raises his finger and points . . . at atheism!

In the space of a few opening pages in his book *Religion for Atheists: A Non-believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion*, de Botton charges atheism with the crime of discarding everything religious in culture. He then equates secularism with a vapid, anticultural atheism and speedily faults this new nihilistic secularism for so much nasty cultural decay. Where is this atheistic self-hatred coming from?

Pausing just a moment to mention how religion does terrible things too, de Botton next accuses atheism of judging religion too harshly. He places on exhibition all the valuable things that atheism-secularism has allegedly ignored to death: community, kindness, education, tolerance, perspective, art, and architecture. All those wonderful things are dying in the thin, dry air of secular society, and the only thing that can save them is a return to religion's warm atmosphere. Atheists need religion most urgently, according to de Botton, since they are the most deprived of personal and cultural enrichment, and their seditious secularizing is killing society for everyone else besides.



Religion for Atheists: A Non-believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion, by Alain de Botton (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012, ISBN 978-0-307-37910-8) 320 pp. Hardcover, \$26.95.

Tearing out de Botton's root fallacy is going to take some effort. Let's try a simple rephrasing of his core tenet: religion for atheists is like trains for astronauts. If you are an astronaut, you must like to travel a lot and at high speeds, too. If you want to travel at very high speeds, you really want trains. Can't do without them, in fact.

What would an "Astronaut's Guide to the Uses of Trains" look like? From an examination of de Botton's manual for atheists, we could easily guess. First, assuming all astronauts are quite sociable folks, seeking community and easy communication would naturally be top priorities. And if you want more interconnected community and cheap communication, then you want railroads. I dare say that until railroads came along, only the thinnest of ties stretched between villages, towns, and cities—why, until the railroads, you could hardly say that a genuine nation was possible!

And what a thing to be traveling on those railroads, seeing the incredible sights inaccessible to ordinary folks. After you've traveled around visiting different places and meeting the local inhabitants along the way, warm feelings of common humanity well up in your breast. Why, if you let your guard down and soak up the kindness of those strangers, you could sit a spell, tasting a little of their food and hearing a lot of their stories. They are fine stories, too—things you could have never

learned if you had stayed back home. If you have a day to spend before getting back on the train, walk around and see the sights. Every town, big or small, enshrines its hopes and dreams in beautiful art and impressive architecture that is entirely novel and native to that particular soil.

Astronauts are human, and like everyone else they need such vital things as community, variety, perspective, and enriching experiences that are only available from traveling around to see the world. If you want all that out of life—and every sensible person does—then no one could possibly do without trains.

Now you see the fallacy: are trains the only way to travel?

Similarly, de Botton is wrong about what atheists really need, and his understanding of what religion is really all about shows us why. He is quite right to treat religion as a cultural phenomenon that has a major role in enhancing other social technologies that provide things that people need. The crucial point is that on this view, religion itself does not directly supply the experiential goods people value. Communal practices and special public spaces, art forms and dances, ceremonial rituals and learned treatises, moral codes and revered elders—these (and many more) are actually the direct "forms of life" through which religiosity flows. Art can be religious or not; ceremonies can be religious or not;

ethics and wisdom can be religion-based or not; gazing up at the stars can be a religious experience or not; attitudes toward death can be religious or not; the reason for eating unleavened bread can be religious or not. Even religious concepts especially prominent in Western thinking needn't be so. For example, suppose I think that something is responsible for the big bang that started off our universe. It needn't be religion-based—many atheist cosmologists are pondering theories about what triggered the big bang without having any religious notions involved at all. Approaches to studying the laws of nature can be religious or not. Perspectives on life's incredible diversity can be religious or not.

It all depends: whether something we do or something we think about is genuinely religious depends on how individual people do it and think about it. Cultural anthropologists have long been far more comfortable studying "the religious" as dynamically symbolic than as statically dogmatic. And creeds can be religious or not—well, you see the point, I hope. Religion never was some separate matter alongside all the other kinds of cultural activities that engage humans. Only our modern secularized lenses could perceive religion as a discrete phase or sector of society, reflecting secular hopes that religion could be isolated from central concerns of civic life. But along the way, two different things got conflated. The possibility that religion could be disentangled from some public matters (like education systems or political constitutions) got confused with the notion that religion had always been an add-on, a separate institution supplying distinctively "religious" things, that somehow sprang up long ago. (Hence the misguided search for some extravagant causal factor responsible for religion, like the "god meme" or "terror at lightning" or a hyperactive agency detector.) No single thing, or even combination of things, could have really been responsible for the "invention of the first religion," as mythical a beast as anything in fairy tales.

The social sciences have never been able to accept that odd theory, and current scientific research into religion concurs: religions always were supplementary-like spices to a cuisine and not an

entirely new food group. For example, religion enhances tribal morality and in-group obedience and relieves severe anxieties that result from strains in social life. But morality, obedience, anxiety, and social fractures are not especially religious, nor did they come into existence because of religion. Religion makes people think and act differently when they deal with morality, loyalty, anxiety, and disconnection. Religion can heighten moral devotion, strengthen in-group loyalty, console the inconsolable, and reforge community. No question about it.

Trains can get you places fast. But the invention of the railroad was not responsible for arousing a desire to travel and commune with distant strangers, learn new things, or feel the exhilaration of fresh sights. And trains are no longer the only way, or often even the best way, to do those valuable things. Similarly, it never was the case that religion was necessary for beauty, morality, community, education, or exhilaration. Religion has been a supplementary social technology, no doubt. But all technologies have their proper place and time, and all technologies evolve and eventually disappear, to be replaced by other technologies across the millennia as humanity bravely ventures further afield. Only a failure of intelligence or surrender to terror could freeze a culture into rigid stupidity.

All-too-human needs and desires were responsible for the invention of the chariot, the sailboat, the train, the automobile, the rocket ship, and who knows what next. Astronauts may enjoy riding trains once in a while, like I do myself, not for anything intrinsic to railroading but just because the experience can thrill the heart. Like myself: many people can enjoy the arts, improve our ethics, and make our societies more livable and just without participating in a religion. Sorry: there's just no use for religion here, not for us. More important things are happening—for one thing, we are doing these things because they are right to do, not because some tradition or God demands it from us. Telling us that we are quite wrong, that engaging in those important things for emotional and practical benefit is still conducting one's self religiously, is just factually false. We are not forever stuck with trains, and we are

not forever stuck with religion. That we need the arts doesn't mean we still need religion any more than wanting to travel means that we still need trains.

I will happily let religious humanists judge precisely how de Botton's urgings fit into that long tradition, but to my independent eyes, it appears that in this book de Botton has composed a revised Religious Humanism 6.311 rather than an original Atheism 2.0. Of greater interest is the question of whether humanists have to take de Botton seriously—beyond his ample evidence borrowed from the social sciences, I should hasten to add. Is the brightly optimistic and oh-so-civilized version of humanism proffered here the right direction for humanism?

I don't mean to be questioning the arts, education, or all that fine culture—of course we need those things and more of them, please. But humanism was designed to be a social enhancer for better supplying a few vital needs of life, many needs earlier having been attended to by religion. Now, clever intellectuals have been simply redefining "religious" as anything attending to those vital needs, seeking a permanent victory for religion and all its priests. However, that verbal trick wouldn't fool people for long, just as renaming all rocket ships "sky trains" couldn't save the jobs of railway conductors. Religious humanism instead (properly) looked to human experiences, labeling as "religious" or "spiritual" those special experiences that possessed that spice of religious quality—experiences arising from our gazing into the depths of nature, the pursuit of cherished ideals, or the struggle for preserving humanity in the face of fear. Existentialists and pragmatists have explored the emotional depths of pathos and despair, along with hope and exultation, from Kierkegaard to Dewey and Tillich. It's ultimately not about some distant God but only our own humanity, in all its blood, guts, and glory.

