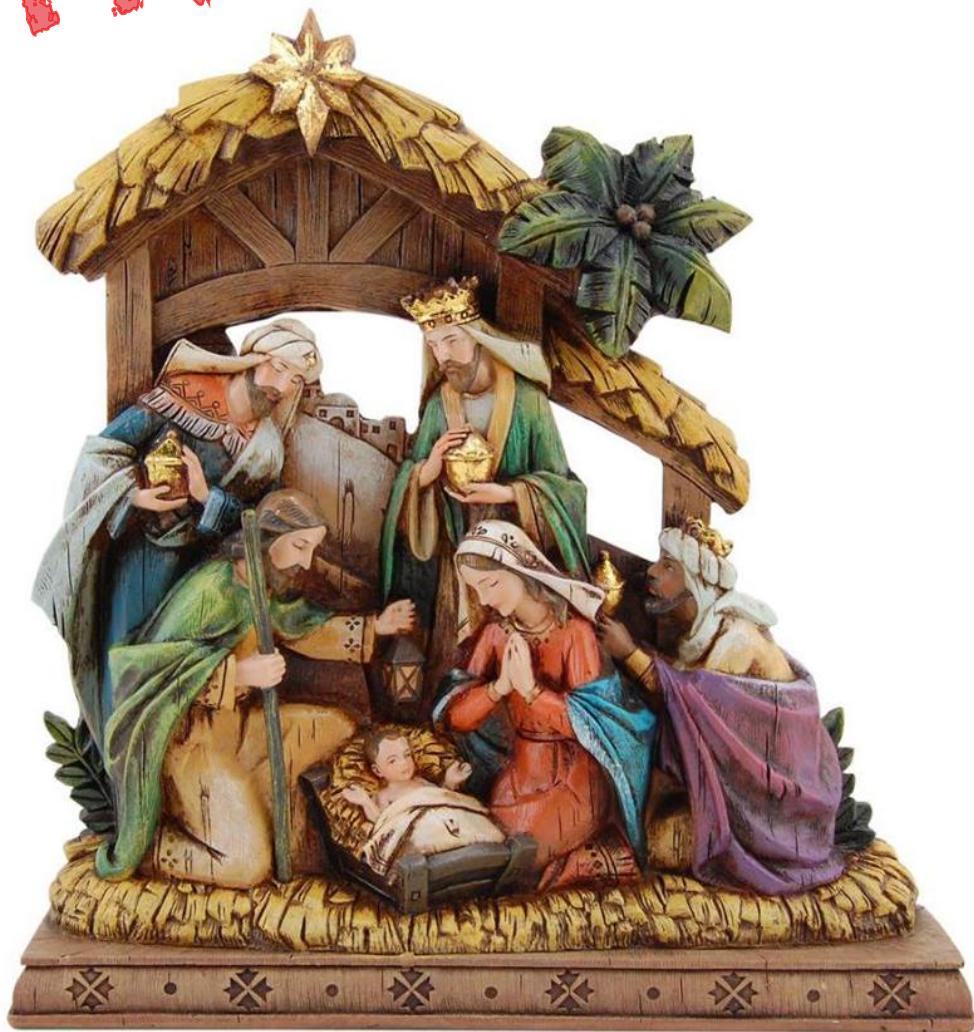


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December 2018

FAKE Good News



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Graveyard of the Gods by Sebastian

Editorial

Once upon a time, Saturnalia was just an innocent midwinter festival when we all decorated our homes with holly to celebrate the lengthening of the days that heralded the imminent return of spring with its promise of fresh food: delicious eggs and bunnies!

Around two millennia ago, the Romans, then European bosses, adopted Christianity as the state religion and imposed it on all of their conquered territories. Here's a tip: when you impose a doctrine on a population, it's always easier to merge it with existing customs—that way you annoy fewer people.

So, Saturnalia was snatched and morphed into Christmas. In the same way, the spring festival was commandeered for the crucifixion. (Note how sweet it is that Jesus' execution event once belonged to Eostre, Goddess of New Life!).

Sadly, what was previously a joyous occasion (*Hip, hip hooray,*

spring is on the way!) has become a contentious time of year in our present multifaith world. As Christopher Hitchens would say, "Religion Poisons Everything". Why is that?

Well, it's because religions are merely belief systems based on a supposed 'god'. Unlike the change in day-length, which is an indisputable fact, beliefs are just opinions about the unknown, so they need defending. Claims that are not backed by evidence can only be supported argumentatively; the lack of evidence means that they *need* arguments, indeed, *they only have arguments*.

This puts us immediately into the arena of disagreement: "My god is the true one, yours is false and questioning my beliefs will be deemed offensive". The next thing that happens is dogmatic religious leaders feel entitled to enforce so-called 'crimes' of blasphemy and heresy to protect their doctrines, sometimes with cruel punishments including execution. Non-believers are demonized with names like 'heathen', 'gentile' and 'infidel'. Given that faiths are historically territorial,

conflict is the inevitable result.

Non-believers sometimes get asked, "What do you do at Christmas?", as if we have no permission to celebrate the time of the year that has been stolen by the Christians for their God.

So, what do we do at Christmas? We do what the dictionary tells us to do:

Saturnalia: the ancient Roman festival of Saturn in December, a period of general merrymaking and an occasion of wild revelry or indulgence.

We feel free to meet up with family and friends, to eat, drink and be merry. It's about Northern winter and nothing to do with Zeus, Saturn, Odin, Shiva or any god.

John Richards
Publications Director





President's Letter

Let's make 2019 our year—the year of atheists. The year where a voice from the background takes center stage.

As 2018 fades out, I can't help but wonder what 2019 will bring us.

To be honest, I'm not hopeful. This past year I endured weeks of smoke filled skies from forest fires, people shouting at me when I tried to have an open discussion on a proposed pipeline and my two sons moving back home because housing is unaffordable and scarce. And I live

in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, which is considered to be one of the most livable places in the world, and a beacon of democracy.

Beyond Vancouver, things don't look much better—more mass shootings, freedom of speech in jeopardy, democracy declining, fake news, climate change worsening, and the list goes on.

But this is not a time for atheists to give up and stand by idly as the chaos continues. This is our time to shine. Who better to steer the world to peace, stability and prosperity than us? People who believe in rationality, science and critical thinking, which produce tolerance and understanding. People who value openness, discussion and evidence which the world so desperately needs now. This is our battle cry.

Enough of the emotionally laden statements and platforms we see today. Atheists need to be that calm, consistent voice in the background asking the questions,

pointing out the fallacies, providing the evidence and looking at all sides of the issues.

This will not be easy for us to do. Atheists are not typically seen as morally, upstanding people that others would listen too. Nor will it be easy to get others to put away their emotions and opinions and listen to reason.

But we cannot walk away from this. This is our chance to show the world that we are morally upstanding citizens with lots to offer. This is our chance to create a better world, not just for us but for everyone. In time, people will listen because we have the only alternative that makes sense.

Gail Miller
President, Atheist Alliance International



Music & Mortality



The music it ain't an escape, man,
for the older woman and man.

The music ain't an escape
for the older woman and man.

It was the music that called us to roam, man
It was the music that called us to roam.

Now the music is bringing us home, man
The music is bringing us home.

The music touched on our hearts and our minds, man
It touched both our hearts and our minds.

Play again, play again, be so kind, man
Play again if you will be so kind.

Sure we all got together to rock and to roll, man
Got together to rock and to roll.

Now the music will play to our soul, man
The music will play to our soul.

The music it taught us to dance, man
The music it taught us to dance.

It will stir us again, just give it a chance, man
It will stir us again, if you give it a chance.

The music it played down the path of our youth, man
The music played the path of our youth.

It brings us back to the truth, man
The music it brings us the truth.

Some people they sing with their voice, man
And some they sing with their tears.

However we sing, however we play
We are saying goodbye to our fears.

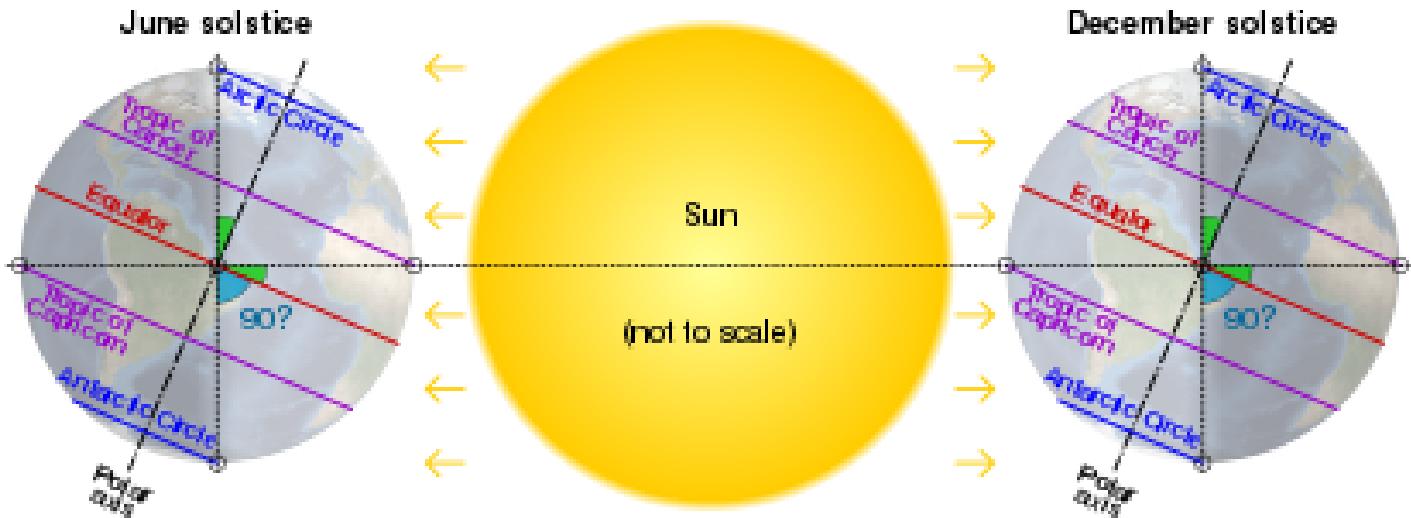
The music it dances through time, man
It dances over the years.

The music it takes you so far, man
The music it brings you so near.

Janis and Jimi got burned, man
The music can be too hot to hold.

The music will play us to sleep, man.
At least that's what I've been told.

By Brian Tully, taken from "Raising the Human Spirit" published by Humanist Voice 2016



SCIENCE LAB : The Reason for the Season

December 25th is not the Christian's gig

At this time of year we often hear people complaining that Christmas has become a debauched commercial splurge. Devout Christians exhort us to remember the 'reason for the season', by which they mean 'The Nativity'. Is that really the reason, though?

The fact is, there were several midwinter festivals long before Jesus was even a twinkle in his hypothetical father's eye! People who are running out of the food they've had stored since the harvest are very relieved to observe the first glimmer of longer days and naturally want to celebrate their renewed hope of surviving the cold, dark time. These agrarian communities and the associated calendars originated in the Northern Hemisphere where December means winter. So, it's to do with *winter* not Christ; he is a Johnny-come-lately addition.

Why is there winter then? Because of *axial tilt*. To explain that, we have to consider how the Solar System formed, so here goes:

About four point six billion years ago, the Sun formed as a result of gravitational attraction between hydrogen atoms in this region of space. The clumping together caused it to rotate on an axis and the internal pressure instigated a nuclear fusion reaction: sunshine began. During the next hundred million years, smaller globes, the planets, formed in orbit around their star with their axes perpendicular to the plane of all the orbits.

This model is consistent with what we observe and we have used it to make our calendar. One spin of the Earth on its axis gives us day and night as it exposes different surfaces of our planet to the source of sunlight, and one orbit of the sun gives us the year.

Early on, our planet was struck a mighty blow by a wandering cosmological body, which tilted Earth's axis and smashed off rocky material that became the moon. Gravity captured the moon into its geocentric orbit where it appears, to observers, to change shape each night due to the Earth's shadow interrupting the sunlight that it reflects. Observers used a single cycle of lunar phases to calculate the month.

The 23.5 degree tilt of the Earth's axis means that, in one place on its orbit the North pole is tilted towards the sun causing it to experience summer. Meanwhile, the South pole will be getting winter and, six months later, at the opposite side of the circuit, the situation is reversed.

The curvature of the globe means that the sun's rays are more thinly spread over a larger area in the higher latitudes, hence it is cooler there. The tilt has little effect on solar radiation levels near the equator therefore seasons are only experienced in the higher latitudes.

The Northern hemisphere was the first to be populated by societies that invented writing so that's where all the midwinter myths originated. Christmas South of the Tropic of Capricorn is a mid-summer beach barbecue affair very unlike the original intention of celebrating the eventual prospect of spring.

Although this time of year is supposed to be a period of 'Peace and Goodwill to all Men', Christmas is in fact divisive. Since the era of cheap travel ushered in by the jumbo jet, we have all become mixed up and our religious differences have become more apparent.

A Virgin Birth?



Like many of our readers, I guess, I have daughters. If one of them came home pregnant and claimed that she was still a virgin, would I believe her? No! Would you? No? Why not?

Is it because that's obviously a tall tale? We all know how a woman gets pregnant. Apart from artificial insemination, which wasn't available in Biblical times, there is no way of conceiving other than by copulation: by losing virginity.

Nowadays, virginity is not highly prized but, back then, it was the only way a man could be sure he wouldn't contract a sexual infection, so it was a highly valued condition and women were expected not to indulge in sexual acts until after their wedding. If they fell pregnant while single they were considered to be 'soiled goods' so there was heavy social pressure to conform with the expectation of 'purity'. One wonders how 'Mother Mary' passes as angelic in Catholicism.

This tells us something about the relative status of women and men in early religious societies and it's a principle that prevails in fundamentalist communities today.

Traditionally, in devout Christian

circles, social customs have been heavily biased in favor of men. In a Muslim Shia court a woman's word is still considered to be only half the value of a man's! Men are thought to have 'uncontrollable lust' which gives them an excuse for their behavior and puts responsibility firmly at a girl's feet (or higher up)!