I hesitate to place de Botton with that sort of emotional humanism. Not because he isn't interested in emotion—emotions drip off the pages of every chapter—but because of the emotions he chooses to prioritize and the way he keeps accusing secularity of emotionless aridity. De Botton is so obsessed with crediting religion with

sustaining core human values that he can only portray the secular life as devoid of anything serious and meaningful. He seems to continually say that secular society is deficient in high spiritual aspiration and practical moral guidance. He can't be looking at the same society that I see. From human rights and civil liberties enshrined in secular constitutions around the world, to the secular colleges and universities spreading the light of knowledge, and on to all the (church-free) arts and sciences benefitting humanity in countless ways, I'd say that those worldly institutions and their secular values have elevated human existence during the past four hundred years far more than the last forty thousand years of religious domination. If de Botton can't agree, I dare him to publicly say so.

Furthermore, I think his high-minded vision for cultured religious humanism is instead a shallow and uninspired version of atheism unable to lead us forward. I'm reminded of William James, the early twentieth-century pragmatist and humanist, and his abhorrence of too much high culture. A cultured man himself, he nevertheless knew that refined, sterilized, and prepackaged culture by itself was a sweet cake that could never sustain the masses. His essay "What Makes a Life Significant" (1899) relates his perspective:

A few summers ago I spent a happy week at the famous Assembly Grounds on the borders of Chautauqua Lake. The moment one treads that sacred enclosure, one feels one's self in an atmosphere of success. Sobriety and industry, intelligence and goodness, orderliness and ideality, prosperity and cheerfulness, pervade the air. It is a serious and studious picnic on a gigantic scale....

And yet what was my own astonishment, on emerging into the dark and wicked world again, to catch myself quite unexpectedly and involuntarily saying: "Ouf! what a relief! Now for something primordial and savage, even though it were as bad as an Armenian massacre, to set the balance straight again. This order is too tame, this culture too second-rate, this goodness too uninspiring. This human drama without a villain or a pang; this community so refined that ice-cream soda-water is the utmost offering it can make to the brute animal in man; this city simmering in the tepid lakeside sun; this atrocious harmlessness of all things,—I cannot abide with them. Let me take my

chances again in the big outside worldly wilderness with all its sins and sufferings....


In James's view, any ethical culture worth the name must make room for the entire width and depth of human emotional experience. It must offer staunch moral guidance for directly grappling with the darkest and vilest corners, where vice and evil preys on the human spirit at its weakest.

When we turn our gaze back to de Botton's bright and cheery museums and temples for upright, clean atheists, they do look like lovely places to visit. But no one could really live there.

What sort of humanism is de Botton advocating? Sociologists chart the inevitable divides enlivening any denomination, divides that typically widen and split churches when the role of the emotional life is disputed. Reformers bringing people back to the raw experiences aroused by religion, reviving deep emotions to run them through the creedal veins and invigorate all the religious "organs" in sympathetic response, always run into ecclesiastical obstacles erected by cooler conservative heads. If a denomination can avoid schism across the centuries and revivalists can be continually domesticated with offers of their own churches, a distinctive "high church" and "low church" compromise can flourish. Preserving grand tradition and intellectual system, the high church is the very model of stability and reliability. It commands respect for its ability to instruct generation after generation in the same answers to the same questions. In contrast, the low-church version is in constant flux, in a state where fresh, charismatic leadership blossoms from unexpected directions, psychologically nimble enough to meet the common folks where they need to be met, arms full of worries and troubles amid chaos and disaster. From this sociological angle, high church/low church gaps can happen to any ideology or "ism"—not just to religious churches—because it is always real people that any movement must recruit.

De Botton, imitating much of Anglo-American religious humanism (and following the example of intellectually liberal Christianity before that), has redrawn the familiar blueprints for high-church

humanism. I deeply admire and respect that tradition, and I have learned much from it, as radical freethinkers, rationalists, agnostics, and atheists have before me. I love colleges and museums and regular gatherings, and I'd even pay for admittance to de Botton's envisioned temples once in a while. But nobody lives in the nineteenth century anymore, and nonbelievers presently look like anyone anywhere in society—we are numerous, and we come from all walks of life. We don't want exalted religion and we rarely need elevated ideas. Ordinary folks can get everything to instruction on art to basic education straight from the Internet. Yes, it's nurturing relationships and vibrant sociality that we really need to truly sustain viable communities. But give me low-church humanism, a full-blooded moralistic humanism ready for sharing and sacrifice, eager to help repair the messy and broken lives that real people have to live on a planet itself tearing apart at its seams.

Until that low-church humanism walks abroad the whole land and settles deeply into the fabric of cities and towns everywhere, we shall not have the humanism that all nonbelievers deserve. What are the realistic alternatives, in the long run? A low-church, pop-psychology Christianity sounds more and more humanistic, justifying its spirituality by elevating high hopes for this life. When life gets tough and nonbelievers are tempted to drift back into that cozy embrace, who else is looking after their personal emotional needs? Mere atheism has long been scorned for thin intellectualism and often rightly so; a low-church atheism has emerged to aim emotional energies back at the conservative religions from which many apostates have recently come. Recommending religion for atheists at least places the individual flourishing of nonbelievers at the forefront of concern. Yet it is too late for religion and its surrogates. New times deserve new technologies. 

John Shook is director of education and senior research fellow at the Center for Inquiry.

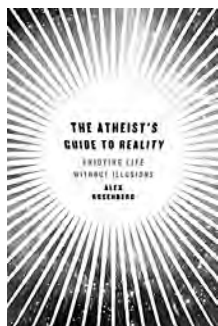
Atheist 'Guide' Goes Down Wrong Path

Jean Kazez

Post-millennial atheist writers seem to have moved from stage one to stage two. The nonexistence of God was dealt with by Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and others in the 2000s. Now in the 2010s, atheists are tackling the nature of morality, free will, the self, and Everything Else. While Sam Harris has devoted one book apiece to religion, morality, and free will (will the self be next?), philosopher of science Alex Rosenberg offers to be our guide to all of the persistent questions, as he calls them, in his new book *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions*. His answers add up to a stance you might call "nonchalant nihilism." It says, "No God, no morality, no free will, no self, no meaning, no purpose . . . no big deal." Rosenberg isn't troubled by giving up so much of our ordinary understanding of the world.

“. . . In the 2010s, atheists are tackling the nature of morality, free will, the self, and Everything Else.”

Atheism doesn't so much lead to all these nihilistic positions, according to Rosenberg, as it shares a parent with them—that parent being "scientism," the view (here wearing a white hat) that "science provides all the significant truths about reality, and knowing such truths is what real understanding is all about." When Rosenberg says "science," he does mean science (as in what people teach and do in the science departments of universities), not reason more broadly. Physics is preeminent among the sciences, he thinks—it describes the rock-bottom components of reality. That doesn't rule out there being other sorts of facts: there can be, for example, biological or geological



The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions, by Alex Rosenberg (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011, ISBN 978-0-393-08023-0) 352 pp. Hardcover, \$25.95.

facts too, as long as they rest securely on the physical (i.e., physics-revealed) facts. The operative slogan in the book is "The physical facts fix all the facts." Purported facts that aren't properly fixed by physical facts are just illusions to be committed to the flames (to steal an image from Hume).