This male advantage has bred a tolerant attitude towards the abandonment of mothers-to-be and left us with many fatherless children. That's not so bad in communities where children are raised by the village, but it's a severe disadvantage in prurient societies where the nuclear family is the only approved coupling. Not knowing your father earned you the label of 'bastard' and added public ostracism to your other problems.

However, in the case of Jesus, the father is claimed to be known so some of the blame must attach to him. What was 'god' doing seducing Joseph's girl? Weren't they on their way to get wed? He can't claim ignorance because he is supposed to be 'omniscient'! Judged by modern standards, god is a philanderer at best, and a possible rapist at worst! Shouldn't he attract

the attention of #metoo?

There is a scientific angle to this story as well, because 'virgin birth', properly called 'parthenogenesis', does occur in nature. It's a form of asexual reproduction that is carried out by many species of plants, water fleas, aphids, bees, some fish, amphibians, reptiles and a few birds. It hasn't been observed in humans but in species that have the XX/XY chromosomal sex determination system, like we do, the offspring can only be female like the mother.

Was Jesus a girl? Perhaps she should have been named Jessie? Oddly, we encounter the same problem in the Genesis story of creation, which tells us that god made Eve from Adam's rib. Given what we now know, this means that Eve could only have had the same chromosomes as Adam and must, therefore have been as masculine as him! Maybe it was Adam and Steve! Was the first couple homosexual?

The fact is, whichever way you try to make sense of Biblical stories in the light of our modern biological knowledge, they are revealed as nonsense. Is anyone surprised?

Another Christmas Myth

Adapted from BBC iWonder

The Christmas Truce of 1914 is often celebrated as a symbolic moment of peace in an otherwise devastatingly violent war.

We may like to believe that for just one day, all across the front, men from both sides emerged from the trenches and met in No Man's Land to exchange gifts and play football. But first-hand testimonies help us get closer to what really happened.

By November 1914, it had become clear that the war was not going to be over quickly. As autumn turned to winter, the last of Britain's professional soldiers, exhausted after months of vicious fighting, settled into the routine of life in the trenches of northern France. They naturally began to think of enemy soldiers, sometimes a few feet away, doing the same. As a result of this proximity a 'live and let live' attitude developed in certain areas of the trench system.

Reciprocal periods of 'quiet



Click on or enter <https://tinyurl.com/ybc4jqkv> to see the video.

'time' emerged when soldiers tacitly agreed not to shoot at each other. Between battles and out of boredom, soldiers began to banter, even barter for cigarettes, between opposite sides. Informal truces were also agreed and used as an opportunity to recover wounded soldiers, bury the dead and shore up damaged trenches. In many ways, for the last of the professional soldiers, this was all part of the etiquette of war.

Along parts of the front, some men responded to Christmas Day by tentatively emerging from their trenches into No Man's Land. Where it happened, enemy soldiers met and spent Christmas together.

Spontaneously, they exchanged gifts and took photos. It was an opportunity to leave the damp of the trenches and tend to the dead and wounded of No Man's Land. There wasn't a single organized football match between German and British sides. There may have been small-scale kick-about's, but these were just one of many different activities men took the time to enjoy.

Meanwhile, in other places along the front, bloody battles took place over the Christmas period and those that dared to come above the parapet were met not by gifts but gunfire. Belgian, Indian and French troops who witnessed episodes of fraternisation were at best puzzled

and at worst very angry that British troops were being friendly towards the Germans.

Reports and photographs of these small-scale unofficial ceasefires reached the papers back home and the military authorities. High Command was angry—they feared that men would now question the war, and even mutiny, as a result of fraternizing with the enemy meant to be defeated. Stricter orders were issued to end such activity, with harsh punishment for any man caught refusing to fight.

The London Rifle Brigade's War Diary for 2 January 1915 recorded that "informal truces with the enemy were to cease and any officer or NCO [non-commissioned officer] found to have initiated one would be tried by Court Martial."

As the war continued, brutal developments on the battlefield changed the character of war in 1915. The enemy were further demonized and fraternization made even less likely. The small truces of 1914 never happened again.

Yet despite the best efforts of the authorities, the story was out there in the media and in the popular imagination. A story that has been re-told and re-shaped many times in the decades that followed.

Is 'God' Mr. Jorkins?

Have you ever wondered why everyone's god always agrees with them?

Lovers of Charles Dickens' novels, so often evocative of Victorian London at Christmas time, will know that Mr. Jorkins is the business partner of David Copperfield's employer, Mr. Spenlow. When David asks to be released early from his apprenticeship, Mr. Spenlow says that he would consider it, but Mr. Jorkins would never allow it. Mr. Spenlow uses Mr. Jorkins as a scapegoat so that he doesn't get into difficult confrontations with people when he tells them "no". At this stage of the narrative, Jorkins is unseen in a back office and is used as a mean boss for Mr. Spenlow to refer to whenever an employee asks for a favor. We are left wondering for several chapters whether Mr Jorkins actually exists.

In reality, the only organisms that can have their meanness, or whatever characteristics, recorded are creatures that can be observed. Biologists make use of this in floras and other identification keys; we



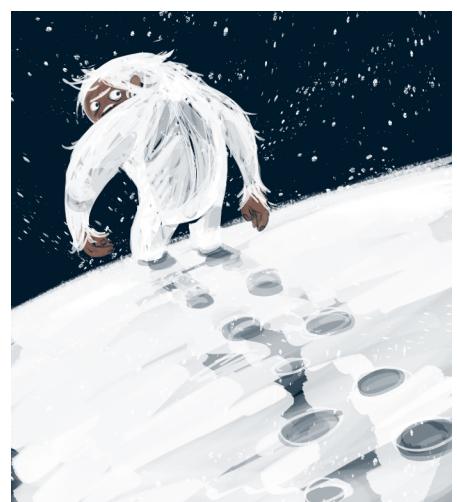
look at a specimen and compare it with the morphological statements in the book that lead in a sequence to its taxonomic name. We can then say, with some confidence, that we have found an example of species 'x'. If there is any dispute we can dissect it and study the anatomy, use a microscope to examine the cells, or even sequence the DNA.

We can do none of this with 'god'. God cannot be observed. In fact, he is proudly proclaimed to be invisible, even immaterial.

Why isn't that a clue? Why don't believers notice that following the claim, "There is a god" with the assertion, "But he is immaterial" is an ad hoc fallacy? (i.e. a second unsubstantiated claim designed to 'support' a former unsubstantiated claim to 'save' it from being refuted.)

Any features can be assigned to an invisible character. Dickens chose

to make Mr Jorkins into a bogeyman, but we can equally well imagine a hidden loving personality, a cuddly toy, a comfort blanket. After all, we are just talking about invented descriptions; fiction like Dickens mastered or the myths of the Ancient Greeks. The descriptions needn't even be consistent: my version can be different from yours; there is no way of telling what is true. Claiming to know what 'god' is like is tantamount to pretending to know the Yeti's shoe-size!



There are about 4000 different gods, some still being worshipped today, and even more dead gods that no longer have followers. Perhaps this is why believers talk about a 'personal god'.

Courtney's Column

AKA Godless Mom



Hello readers, I'm really proud to have been asked to contribute to SW.

This article comes from my archives; unfortunately my attempts to reach out to "Anonymous Indian" have failed. I cannot express how sad that makes me. Here is his story:

"I am a 21-year-old college student from the small town of Maharashtra, currently living and studying in Pune. I am writing this story because I feel the need to bring people's attention to the issue that I have. I have been framed under false charges of IPC section 295A because I wrote a post about Mohammad on Facebook.

One day, we were talking about how people allow child marriages, as we have heard about many happening in our neighborhood. One of my dearest Muslim friends, Shoeb, told me in a casual discussion that their last prophet, Mohammad (age 53) had married Aisha (age 9). He stumbled while talking about Aisha, Mohammad's child bride. This was shocking to me. His opinions were crazy. He said, "What's the news in it? Child marriages are seen everywhere".

I had to know was it true? So out of curiosity I searched on Google and found that it was true. At first, I didn't trust the internet. How can it be possible that millions of people

worship a pedophile like that? So, I read a few more books: English translations of Quran, then in Marathi and Hindi. I felt disgusted after realizing the truth. I said to myself, "Forget about it, who cares? People will still find a logic to prove it right because their prophet did it. And they will never let anyone question it either."

Then I wrote a post on FB asking, "Do prophets and babas use people's religious sentiments to hide their criminal activities? Because obviously a 9 yr old girl would hardly know what a marriage means and nobody can ever justify a 53 yr old man getting aroused by a 9 yr old girl. That's pedophilia nothing else: he raped Aisha."

I posted that on my wall. It was 14 pages long with proofs showing the evidence in their own books with verse numbers. Many people commented. Of course, 98% of comments were just filled with abusive words from the "purely religious people". I don't care if people love such a pedophile but I don't want to myself.

The next day I was arrested by police on a complaint of the same person who had told me about it: Shoeb! Yes, that 'friend' of mine had taken printouts of my post. I was in jail for 2 days of police custody and I got beaten up by the cops. The

beating was painful but, after a while, when I thought about it, I kind of felt good! A Buddhist guy like me, getting beaten up by a few Hindu policemen on the complaint of a Muslim guy! That proves the secularism and equality my small town has developed!

Then I got bail and the charges were so crazy. They said "This person was trying to bring on a riot between Hindus and Muslims in our city. He must be from a Hindu religious organization or a political party trying to defame Islam and Allah"

Defame Islam and Allah? Really? I mean is that even possible? If God exists, and they say their Allah is the most powerful and the greatest, then why would such a super-natural power be bothered by me and my tiny little posts? If you believe in God then at least wait for your God to punish me, why file a complaint in police station, eh? If God is affected/annoyed/disturbed by a few words of a 21-year-old guy then he seems more like a normal human being to me. Actually, I'm just an atheist, I don't differentiate or discriminate between religious people. I am a Buddhist by birth; I have zero political contacts; nobody forced me to write anything and I am taking complete responsibility for what I have written.

cont. on page 10

cont. from page 9

I have read and heard worse things being said by politicians. They get away with offensive and violent statements such as, "Remove the military and police for 15 min, we (Muslims) will finish all of the Hindus in India" !

That was a statement made by Akbaruddin Owaisi, a well known politician of MIM party which is based on Muslim votes and, yes, he made that statement in a public speech!

OK, my opinions may hurt you emotionally but is it fair to jail a person for having an opinion? An opinion which is neither violent nor aggressive! Is it worth destroying my life? I have realized there is no

freedom of speech in India, it's just speeches about freedom, not freedom to speak.

I still have utter faith in the High court and Supreme court of India. My family is by my side and I am still fighting the case. The lawyer said in the worst case the punishment is about 2-3 yrs of jail. I am not sharing my name because my lawyer told me not to, not because I'm scared to. I will share my name when the case is over or maybe I'll write a book about my views with my name on the top of it. I swear I will not stop writing about anything ever.

Why is it that our people always take criticism negatively? Can't you people just accept the truth based on facts and research, and then make changes in your religious

books? Hindus, Christians and Buddhists have accepted so many changes, why don't Muslims? I am not a Hindu but I can not support that Hinduism is insulted for 2 hours in a movie while, on the other hand, publishing cartoons about Muhammad on Facebook is considered a punishable crime. It's not as if I am living in an Islamic country.

**I think everybody
should have
their own views.
Just stop
killing mine.**

—Anonymous Indian

Sweet Tweets

Let's face it, Islamic theocracies don't even use the Gregorian calendar: in fundamentalist Muslim parts of the world Christmas Day 2018 is the 17th of Rabi Al-Akhar 1440!

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Muslim children in multicultural schools have to face the fact that their Christian friends will be getting presents and singing Carols while they will not. Jews will be lighting candles for Hanukkah... Hindus and Buddhists will be bystanders...

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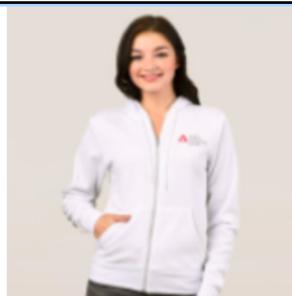
Religion spoils everything

Our online store

<https://www.zazzle.com/atheistalliance>
To see our merchandise click [here](#)



Accessories



Clothing



Holiday



Jewellery



Office



Travel and Outdoors

Things theists say...

"I don't have enough faith to be an atheist!"

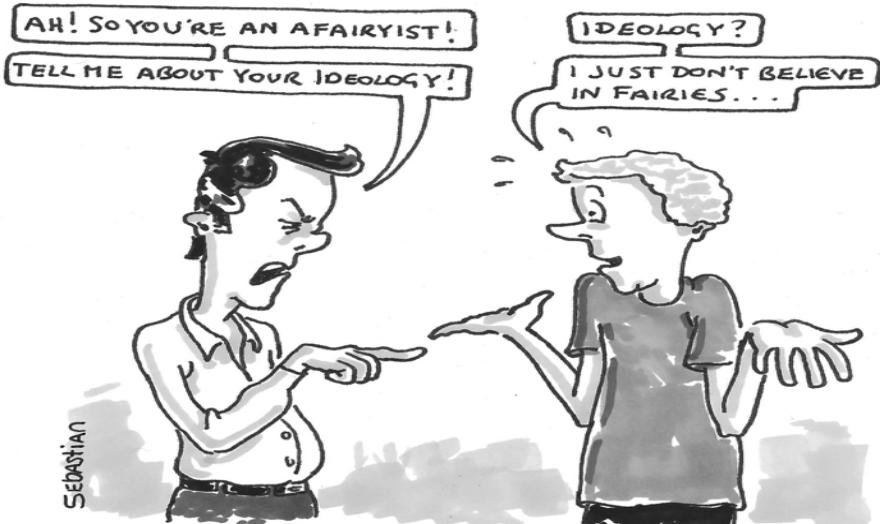
I am deeply indebted to believers for a constant supply of nonsense to refute! What would I have to write about without them? The above saying was the original post of a Facebook thread and it exhibits, in the space of nine words, two misunderstandings on the part of the theist. He reveals that he thinks that 'faith' is a useful means for distinguishing truth from falsehood and that he thinks an 'atheist' is a person who belongs to an association of people who share a belief system. Both are wrong.