So: fixed by the physical facts or unfixed? That is the question that decides the fate of all sorts of apparent facts, so you'd want the distinction to be crystal clear. Rosenberg starts simply: "the physical facts constitute or determine or bring about all the rest of the facts." By way of elucidation, he asks us to suppose that our corner of the universe has a perfect duplicate in some very remote region of space. Everything that physics cares about is exactly the same in the two regions. If that were so, he claims, all further bona fide facts would have to be the same, too. Anything not the same would be spurious, illusory, fictional, and destined for the flames.

This lets us acknowledge some higher-than-physics level facts. Being alive, for example, is grounded by physics in the right way to be a reality: if I am alive on Earth, Twin JK is alive on Twin Earth and vice versa. Ruled out are spurious facts such as my being a witch, since there's nothing to guarantee that Twin JK would have witchhood on Twin Earth if I had it on Earth. Witchhood isn't constituted by the physical components of the world in the way it needs to be for it to be robustly real. Get thee to the flames!

So far, so good. We want witchhood to fall by the wayside. But can Rosenberg

be serious about this gloss on what it means for the physical facts to fix all the genuine facts? I wonder, since that will lead us to some very strange conclusions. In this world, it may be that I shot the sheriff—Sheriff Dan, let's suppose. On Twin Earth, Twin JK did not shoot Sheriff Dan. She shot Twin Sheriff Dan. Are we really to think that these facts about who shot whom are illusory just because they aren't the same? Surely not. All signs are that Rosenberg is not completely serious about this account of what it means for the physical facts to fix all the facts, because it's presented at the outset but not used in the rest of the book.

In fact, there are separate arguments for each extirpation, none related to Twin Earth thought experiments and many rather slapdash. One extirpation stands out both because it is so surprising and because Rosenberg works hard on it. This is the whole business about "aboutness" that spans chapters 8 to 12.

One of our many illusions, Rosenberg writes, is that our thoughts are about things. Rosenberg thinks it's impossible to see aboutness as wholesomely ensconced in a world made of physical stuff. Thus, it's illusory and should be thrown out when we're being serious about what's really real and what's not. What's so problematic here? Rosenberg takes us on a journey into the brain and finds brain stuff lacking—i.e., lacking the ability to support aboutness. When you get in there, all you find is neurons, neural connections, input-output circuits, and such. Circuits are all there is, just about, in the brain of a

sea slug, a rat, or a human being, and circuits just respond to electrical inputs with electrical outputs. “That’s why they are not *about* anything. Piling up a lot of neural circuits that are not about anything at all can’t turn them into a thought about stuff out there in the world.”

Now, that’s not very convincing. You may as well say that the tiniest bits of my body are not alive, so I’m not alive. Or the tiniest bits of a red crayon aren’t red, so the crayon isn’t red. It may be weird that brains made of circuits have thoughts about things, but Rosenberg doesn’t make much of a case that it’s physically impossible.

Rosenberg claims that a generation of philosophers (including Jerry Fodor, Ruth Millikan, and many others) has failed to reveal how aboutness is physically realizable, but he keeps to himself what the various ingredients are that have gone into proposed recipes. Nobody thinks intentionality exudes from individual neurons or circuits. One proposal is that intentionality is constituted by a combination of the very complex role that a type of neural state plays in the brain and the relationship between that neural state and the outside world.

Psychology would be an austere and unilluminating science if shorn of all talk of mental content. We couldn’t do the simplest things, such as explain that I succeeded in landing at Charles de Gaulle airport by citing the various thoughts that went into my buying tickets, getting into the car at the right time, etc. Without mental content, we’d be forced to an explanatory level that’s too “low,” like atoms and the void are too low-level to explain why a square peg won’t go through a round hole. Rosenberg apparently sees this and so fudges on what psychology is going to be like after intentionality goes up in flames. Never fear; we’re going to keep talking about the brain as an “information” processor. (“Don’t misunderstand, no one denies that the brain receives, stores, and transmits information.”) Yes, but information tends to be information *about* something. And when philosophers (such as Fred Dretske) have tried to elucidate mental content using the concept of information, they’ve had in

mind a semantic notion—a notion that involves aboutness.


Rosenberg gives the reader a glimpse of some of the debates at the frontiers of the philosophy of mind, and it’s not his fault that intentionality and mental content appear to be fraught with difficulty. They are elusive, and there are real issues about exactly how best to think about mental content so that it can do serious work in scientific psychology. But Rosenberg has given no good argument here why aboutness is out, no matter how carefully crafted or reconfigured, as far as science goes.

“[Rosenberg’s] answers add up to a stance you might call ‘nonchalant nihilism.’ It says, ‘No God, no morality, no free will, no self, no meaning, no purpose . . . no big deal.’”

One of my frustrations with this book is that Rosenberg comes across as an emissary from the arcane world of philosophy, but he says little about what a singular emissary he is. A fascinating survey published at PhilPapers (philpapers.org/surveys) shows that while most philosophers are atheists (72.8 percent), they do not generally embrace the nihilistic positions that Rosenberg sees as sisters of the same strict parent—scientism. Rosenberg rejects objective morality, saying that our moralizing is a mere adaptation, but the majority of philosophers accept or lean toward moral realism, the view that there are objective truths about morality (56.3 percent); only 12.2 percent of philosophers think, accept, or lean toward there being no free will; and 63.8 percent accept or lean toward some theory of the

self instead of dismissing it altogether. The notion that there is no aboutness is a rare stance that philosophers typically treat with derision. There are two possible explanations for the divergence: philosophers don’t come by atheism from the premise of scientism (there are certainly many other routes), or philosophers mostly don’t think scientism leads to the various forms of nihilism that Rosenberg so nonchalantly embraces. Or both.

Whatever the explanation, Rosenberg’s nonchalance is also singular. He doesn’t make a convincing case that we’ll all be fine after we get rid of morality, free will, the self, etc. We’ll particularly not be fine without the notion that our thoughts are about things and that we can have plans and purposes. A news story I heard just after finishing Rosenberg’s book brought this home vividly. It was about Purpose Over Pain, an organization of parents of murdered children. The parents get involved in social activism as a way of coping with the death of their children. The organization was profiled on National Public Radio in connection with the tragic death of Trayvon Martin, the seventeen-year-old Florida boy who was shot down by a neighborhood patroller.

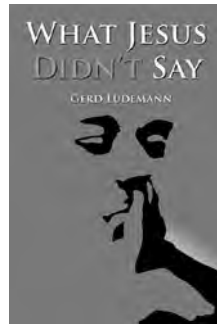
Now, if grieving parents really can’t think about their children, they can’t have purpose over pain. Rosenberg flippantly suggests Prozac for all our problems, but (despite his allegiance to science) he ignores recent research that suggests antidepressants are no more effective than placebos. In fact, the solution to our problems is often not to descend immediately to the lowest level—to work on our neurons or our bosons and fermions. Instead, it involves deliberately thinking about our problems in new ways—adopting new purposes. Fortunately for us, Rosenberg does not make a convincing case that this aspect of our self-understanding is defective. 

Jean Kazez is the reviews editor at *The Philosophers Magazine* and the author of *The Weight of Things: Philosophy and the Good Life* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007) and *Animalkind: What We Owe to Animals* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). She teaches philosophy at Southern Methodist University.