The only way to tell truth from falsehood is by providing evidence in support of the proposition and even the clergy themselves accept that faith is not evidence. They invoke faith as the last resort when their evidence, or what they consider to be their evidence (it's not really evidence), is critically questioned: 'You just have to have faith,' they say.

What IS this 'faith'?

Non-believing philosopher Bertrand Russell put it rather well:

"We may define "faith" as a firm belief in something for which there is no evidence. Where there is evidence, no one speaks of 'faith'. We do not speak of faith that two



and two are four or that the earth is round. We only speak of faith when we wish to substitute emotion for evidence."

(*Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (1954) Chapter 7.)

More recently, here is what ex-preacher, Dan Barker, has said:

"If the only way you can accept an assertion is by faith, then you are conceding that it can't be taken on its own merits. It is intellectual bankruptcy. With faith, you don't have to put any work into proving your case. You can 'just believe'."

(*Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist* (1992), p. 102)

As for 'atheist', there is no such belief system as 'atheism' to belong to. Let me just draw your attention to the fact that we don't have a special word for a person who doesn't believe in fairies – there is no 'afairyist'. Why is this?

It's because not believing in something is not a belief system. It's not believing, so it can't be a belief system. Consequently, there is no such ideology as 'atheism' to join and, therefore, no-one can be an 'atheist'. Furthermore, we can't completely eliminate the possible existence of a creator deity so disbelief in the god hypothesis

cannot be a position of absolute certainty; we can't prove the non-existence of a 'god'. That's two reasons why 'atheist' is a stupid appellation.

I like what Luke Rosewell said in the Facebook thread that was the inspiration for this article:

"How about being a skeptic, to a rational degree? Don't believe anything without appropriate evidence. Okay? Now, is there appropriate evidence that a god exists? Nope. Done: you are now an 'atheist' and you've only followed your rational skepticism. No faith was required."

So, why do we call ourselves *Atheist Alliance International* then? Because, hopefully, it will be easier to rehabilitate the word 'atheist' to mean the normal condition for humankind, than it would be to try to deny that the word 'atheist' exists.

An atheist is just a non-believer and faith is just a belief on steroids.

Applying Logic to the God Proposition

*The fourth article
in the series*

The Argument from Reason

Christians love to attribute human intellectual achievements to their God who, they believe, gave us these brilliant brains. You hear them in hospitals thanking God for the skills of the surgeons even when 'He' was not present in the operating theater! Let's examine this claim...

If their perfect God *did* design us, our brains should have worked properly from the start, but if God did not design us, our innate reasoning abilities should be shoddy and ad hoc and only ever improved upon by what are in essence culturally (not biologically) installed 'software patches' (like the scientific method, logic and mathematics, and so on), which corrected our reasoning abilities only after thousands of years of humans trying out different fixes. Fixes that were only discovered through human trial and error, and not communicated in any divine revelation or scripture. Software patches that took thousands of years to figure out, and which are completely absent from all supposed communications from the



Christian God.

Thus, observation confirms that the actual historical evidence of the development of human reasoning ability is far more probable if God did *not* exist than if he does. Therefore, even the Christian's own Argument from Reason argues that God does *not* exist, rather than that he does!

Yet again, when we bring in all the evidence, the Bayes Factor strongly supports atheism.

Dr. Richard Carrier
Ancient Historian

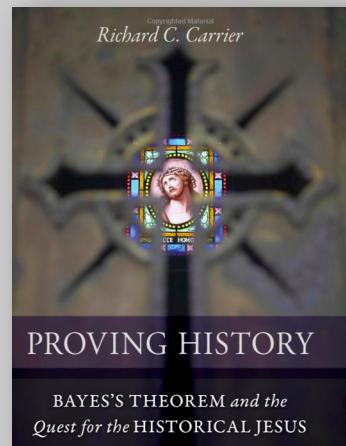


To watch an interview with Dr. Richard Carrier, click [here](#).



This series of articles is adapted from *Proving History* by Richard Carrier.

Buy the book
by clicking [here](#).



"... As a mathematician, maybe I'm biased, but I think every field of inquiry, even in the humanities, benefits from becoming 'mathier' and, as Carrier points out, the underlying framework of Bayes Theorem is already present in all correct historical reasoning: it can only get better if historians use it consciously rather than unconsciously."

Confirmed purchaser

Templeton announce new prayer study

But what about their old one?

from [Stephen Law's blog](#) January 2018

The John Templeton Foundation is a philanthropic organization that reflects the ideas of its founder, John Templeton, who became wealthy after a career as a contrarian investor and wanted to support progress in religious and spiritual knowledge. (Wikipedia)

The Foundation is a fund-raising organization that finances numerous scientific studies to address what it calls the "Big Questions" such as genetics, "cognitive creativity" and personal development. It is best known for the Templeton Prize for Progress Toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities.

Its aim in practice appears to be to corrupt the public discourse concerning science in the interests of religion, by swaying academics with much more money than they'd get any other way. Anything or anyone funded by Templeton should be viewed in this light. Of late, they have expanded beyond religion to funding climate change denial.

The Templeton Prize includes a monetary award of £1,100,000 sterling. It is given to a living person who has made an exceptional contribution to affirming life's spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works. Although they claim to award it to anyone of any faith, any "creed" and "men and women alike" the majority of Templeton laureates are old, male, white and Christian.

Templeton have just announced

a new study on the effects of prayer on the pray-er. In their accompanying blurb, they also suggest that testing for the effects of intercessory prayer on those prayed for, is a scientific and theological 'dead end'!

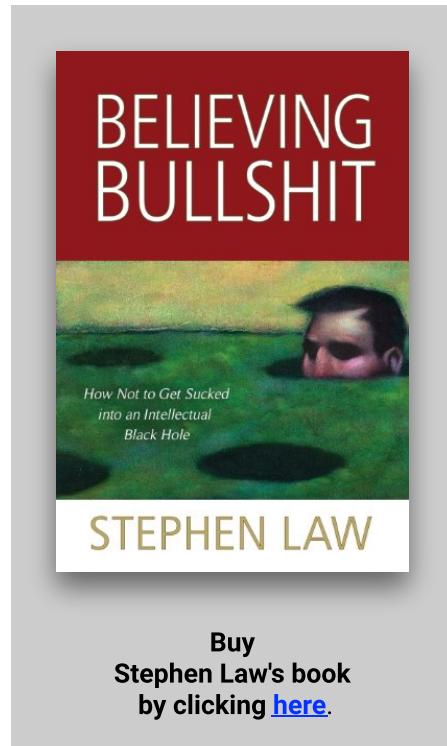
In fact, the effects of prayer on others can be scientifically investigated. Indeed, it has been. In a huge Templeton funded study!

In 2006 Harvard professor Herbert Benson performed a "Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer (STEP)" It used 1,802 coronary artery bypass surgery patients at six hospitals. Using double-blind protocols, patients were randomized into three groups. The members of the experimental and control Groups 1 and 2 were informed they might or might not receive prayers, and only Group 1 received prayers. Group 3, which served as a test for possible psychosomatic effects, was informed they would receive prayers and subsequently did.

Complications of surgery occurred in 52 percent of those who received prayer (Group 1), 51 percent of those who did not receive it (Group 2), and 59 percent of patients who knew they would receive prayers (Group 3).

There were no statistically significant differences in major complications or thirty-day mortality.

What if the study had shown strong evidence for the effects of



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prayer (which it might have done)? Then, as Dawkins points out, this would have been hailed as a scientific and theological breakthrough - it would have been 'trumpeted from the rooftops'. But Templeton didn't get the result they were after. Now they declare such studies are a waste of time, a scientific and theological dead end. Why, then, did they fund it?

Of course, the study wasn't a dead end. This was good science, properly done. And Templeton should get credit for that.

This, and other research, has revealed not only an absence of evidence for the beneficial *medical* effects of intercessory prayer, it's also revealed pretty good evidence for the absence of *any* such effect.

Stephen Law
*Reader in Philosophy at Heythrop College,
University of London*



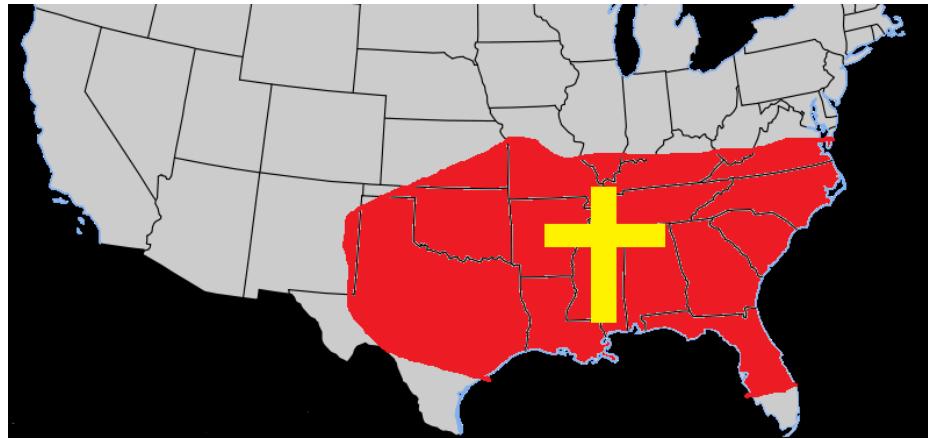
Life in the Bible Belt

One morning I awoke to the news that the Governor of my state publicly declared that anyone who opposed a particular piece of legislation was an instrument of the devil! His base approved of his sentiments so uniformly that he coasted into winning another term. A few minutes later I logged into social media to learn that a prominent minister had declared that atheists should leave the country because America is a God-fearing nation. I decided not to find out how many members of my family had shared his words approvingly. Then, on my drive to work I couldn't find two of my favorite radio stations because a national Christian radio conglomerate had bought both of my stations and closed them down.

At work, I opened several emails from coworkers announcing prayer requests or praises to God for things that had happened in their lives. I teach at a public school, yet I am required by state law to prominently display a 11x14 poster in my room declaring "In God We Trust".

At lunch I watched as a trio of local youth ministers circulated through the lunch room, greeting kids and chatting with them as they ate. This is something they do for nearly two hours every single Wednesday. No other non-school employee is afforded such prolonged exposure to the students.

After work I stopped to get gas and heard Christian worship music blaring over the loudspeakers above my head. I drove to my local gym where I worked out listening to more Christian music playing in the locker



Wikipedia commons

room and over the gym floor.

After that I took my daughter to the skating rink where more Christian music played and Bible verses were projected onto the walls. We left there and got dessert at her favorite yogurt place where they played, you guessed it, Christian music.

On our way home we passed two banks scrolling Bible verses across their marquee signs. This is a typical day in Mississippi.

Around here you discover a different side of your friends, family, and coworkers after you tell them you no longer subscribe to their religion. Where I live, faith is so central to the moral and social development that they cannot trust a person without it. *Without Jesus, how can anyone know what is right?*

It brings shame to your family for anyone on the outside to learn that you weren't raised well enough to "follow Jesus" into adulthood. Religion relies on social consent in order to perpetuate itself, and our departure necessarily deprives it of that consent. That means there is no non-offensive way to opt out of it. It doesn't matter how nice you are about it, leaving your religion automatically weakens it for anyone left in it.

As an "out of the closet" atheist living in the Bible Belt, I learned a long time ago how to avoid upsetting the devout who live and work around me. Of course, they themselves are under no such obligation. On the

contrary, their churches encourage them to be quite demonstrative about their beliefs. They believe God wants them to be as public as possible about their faith, but find it terribly offensive for anyone to be equally public about their non-faith.

When you're as outnumbered as I am, surrounded by this much social inequality, you learn to pick your battles. I cannot count on a large number of people around me supporting my right to be different from them on this matter, nor does it help to remind them how important religious pluralism and tolerance were to the founders of our country.

So, I surround myself with as many sympathetic friends as I can, be they local or long-distance. Their emotional support helps to save my sanity in a world where I stick out like a turd in a punch bowl. I would have lost my mind long ago if it hadn't have been for those who are also able to speak openly about their loss of faith.

So share your stories if you can. There are those out there for whom your words will be life-giving, or maybe even life-changing.

I know it was for me.

Neil Carter



FFRF's 41st National Convention



FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION **NATIONAL CONVENTION**

The Freedom From Religion Foundation's 41st USA convention was held on the first weekend in November at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in San Francisco. Over 1000 participants packed the ballroom to listen to a strong lineup of speakers.

Jared Huffman, founder of the U.S. Congressional Freethought Caucus kicked off with a rousing call to arms. He spoke about how, as a humanist, he still remains popular with his constituents. "People could care less about my religion just so long as I am doing good work," he explained. "I try to maintain spiritual humility. All of my reason and experiences lead me to be non-theistic, but I leave a little crack in the spiritual door and if God ever wants to talk to me, I will take the call. However, I'm not waiting by the phone." He said that he wants voters to know he maintains a strong sense of values without believing in gods.

The keynote speaker was Salman Rushdie whose fourth novel "The Satanic Verses" brought him to the attention of freethinkers. Its controversial treatment of the origins of Islam led Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini to issue a fatwa in 1989 calling for Rushdie's death. Rushdie was forced into hiding under police protection. "The Satanic Verses" was banned in several countries and engendered worldwide protests,

some of them violent. Several people associated with the book were severely harmed.

Quoting one of his characters he said, "Battle lines are being drawn today. Secular versus religious, the light versus the dark. Better you choose which side you are on."

The actor John de Lancie, best known for his role on "Star Trek," accepted the Clarence Darrow Award. He offered an eloquent and timely talk about the need to keep truth alive. "At a time when so many are so willing to forsake reason in favor of faith, is it any wonder that our leaders embrace the unreasonable, the unimaginable? That's why debunking the notion that morality is based on any single book is important."

Larry Decker, Executive Director of the Secular Coalition in Washington, D.C., presented a rousing sermonic defense of secular government. The speech, interrupted numerous times by generous applause, ended with "Secular government has no religion" followed by a standing ovation.

Two authors talked about their new books—Baily Harris, 12-year-old author of a picture book about evolution called "My Name is Stardust," and Debra Deanne Olson, who has written a book about her grandfather, Culbert Levy Olson, who

was an atheist governor of California from 1939-1943.

Ms. Harris said she was inspired by a line from "Cosmos," "We are all made of stardust." She won the Student Activist Award of \$5,000.