When the members of the Jesus Seminar finished sifting through the sayings and stories of the Gospels, their goal was to construct a database from which one might reconstruct the career and teaching of the historical Jesus. And after they finished that, there was some talk about focusing on the many texts and stories deemed probably or definitely inauthentic. Where did they come from? What can they tell us about the evolution of early Christianity, since it must be early Christians, not Jesus himself, who coined these sayings and spun these tales? *What Jesus Didn't Say* by longtime Jesus Seminar Fellow Gerd Lüdemann is a first step toward that goal. The author aims to demonstrate not so much the criteria of authenticity in Jesus tradition but rather the criteria of *inauthenticity*. What do scholars look for as telltale signs of a post-Jesus fabrication?

“The author aims to demonstrate not so much the criteria of authenticity in Jesus tradition but rather the criteria of inauthenticity. What do scholars look for as telltale signs of a post-Jesus fabrication?”

For one thing, if a saying has the editorial fingerprints of one of the evangelists (Gospel writers) on it—e.g., his distinctive motifs and vocabulary not found in other Gospels—that's a sure sign that a saying (or story) has at least been reworked by the evangelist if not created out of whole cloth. And even if it is just a matter of alteration, that is already enough to say that the finished product is spurious. It has been retooled and made to say something else, as when a politician claims he has been



What Jesus Didn't Say, by Gerd Lüdemann (Salem, Oregon: Polebridge Press, 2011. ISBN 978-1-59815-030-8). IV + 133 pp. Paper, \$18.00.

taken out of context and thus misrepresented. Again, compared to the basic Gospel scenario of Jesus as a wandering prophet and faith healer (assuming we can take that much for granted), it does not make sense for him to be warning his audience to be ready for persecution and to turn the other cheek when they are excommunicated, arrested, and martyred. All that presupposes a situation that could not then have existed, namely, one in which Christianity had separated off from Judaism and become an outlaw movement. Likewise, for Jesus to be explaining the significance of his death when the Gospels make clear even his disciples had no idea it would happen marks a saying as a piece of subsequent Christian preaching. If a saying presupposes the resurrection of Jesus (“All things have been delivered to me by my Father,” etc.), we must be dealing with the utterance of some Christian prophet, as when we read letters dictated by the son of God whose eyes are as a flame of fire in the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation. When sayings have Jesus adjudicate issues debated first in the early church but anachronistic for the earthly Jesus—e.g., the propriety of preaching to non-Jews, whether circumcision is incumbent, whether fasting ought to be continued, and especially when there are two or three different views ascribed to Jesus—well, we know we are dealing with people using him as a ventriloquist dummy to win an argument. If Jesus had actually settled the issue, why was it still being debated in the early church?

This is all very helpful for readers curious about the methods and results of Gospel critics. Lüdemann is, as always, admirably clear and sharp-eyed. His books are always goldmines of information and insight. It is a bit surprising, however, that he is not more critical than he is. For instance, I find it astonishing in view of the arguments of Walter Schmithals and Günter Klein, that Lüdemann still thinks Jesus appointed a body of twelve disciples. Surely that is a post-Easter development, since the twelve are never mentioned as such in any Jesus saying except in the nonhistorical John 6:70 and the Matthean redaction (20:28) of the Q saying preserved in Luke 22:30. Only Matthew specifies that the disciples will one day occupy *twelve* thrones. Lüdemann accepts the denials of Peter as historical, although I think Alfred Loisy was right in dismissing the story as pro-Paul, anti-Peter propaganda. Lüdemann thinks not, since Peter, the leader of the early Christians, would not have been besmirched in this fashion.

And here arises a broader issue. Lüdemann deals briefly with the generally accepted criteria of authenticity, and one of them is the “criterion of embarrassment” (or “offensiveness,” as he calls it). Something that would have embarrassed “the” early Christians, such as Jesus being baptized by John or the vilification of Simon Peter, must have been true, for who would have invented it? Here Lüdemann, like most supposed critics, remains stuck in the old orthodox paradigm whereby all the earliest Christians were

one big happy family who were at one in matters of doctrine or practice. Of course, if you put it that way, he rejects it, and elsewhere he shows himself fully cognizant that the earliest Christians were a diverse and bickering lot (e.g., his discussion of the fasting sayings). But he is inconsistent, as elsewhere in his books on Paul and the early church in which he explicitly rejects the historical accuracy of the Book of Acts yet then, inexplicably, proceeds to use its basic picture of church history as his default model.

Speaking of offensiveness, Lüdemann accepts as authentic those parables and sayings in which “Jesus” uses rogues as heroes and examples, such as Luke’s

Unjust Steward (16:1–7) with his shady but resourceful tactics. The idea seems to be that Jesus would have been hip, not pious and stuck up like subsequent Christian leaders. But this is like Joachim Jeremias (*The Parables of Jesus*) declaring that sayings that seem to be Greek translations from an Aramaic original must go back to Jesus. What? Was Jesus the only one who spoke Aramaic? And was he the only smart-ass in first-century Galilee?

Lüdemann’s book is very helpful, not to mention fascinating. One of the best parts is his scalpel dissection of the Farewell Discourses in John

chapters 13 through 17, though you will need to refer to your Bible to keep up with him. Let me recommend that you read this and Bart Ehrman’s book *Forged* together. They are somewhat different approaches to spurious materials in the Bible, a topic that makes many people uncomfortable but probably not readers of this magazine. ☒

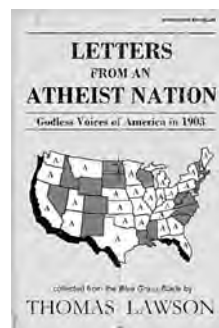
Robert M. Price is professor of theology and scriptural studies at Coleman Theological Seminary and a research fellow at the Center for Inquiry, for which he is hosting its new podcast, *The Human Bible*. His latest book is *Secret Scrolls: Revelations from the Lost Gospels* (Wipf and Stock, 2010).

The More Things Change . . . Tom Flynn

In 1903, the *Blue Grass Blade*—after *The Truth Seeker* and *The Boston Investigator*, perhaps America’s most successful national freethought newspaper during the Golden Age of Freethought—solicited letters from its readers on the topic of “Why I Am an Atheist.” The campaign was conceived by ex-rabbi Morris Sachs of Cincinnati and enthusiastically supported by the *Blade*’s indefatigable Kentucky-based editor, Charles C. Moore. Dozens of replies were received from more than half of the states of the union and published in the pages of the *Blade*.

Self-described “part time writer and full time dad” Thomas Lawson collected many of these letters, working from the Library of Congress Chronicling America website, a huge American-newspaper archive. The resulting e-book became a Kindle best seller; it is now in paperback for the rest of us.

In *Letters from an Atheist Nation: Godless Voices of America in 1903*, Lawson supplies an excellent, even scholarly introduction placing both Sachs and Moore firmly in their Golden Age contexts, then turns the book over to the atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, and other doubters of nearly 110 years ago. It’s a bracing portrait of grassroots unbelief during a period we know better from the works of “elite”



Letters from an Atheist Nation: Godless Voices of America in 1903, edited by Thomas Lawson (Langley, B.C.: Thomas Lawson Books, 2011, ISBN13 9781466397354) 347 pp. Paper, \$16.95; e-book for Amazon Kindle only, \$7.99.