On hand to announce the new Avijit Roy Courage Award was Rafida Bonya Ahmed, widow of Avijit Roy. In 2015, after returning to Bangladesh for a book fair, she was seriously injured in an attack by Islamists. Her husband was hacked to death by machete-wielding men in the incident. The recipient of the award of \$5,000 was "Roopbaan," the first gay magazine published in Bangladesh. One of its founders was also murdered by Islamists.

Ensaif Haider, the wife of the persecuted Saudi freethinker and blogger, Raif Badawi accepted the Henry Zumach Freedom from Religious Fundamentalism Award of \$10,000. She offered advice on how to treat people who are struggling with the choice to leave Islam. "Tell them they will not be alone and that you will stand with them."

The atheist comedian Julia Sweeney, who is well known in atheist circles for her one-woman show *Letting Go of God*, entertained with her new stand-up comedy show *Julia Sweeney: Older and Wider* in

cont. on page 16

cont. from page 15

which she hilariously presented her take on parenting, religion, cancer and feminism.

The convention also included a preview of the film, *Losing our Religion*, a documentary about the Clergy Project. Allowed access to the 600 members, the producers followed ex-members and clergy who were still undercover.

A considerable amount of time was devoted to presentations of FFRF's legal eagle attorneys who enumerated the many projects in the service of protecting the separation of church and state which is guaranteed by the U.S. constitution.

Throughout the two days of the conference many attendees who were staying at the hotel made a point to take the bible that was in their room and take it to the front desk. The hotel retaliated by saying they would charge the guests \$3.50 for each bible removed from their room. Annie-Laurie Gaylor, co-president of FFRF responded, "We don't want to pay high prices to stay in a hotel room to be proselytized much less to have a book thrust upon us that says you should be killed if you're a blasphemer or you're gay or you're a woman who had sex before marriage or you're a fool because you don't believe." The hotel rescinded the bible-removal charge.

Presumably the Bibles are back in the guest rooms now!

Howard Burman
AAI Secretary

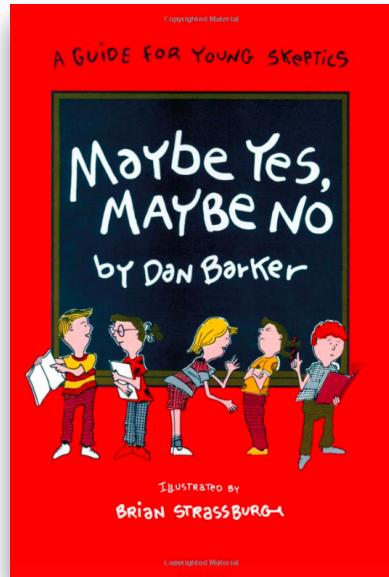


secular world Recommends

Maybe Yes, Maybe No *A Guide for Young Skeptics*

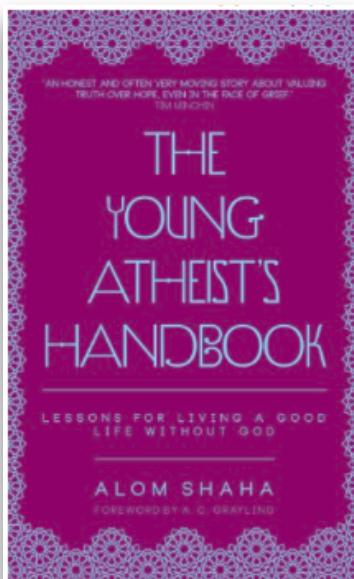
by Dan Barker,
Ex-pastor and Founder
of FFRF

Dan Barker (1949-), a former preacher, is co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, co-host of *Freethought Radio*, and co-founder of *The Clergy Project*. After 19 years as an evangelical minister, Dan "saw the light" and announced his atheism in 1984. His first public appearance as an atheist was on Oprah Winfrey's *AM Chicago*. He travels extensively, lecturing and performing on college campuses, and has participated in more than 120 public debates.



A former composer of Christian music (for which he still receives royalties), Dan is now a jazz pianist and writer of freethought music.

Buy the book by clicking [here](#) or enter into your browser: <http://a.co/d/5BombTU>

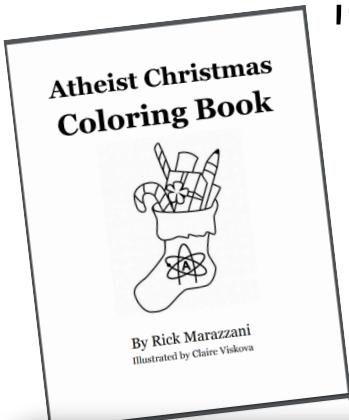


Growing up in a strict Muslim community in SE London, Alom Shah learnt that religion was not to be questioned. But Alom was more drawn to science and its power to illuminate. As a teen, he lived between two worlds: the home controlled by his authoritarian father, and a school alive with books and ideas. In a charming blend of memoir, philosophy and science, Alom explores the questions about faith and the afterlife that we all ponder. This is a book for anyone who wonders what they should believe and how they should live.

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'Tis the Season...

...to buy stuff and give it to other people.
Click on the red buttons to purchase items.



Download your **FREE** copy of the
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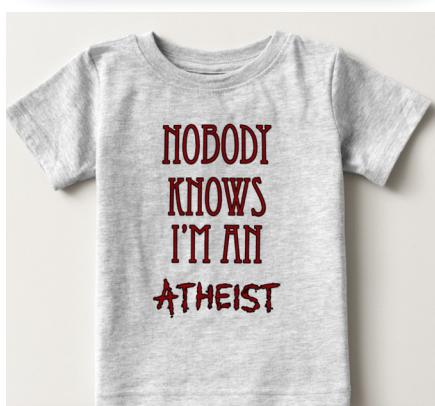
**Atheist Alliance International
All-Occasion Wrapping Paper**



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Prayer Candles**



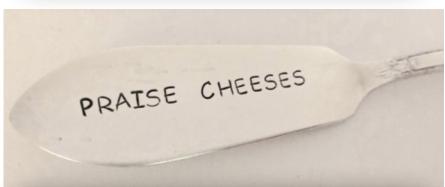
Neon Green Bum Bag



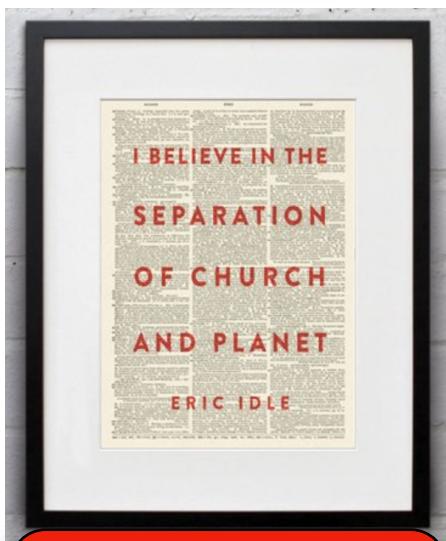
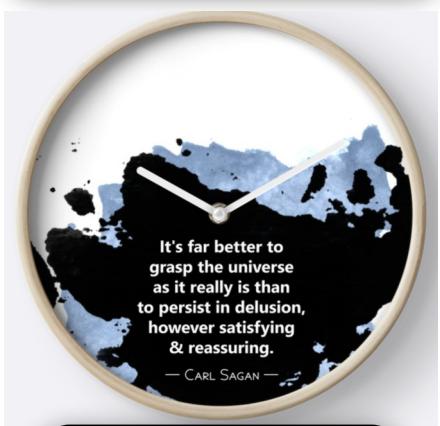
Shhh...Nobody Knows T Shirt