“Most writers rejected their childhood religions and faced the disapproval of family, friends, and employers, just as still occurs today.”

writers (Ingersoll, D. M. Bennett, Moore, and others). A few celebrated free-thinkers contributed (notably suffragist and sex radical Josephine K. Henry, birth-control pioneer E. B. Foote, and movement activist Otto Wettstein), but the vast majority included here are “plain folks” who may never have published a word aside from their letter to the *Blade*.

Much of what they offer sounds surprisingly contemporary. Most writers rejected their childhood religions and faced the disapproval of family, friends, and employers, just as still occurs today. Whether closeted or open, many expressed a fierce pride in their unbelief that also sounds fresh. “Truth is better than Christianity,” quipped Mrs. M. A. Lee of Blue Earth, Minnesota (123).

Where there are differences, they speak to the period: several writers argue (based on the scientific orthodoxy of the day) that because the universe is eternal, the concept of a creator god is not only foolish but unnecessary. "I hold that the universe is eternal, boundless, self-existing, and everlasting, and was not created in six days about six thousand years ago by an orthodox God," declared Henry Kaiser of Penryn, California (118). Ingersoll made the same case, so Kaiser is in good com-

pany. (See my entry on Ingersoll in S.T. Joshi, ed., *Icons of Unbelief* [Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2008] for a discussion of Ingersoll's scientific errors and their nineteenth-century foundations.)

Lawson's remarkable work demonstrates both the power and the limits of online research. He was able to peruse most issues of the *Blade* from his home near Vancouver using the Chronicling America website. Yet where that site is missing issues, he

was forced to omit some entries. Presumably some of the missing issues exist on microform at the physical Library of Congress, or in microform or even in the original print at the Center for Inquiry Libraries. Some old-fashioned travel could have made this collection more complete, but the gaps are minor. What Lawson completed without leaving home is truly impressive. **FI**

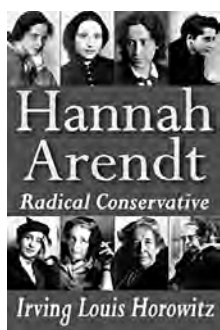
Tom Flynn is the editor of FREE INQUIRY.

A Knight at Evening

Brooke Horvath

By the end of this year, Hannah Arendt will have been the subject of at least five books devoted entirely to her thought, including Steve Buckler's *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory*, Marco Goldoni and Christopher McCorkindale's *Hannah Arendt and the Law*, Valerie Hartouni's *Visualizing Atrocity: Arendt, Evil, and the Optics of Thoughtlessness*, and Ronald Arnett's *Communication Ethics in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt's Rhetoric of Warning and Hope*. Arendt will have figured prominently as well in three other studies—Keith Breen's *Under Weber's Shadow*, which examines Arendt along with Jürgen Habermas and Alasdair MacIntyre; Lars Rensmann and Samir Gandesha's *Arendt and Adorno*; and William Spanos's *Exiles in the City: Hannah Arendt and Edward W. Said in Counterpoint*—and her ideas will have been cited passingly in several dozen other books (I speak here only of books published in English), from Andrea Karin Muehlebach's *The Moral Neoliberal* to Bassam Tibi's *Islamism and Islam*. Arendt's work, in short, remains vital.

Irving Louis Horowitz's *Hannah Arendt: Radical Conservative* is one of these new studies, although it is new only in the trivial sense of having just been published, the last of Horowitz's books prepared by him before his death last March. Its eight chapters have all seen print before as articles or book reviews in sundry periodicals, the earliest as long ago as 1964 and the most recent in the current issue of Horowitz's journal *Culture and Civilization*. They have



Hannah Arendt: Radical Conservative, by Irving Louis Horowitz (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 2012, ISBN 978-1-4128-4602-8) xii +100 pp. Hardcover, \$29.95.

been subjected here to "modest cosmetic surgery," but no effort has been made to transform them into a sustained argument. "They may not add up to a full-bodied effort at critical analysis or intellectual biography," Horowitz admits in the Acknowledgments, "but they provide a perspective on the work of Hannah Arendt from political science or, if preferred, a normative or philosophical standpoint."

The sentence just quoted suggests a problem the general reader may confront: Horowitz often presumes an audience conversant with the language and concerns of sociology and/or the disciplines he names. (The reader desiring a brief, "normative" introduction to Arendt might start with the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* or the *Jewish Virtual Library*, both accessible online.) To raise this complaint is not, of course, to imply that what Horowitz has to say is not worth reading, whether he is discussing Arendt's connection to Martin

Heidegger or exploring her ideas about totalitarianism, revolution, or open societies. Although not uncritical of Arendt's work, Horowitz is motivated, he tells us, by a desire to defend Arendt from the "pygmies" (his word) who wish to cut her down to their size, from the "bitter and at times highly emotive response to Arendt's *leben* even more than her *werke* by serious scholars" (I can almost see the quotation marks Horowitz almost placed around "serious").

One may question Horowitz's politics, disagree with his conclusions, or groan over the frequently infelicitous sentences and sometimes turgid development. One should, however, applaud Horowitz's gallant motivation in this final effort compiled in the evening of his own *leben*. **FI**

Brooke Horvath is professor of English at Kent State University and the author of *The Lecture on Dust* (Bottom Dog Press, 2007) and *Understanding Nelson Algren* (University of South Carolina Press, 2005).

Sideshow

Philip Appleman

OK, Life, you with the grinning clown face,
 I know I'm not the main attraction here,
 and of course you've slapped me around,
 whacked me with bladders,
 booted my behind—
 but I want you to know
 that after all those pratfalls,
 I've finally got used to your jabs,
 your tweaks, your pinches, and—
 are you ready for this?
 I forgive you.
 Because
 sometimes on hazy afternoons I'll hear
 the terrible keening of houseflies,
 and a tragic crow will conjure up
 all those broken stones in Rome,
 and maybe
 someone special will glance at me
 and look quickly away—
 and in that one dagger-deep moment,
 Life, you sadistic old joker, I realize
 how much I'd miss you
 if you turned up missing.

Philip Appleman has published ten volumes of poetry, including *New and Selected Poems, 1956–1996* (University of Arkansas Press, 1996); three novels, including *Apes and Angels* (Putnam, 1989); and half a dozen nonfiction books, including the widely used Norton Critical Edition, *Darwin* and the Norton Critical Edition of Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*. His poetry and fiction have won many awards, including a fellowship in poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Castagnola Award from the Poetry Society of America, the Friend of Darwin Award from the National Center for Science Education, and the Humanist Arts Award of the American Humanist Association. They have appeared in scores of publications, including *FREE INQUIRY*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The Nation*, *New Republic*, *New York Times*, *Paris Review*, *Partisan Review*, *Poetry*, *Sewanee Review*, and *Yale Review*. He has given readings of his poetry at the Library of Congress, the Guggenheim Museum, the Huntington Library, and many universities. Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Indiana University, he is a founding member of the Poets Advisory Committee of Poets House, New York, a former member of the governing board of the Poetry Society of America, and a member of the Academy of American Poets, PEN American Center, Poets & Writers, Inc., and the Authors Guild of America.

Passport Application

Maryann Corbett

Prove to you who I am?
 You ask as if I'd know.
 This ID shot, slapped down
 indefinite years ago?
 If it's all a matter of Matter,
 no cell of me, no atom
 of this old face is the same
 as that; if Form, the former
 has rather more than the latter.
 And look: a different name
 than the birth certificate shows,
 stamped in a stiffer time
 by the force of love and laws.
 So in a sense I'm a scam.
 The flimflam woman who
 once played seductress, vixen,
 wetnurse and char is now
 a Being no being knows.
 Yet you sweep a clerical eye
 in a swipe like a squeegee blade
 across uncertainty
 and Bureaucracy's awful shade
 withdraws, clutching its fee.

Maryann Corbett lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, and works for the Minnesota legislature. Her book *Breath Control* is just out from David Robert Books. Her work has appeared in many journals in print and online, as well as in several anthologies. Her poems have been shortlisted for Best of the Net, the Morton Marr Prize competition, and the Able Muse Book Prize and have won the Lyric Memorial Award and the Willis Barnstone Translation Prize.

denied the Holocaust but merely denies that the Muslims had anything to do with it.

As a citizen of the “Zionist” state, permit me to put Drury right on a few points.

Ahmadinejad threatened to wipe out Israel from the podium of the General Assembly of the United Nations in front of the entire world (incidentally, the first and only time anyone has done something like that). Furthermore, he hosted a Holocaust Denial conference in Teheran to which he invited all the well-known Holocaust denial champions of Europe.

Iran funds and trains Hezbollah in Lebanon and has armed them with thousands of short- and medium-range rockets capable of reaching every point in Israel.

Iran is eighty times the size of Israel. One nuclear bomb on the area of Tel Aviv would be sufficient to effectively destroy Israel.

As a member of a people who have been “guests” of Christian and Muslim countries for over 1,800 years, culminating in the Holocaust in Europe, actively encouraged by Hitler’s personal friend, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, I claim the right to a piece of territory of my own, not subject to the whims of other citizens of the “One State” that Drury seems to be so keen on. Unlike some of my countrymen, I do not base this claim on divine promises but on the simple fact that there is a mass of archeological evidence that a group of people known as “Israelites” or “Judeans,” from whom I claim to be descended, occupied parts of the area now covered by Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, and the Golan for over one thousand years, until they were forcibly expelled by the Romans in 135 CE.

I am quite willing to recognize the rights of Palestinians to a share of this area. Unfortunately they are not ready to recognize mine. And the idea of a nuclear Iran scares me to death.

Neil Schwartz
Ra’anana, Israel

Shadia B. Drury states that Iranian President Ahmadinejad has not denied the

reality of the Holocaust, just that it happened in his neighborhood. Here is Ahmadinejad speaking in a 2005 *Al-Alam* interview: “Some European countries insist on saying that during World War II, Hitler burned millions of Jews and put them in concentration camps. Any historian, commentator, or scientist who doubts that is taken to prison or gets condemned. Although we don’t accept this claim [of the Holocaust]. . . .”

Drury also states that Ahmadinejad has never threatened to wipe Israel off the map, just expressed a desire to end the Zionist state. Here is Ahmadinejad speaking on the nineteenth anniversary of the Ayatollah Khomeini’s death in 2008: “You should know that the criminal and terrorist Zionist regime which has sixty years of plundering, aggression, and crimes in its file has reached the end of its work and will soon disappear off the geographical scene.”

A shaft of perfect acuity descended from the Iranian storm cloud in May 2012, when Iran’s military chief of staff said: “The Iranian nation is standing for its cause and that is the full annihilation of . . . Israel.”

Drury whitewashes Iran’s intentions and so becomes a propagandist. In a magazine for atheists, perhaps she feels that she can get away with it. But to allow Iran a nuclear deterrent, in some kind of MAD (mutual assured destruction) scheme, is just what the acronym implies. Perhaps someday a citizen of Iran will be able to criticize the Prophet or openly burn a copy of the Qur’an without facing execution. Unfortunately, I suspect that the repeal of blasphemy laws is at least one civil war away.

Scott Schad
Tulsa, Oklahoma

I find it strange that Shadia Drury thinks that “the world would be better off if Iran had a nuclear weapon” or that she would compare the tension between the United States and a nuclear-armed Iran with the tension between the United States and Russia during the Cold War. Two secular nations engaged in a nuclear standoff have their desires for domination frus-

trated by the mutual disinclination to die. This mindset provided a stabilizing force that mitigated the risk of either side launching an attack; neither would have won anything but a decimated planet and societies in chaos and both sides were rational enough to realize it.

As far as I can tell, the United States is still a secular democracy that has no intention of nuking anyone out of a religiously based ideology. This is why it is vital that the role evangelical Christianity plays in determining public policy diminish. On the other hand, Iran is an Islamic theocracy in which the real power lies not with the president but with the clergy, who harbor their own dangerous eschatology. If the greatest use of one’s life (or the life of a nation called by God) is to sacrifice it in defense of the faith, then all bets are off. The Muslim world is currently shot through with beliefs in martyrdom and *jihad* and thus the concept of MAD no longer applies. If the other side *wants to die* so it can fulfill its imagined historical and religious destiny and attain paradise, and it has the means to do so, that is a danger that free people everywhere must resist.

Matt Millsap
Lander, Wyoming

As usual, Shadia Drury is spot-on with her op-eds. After reading her June/July article, I was very moved. At the age of eighty-three, I remember the days when the Defense Department was called the War Department—much more appropriate, don’t you think?

Arthur Howard
Jacksonville, Oregon

Shadia B. Drury responds:

The quotations from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad referred to by the readers above were a subject of controversy, and their translations were in dispute. So, when Larry King interviewed Ahmadinejad on CNN, he asked him bluntly if he did not believe that the Holocaust really happened and if he wanted to push Israel into the sea. I based

what I said about Ahmadinejad on his response to Larry King—through an interpreter. Just because I am no friend of Zionism, does not mean that I am a propagandist for theocratic thugs. I'm all for a post-Zionist Israel. It is inevitable, but it will take time.

My heart goes out to Neil Schwartz, who lives in Zionist Israel. Unfortunately, the Zionist ideology has turned Israel into a military garrison that is besieged on all fronts. In one of its earliest incarnations, Zionism was a very good idea. Having endured hundreds of years of persecution at the hands of the Catholic Church, and finding themselves persecuted by the nation states that followed in the wake of the French Revolution, some Jews rightly said: "Enough! Let's leave Europe and return to the land of our ancestors and live with people like ourselves who are more likely to accept us, since most of them are

also descendants of Abraham." It was a reasonable idea because, unlike Christianity, Islam does not demonize the Jews. It does not consider them deicides—i.e., the killers of God incarnate in Jesus Christ. In contrast, Islam considers the Jews as the "people of the book." It is that book and its monotheistic message to which Islam is dedicated and from which Christianity has strayed—because no matter how you slice it, three (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) can never equal one. So, the Jews certainly belong in Palestine and have every right to be there.

The trouble set in when Zionism morphed into a European-style nationalist movement. Nationalism is the claim that every "people" with a distinctive language, religion, culture, and ethnicity should have a sovereign country of its own that allows citizens to act as one self-determining entity. Once this idea emerged, Jew-hatred in Europe was no longer based on the Jews

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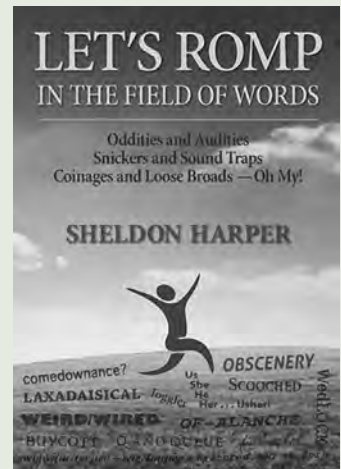
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being decides but on being a foreign element that contaminates the purity of European nation states.