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Bible Facts	
Serving Size 1 Book	
Servings Per "Holy" Container	66
Amount Per Serving	
Angry Gods 1 Commandments	10
	% Daily Value*
Total Bullshit	100%
Original Bullshit	15%
Taken From Other Cultures	85%
Omnipotence	0%
Factual Information	0%
Vengeance	90%
Deaths by God	2,476,633
Deaths by Devil	10
Suspension of Disbelief	100%
"Virgin" Births 1%	Moral Value 5%
Unicorns 1%	Iron Chariots 4%
Religion is man-made. Even the men who made it cannot agree on what their prophets or redeemers or gurus actually said or did. - Christopher Hitchens	

**Christopher Hitchens
Bible Facts Magnet**

Some *REAL* GOOD NEWS!



The USA is slowly losing religion

Opinion polls in the US have been showing an upward trend of those declaring themselves to be non-religious for decades. Over the past ten years there has been a doubling of 'outed' nonbelievers and thirty percent of those born since 1981 are 'unaffiliated'.

November's midterm election will make 2019 the Year of the Freethinker. Once sworn into office, there will be 47 openly non-theist or humanist elected officials at the federal and state levels. "Prior to the 2016 elections we knew of only five elected officials serving in state legislatures who identified with our community, and after the 2016 elections that list grew to 17," said Ron Millar, political coordinator for the Center for Freethought Equality.

The Freethought Equality Fund Political Action Committee (PAC) is proud of the remarkable increase in openly humanist, atheist, agnostic, and nonreligious candidates who ran for office this year. The Freethought Equality Fund PAC is affiliated with the Center for Freethought Equality, which is the political and advocacy arm of the American Humanist Association.

"Considering that a quarter of our country's population now identifies as religiously unaffiliated, our democracy would be impoverished if this large segment of American citizens is discouraged from pursuing elected office and having their voice heard in our government," said Roy Speckhardt, executive director of the Center for Freethought Equality. Speckhardt continued, "That's why it was so heartening to see a record number of atheist and humanist candidates run for office and win their elections this year. Their efforts will increase the visibility of atheists and humanists and work to remove the stigma against our community."

The Freethought Equality Fund applauds the successes of new atheist, humanist, and agnostic candidates like Megan Hunt, who won the District 8 seat in the Nebraska State Senate, Jacqueline Chretien, who won the Hillsborough District 42 seat in the New Hampshire State House, and Howard Watts, who won the District 15 seat in the Nevada State House.

This list includes Congressman Jared Huffman (CA-2) who announced last November that he is a humanist and agnostic. In April, along with Jamie Raskin (MD-8), Huffman founded and now co-chairs

the Congressional Freethought Caucus, which is an affinity group for atheists and humanists in Congress and an advocacy group for church-state separation.

In the 2018 election cycle, the Freethought Equality Fund PAC endorsed a total of 290 candidates at the federal, state, and local level, compared with just 61 in 2016. The candidates identified as humanists, atheists, agnostics, religiously unaffiliated or religious allies of the nontheist community and all ensured that they would defend the rights of atheists and humanists and uphold the separation of church and state.

Despite these historic electoral gains, the atheist and humanist community is still severely underrepresented in elected office.

The religiously unaffiliated will continue to attempt to gain electoral representation equal to the community's proportion in the American population – an effort that would require the nonreligious community to obtain another 1,500 seats. As Millar says, "We still have a lot of work to do."

Ron Millar

*Center for Freethought Equality
Washington, D.C.
Nov. 8, 2018*

ATHEIST ALLIANCE INTERNATIONAL'S

★★★ FREE THINKING HERO ★★★

The Late Christopher Hitchens

Polemicist and Anti-theist

***There is no good time to die,
but around Christmas
is particularly poignant.***

The relatives gather to celebrate the festive season and there is a gap at the meal-table; in the case of Christopher Hitchens' family it must be a very big gap. Few have made such an impact in their lifetime as he did.

Christopher spent his years fearlessly exposing bad decisions, fraud and hypocrisy with his impressive rhetoric. The combination of a towering intellect, enormous vocabulary, easy articulation and a rumbling baritone voice made him a hot property as a guest speaker.

Probably the finest thing about his personal appearances was his lack of animosity; in debate he could powerfully demolish an opponent's position with good humor and get laughs from those lucky enough to witness the event. He was a role model we should all strive to emulate, while accepting that we shall not achieve his high standard.

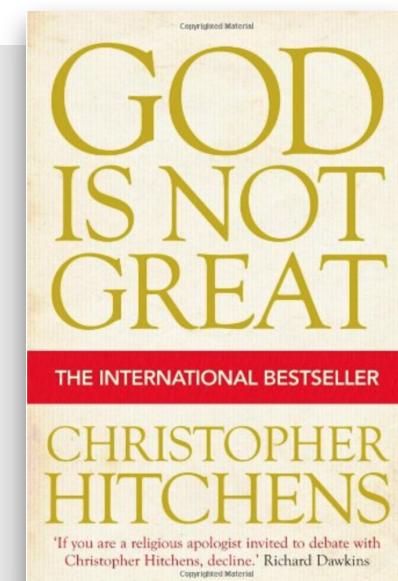
His pen was equally acerbic, which put him in great demand by news editors as an op-ed writer and, by publishers, as an author. No-one could have wished for a better advocate or iconoclast. Not even Mother Theresa, previously regarded as angelic, was safe from his

forensic examination. He alerted the world to her callous disregard for suffering and her smooching of support, from governments and the rich, for her own glorification. Despite which revelation, and this has to be said, the Pope recently 'sanctified' her!

Yes, sometimes Mr Hitchens did get it wrong, such as when he supported the invasion of Iraq, but his views were always his own: he never sold out to a paymaster. I wish our current batch of leaders were as selfless.

In the early years of the new century, Christopher addressed himself to religion and became known as one of the 'Four Horsemen' of 'New Atheism' by writing his masterpiece, God is not Great. Even the subtitle of that book, 'Religion Poisons Everything', still resonates today. 'Atheist' was not a strong enough epithet for him, he styled himself an 'Antitheist'.

Imperfectly human, he was, by all accounts, a person who worked hard and played hard; famous for his overindulgence in all of the 'vices'. Too young he succumbed to the same condition that killed his father: throat cancer. Even during his fierce treatment, a chemotherapy regime that caused him to lose all his hair, he continued to set an admirable example of how to approach the inevitable courageously.



Christopher Hitchens demonstrates the ways in which religion is man-made, dangerously sexually repressive and distorts the very origins of the cosmos.

Christopher's legacy rumbles on: some people are advocating that December 15th, the anniversary of his death, should be called 'Hitchmas'.

Buy the book by clicking [here](#) or enter into your browser: <https://tinyurl.com/yc3vrb25>



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