A few hundred thousand Jews went to live in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century when Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire. The latter deprived all its subjects of political freedom but gave them religious and cultural freedom under the Millet system. But when the Ottoman Empire was dismantled by the European powers in World War I, the *modus vivendi* in which Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived together was replaced with nationalist ideology. The latter is particularly deadly when introduced to parts of the world where there is a great diversity of people with differing religions and languages living in the same vicinity. The dreadful effects of nationalism are still with us—witness the turmoil in Syria, Egypt, and Israel. For the nationalist mind-set the only relevant political question is: To whom does the nation belong?

As long as Zionism remains a nationalist movement, it will continue to contribute to the ethnic hatreds in the region. A nationalist movement is not interested in safety but only in the defense of the purity, authenticity, and exclusivity of the nation state. As long as Zionism remains a nationalist movement, Israel will have to live with endless war.

If Israel would like to be a safe haven for Jews, then here is my advice. Forget Joshua; forget God's command to slaughter all the inhabitants of the Promised Land; forget European nationalism, its racial exclusivity, and its genocidal ways; abandon all pretense to democracy. Instead, learn from two other sources: Cyrus the Great (founder of the Persian Empire) and the Hebrew prophets. Cyrus was the first conqueror not to slaughter the people he conquered. He was the greatest conqueror in history because he was also a liberator. When he conquered Babylon, he

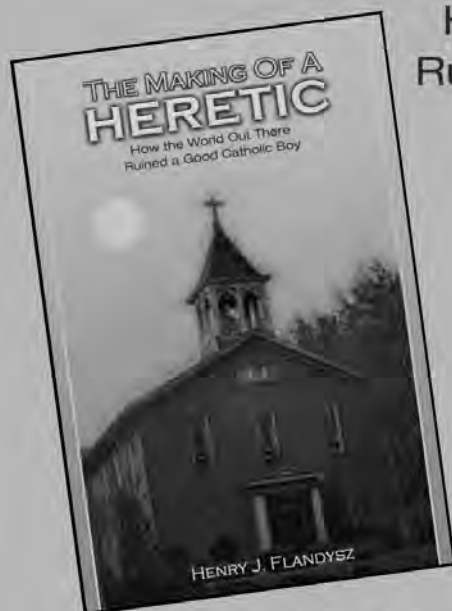
liberated the Jews, who had been in captivity there for generations—a debt that the Jews owe to Persia (i.e., Iran). Israel now owns the West Bank, and it should just take it with all the people in it without trying to cleanse it settlement by settlement. Another lesson from Cyrus is that once you conquer a land and its people, you have to dispense justice—it's an obligation and a privilege. Israel needs equitable laws that are justly administered on all the inhabitants of its territories. And here is where it will need the Hebrew prophets for inspiration about social justice.

In short, my advice to Israel is this: Stop living in fear. Stop getting the United States to fight your battles. Learn to conquer like a great empire—conquer as much land as you can get your hands on. Your military superiority will ensure success. Be quick about it, while the Arabs are still living under dreadful tyrannies. Remember, it is easier to conquer people liv-

THE MAKING OF A HERETIC

How the World Out There Ruined a Good Catholic Boy

HENRY J. FLANDYSZ



"Faith is believing what you know ain't so." ~ Mark Twain

What happens when people ask way too many questions of way too many wizards and gurus, and then spend way too much time thinking about the answers? What if they eventually dare to examine and challenge creeds and dogmas they have been led to believe are sacrosanct?

That's how heretics are made.

Can Big Religion ever be reconciled with science, democracy and the modern world? Can conventional religion catch up, reform itself and make peace with the unavoidable diversity that surrounds it? Can clerics in those institutions begin honestly to acknowledge the crimes of their past and embark on a plan to live in harmony with the children of their victims?

The very personal stories in this book provide some insights into those kinds of questions that, hopefully, the reader can build upon and improve with their own thoughts and from their own life experiences.

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ing under tyranny if you offer them justice. Look to the prophets for inspiration in that department. There is no time to waste; the Arab Spring is kicking in, and conquering free peoples will not be easy.

Meanwhile, if you would like a safe place to live, Neil, come to Canada—we'd love to have you. It is our policy to give asylum to people who live in dangerous places.

Is the U.S. a Christian Nation?

In any discussion of the Christian-nation myth, two things get left out ("Once and for All, Is America a Christian Nation?," *FI*, June/July 2012). The first is Romans 13, which says that government is ordained by God. Government maintains order and punishes wrongdoing, and good citizens need not fear the authorities. The second is 1 Peter 2, which says we must honor the king. Nowhere does the Bible teach rights and democracy, and it certainly does not teach revolution. America is founded on multiple and egregious violations of Scripture and is certainly not a Christian country.

*Ryan Pelsy
Francesville, Indiana*

Re "Our UnChristian Nation" by Hector Avalos: in the late 1960s, a Billy Graham crusade came to Angel Stadium giving Christians around Orange County the chance to exercise their faith. The golden opportunity for believers was the role of counselor: people who sat in the back of stadium sections waiting to follow sinners down to the field during the invitation. There, in front of Billy's pulpit, counselors led converts in the prayer of salvation. This once-in-a-lifetime opportunity gave timid believers a low-risk, highly rewarding opportunity to serve God as he commanded: to go into the world and preach the gospel (Mark 15:16), to confess Jesus to men on earth so he will acknowledge us to his father in heaven (Matthew 10:32), and to be hot for God or be spewed from his mouth (Rev. 3:15–16).

Our church served as a counselor train-

ing center every Thursday over several weeks. Our sanctuary seated three hundred, but two Sunday services accommodated attendance of 150 percent capacity. With two other congregations joining us, I expected standing room only as those with conviction flocked to this chance to stand up for Jesus, to throw out a lifeline, and to rescue the perishing, which we sang about week after week. We could answer the call, demonstrate Christian love, and experience the joy we often forfeit.

The training provided an eye-opening lesson on the hypocrisy and self-deception rampant in our congregation. Three-quarters of the sanctuary sat empty the first session, and attendance diminished from there. What our congregation rejected in practice were the very precepts our brand of belief espoused.

*Gary Zimmerman
Klamath Falls, Oregon*

Re "How Secular Humanists (and Everyone Else Subsidize Religion in the U.S." by Ryan T. Cragun, Stephanie Yeager, and Desmond Vega: there is no question that churches—especially the mega churches—are exploiting their tax exemption to an unethical degree. Here in the Houston area there are two mega-churches that offer business consultation, marriage counseling, vocational counseling, rock concerts, exercise spas, and every kind of recreation imaginable all in the tax-exempt name of Christian service. I do not deny that these are good services. But, as it now stands, because of their tax exemption, they're in unfair competition with private enterprise. This is an act of bad faith in a democratic society sporting separation of church and state.

*John L. Indo
Houston, Texas*

'On Gods and Placebos' Simplifies Complexity

When someone offers a one-size-fits-all explanation for complex human behav-

ior, my oversimplification alarm clamors. According to Martin Jaffe's "On Gods and Placebos" (*FI*, June/July 2012), "The desire to feel secure is the basis for human emotion and behavior. . . . Jaffe qualifies his sweeping thesis by noting that "security is the goal of all *rational* human behavior" (my italics). But surely he must know that much human emotion and behavior is caused by unconscious processes that are not controlled by rational thinking.

Jaffe contends that the desire to feel secure "is the reason humans have believed in gods since the beginning of known history." There are at least several other reasons, including our tendency to see agency in natural phenomena, our love of ritual, religion's contribution to group solidarity, and its answering with myths our curiosity about the world and universe before the advent of science. Jaffe dismisses religion by saying it provides "a false sense of security due to a placebo effect." That's true to an extent, but I doubt that people feel very secure when they fear hell or take part in holy wars.

*Walter Balcerak
Brooklyn, New York*

Martin Jaffe responds:

Walter Balcerak is concerned that I oversimplify the explanation of complex human behavior by a one-size-fits-all explanation (based on security). But can't a similar claim be made for evolution by natural selection, an idea that security and security feelings are patterned after? That is, security predisposes to increased survival, while natural selection selects on the basis of enhanced survivability. Both biological evolution by natural selection and psychological evolution on the basis of security are simple, foundational, far-reaching, one-size-fits-all ideas that produce paradigm shifts. Biological and psychological evolutionary paradigms open new understandings of biology and psychology, respectively.

Balcerak rightfully questions the use of the term rational human behavior. By that I mean behavior whose origin is free from mental derangement, such as occurs with

mental disease or when opioids or methamphetamine hijack the mental reward system thereby resulting in behavior that is not based on the desire to feel secure. Also, in response to Balcerak, love of ritual and group solidarity are social aspects of religion and of minor importance to a belief in God. In addition, hell is a nocebo, and by trying to avoid it people increase their security. Finally, people fight holy wars on behalf of their god, who (they wrongly believe) is the source of their security.

The Reason Rally

Re ("Unreasonable Rally," Josh Bunting and Ian Murphy, *FI*, June/July 2012): Sam Harris, in calling attention to the self-defeating role of orthodoxy among atheists, likens it to our critics having drawn a chalk body-outline that these atheists are all too ready to drop down and fill. The Reason Rally deserves praise for rallying

What Your Preacher Didn't Tell You

Some preachers like to debate the existence of God — because God's existence can neither be proven nor disproven. What they *don't* want to debate is whether Jesus believed that he was God's son. John Windsor's book demonstrates that, according to the gospels, Jesus expected to rule a new "Kingdom of Heaven" that *Yahweh* would establish right here "on earth as it is in heaven." He and his disciples expected the kingdom come during their lifetimes.

The evidence is "hiding in plain sight" in the gospels.



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political support at Congress's doorstep rather than a brickbat for participating Senator Tom Harkin's affiliation with quack medicine (which played no role in the proceedings). Theist orthodoxy, like its kissin' cousin religious orthodoxy, holds that disagreement on a single point of rationalist thought is, dare we say it, "heresy." For some, this has led to dismissal of comedian Bill Maher for his anti-vaccination stance, popular video blogger Pat Condell for his occasional rationality impaired opinions, and Dr. Phil Mason (Thunderf00t) for straying from science with blanket condemnations of Islam. All have been victims of backlash from orthodox atheists who are ever-ready to toss out ideologically impure babies with the bathwater.

My plea to *FI* is to eschew orthodox atheism's exclusionary tendencies. Political progress, which compares better to sausage-making than the hypothetical delights of pure reason, demands that we embrace sound, if ideologically incorrect, people like Senator Harkin to advance our cause.

Jose Segue
San Francisco, California

New Type

The new typeface and improved inking in your June/July issue are substantial improvements. Thank you. Nevertheless, I suspect that most people who believe that serif and sans serif fonts are "by most measures equally readable" ("From the Editor," p. 63) have 20/20 vision.

Hoyt Mathews
Riverwoods, Illinois

Clarification and Correction

In the June/July 2012 issue you published a letter from Lee Simon who wrote (in a comment upon Shadia Drury's "Is Freedom of Religion a Mistake?" in *FI*, April/May 2012): "... the state will not grant me the status of conscientious objector unless it stems from a religious belief." In fact, the rule promulgated by the Supreme Court in *United States v.*

Seeger (1965) is that the belief must be a "meaningful belief occupying in the life of the possessor a place parallel to that filled by the God of those admittedly qualified for the exemption." That is a bit ambiguous, but looking at the specifics of the cases adjudicated in that opinion convinces me that a "humanistic conscience" cited in the letter could qualify.

Jerry Schwarz
Palo Alto, California

David K. Clark's article "Ought America to Be a Christian Nation?" opens with a quote by Anne Graham Lotz and identifies her as the wife of Billy Graham Jr. In fact, she's the second daughter of Billy Graham the evangelist and his wife, Ruth. She looks young for her age. I think David Gregory of *Meet the Press*, the program from which the quote is taken, also erred when he referred to Billy Graham as her grandfather. Anne Graham Lotz is married to a dentist in Raleigh, North Carolina. Billy Graham Jr. is the evangelist Billy Graham, though he is seldom referred to as junior.

Richard Follet
Palm Bay, Florida

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☞ THE AFFIRMATIONS OF HUMANISM: A STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES* ☜

WE ARE COMMITTED to the application of reason and science to the understanding of the universe and to the solving of human problems.

WE DEPLORE efforts to denigrate human intelligence, to seek to explain the world in supernatural terms, and to look outside nature for salvation.

WE BELIEVE that scientific discovery and technology can contribute to the betterment of human life.

WE BELIEVE in an open and pluralistic society and that democracy is the best guarantee of protecting human rights from authoritarian elites and repressive majorities.

WE ARE COMMITTED to the principle of the separation of church and state.

WE CULTIVATE the arts of negotiation and compromise as a means of resolving differences and achieving mutual understanding.

WE ARE CONCERNED with securing justice and fairness in society and with eliminating discrimination and intolerance.

WE BELIEVE in supporting the disadvantaged and the disabled so that they will be able to help themselves.

WE ATTEMPT to transcend divisive parochial loyalties based on race, religion, gender, nationality, creed, class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity and strive to work together for the common good of humanity.

WE WANT TO PROTECT and enhance Earth, to preserve it for future generations, and to avoid inflicting needless suffering on other species.

WE BELIEVE in enjoying life here and now and in developing our creative talents to their fullest.

WE BELIEVE in the cultivation of moral excellence.

WE RESPECT the right to privacy. Mature adults should be allowed to fulfill their aspirations, to express their sexual preferences, to exercise reproductive freedom, to have access to comprehensive and informed health care, and to die with dignity.

WE BELIEVE in the common moral decencies: altruism, integrity, honesty, truthfulness, responsibility. Humanist ethics is amenable to critical, rational guidance. There are normative standards that we discover together. Moral principles are tested by their consequences.

WE ARE DEEPLY CONCERNED with the moral education of our children. We want to nourish reason and compassion.

WE ARE ENGAGED by the arts no less than by the sciences.

WE ARE CITIZENS of the universe and are excited by discoveries still to be made in the cosmos.

WE ARE SKEPTICAL of untested claims to knowledge, and we are open to novel ideas and seek new departures in our thinking.

WE AFFIRM HUMANISM as a realistic alternative to theologies of despair and ideologies of violence and as a source of rich personal significance and genuine satisfaction in the service to others.

WE BELIEVE in optimism rather than pessimism, hope rather than despair, learning in the place of dogma, truth instead of ignorance, joy rather than guilt or sin, tolerance in the place of fear, love instead of hatred, compassion over selfishness, beauty instead of ugliness, and reason rather than blind faith or irrationality.

WE BELIEVE in the fullest realization of the best and noblest that we are capable of as human beings.

*BY PAUL KURTZ

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