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Issue 1 2019

The Heart of the Matter



The Origins of the Abrahamic Religions

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Editorial

Believe it or not, the three most popular monotheisms all originated in that tiny circle in the 'Middle East' shown in the red cross-hairs on the world map above. Arguably, they are also the most warlike religions despite their attempts to represent themselves as peaceful. It's reasonable to ask why is this? You won't be surprised to hear that I am going to suggest a possible explanation. So here goes:

We all know how fashions spread; I'm old enough to remember when rock and roll swept through the world and the girls got circular skirts that spun up to reveal their legs when they jived. Then blue jeans came in and the music turned to beat groups. These are aspects of culture that can be traced back to an epicenter where they started. In the case of Rock and Roll, the origin was in the USA around Memphis, Tennessee where Elvis Presley began his career. In the case of Beat Music, it was Liverpool, UK, home of The Beatles.

Religion is another aspect of culture which, as with clothing and music, starts somewhere and then spreads out rather like an infectious disease. A few millennia ago, the Middle East was the first region with the right conditions for this to happen, initially to Judaism, then to Christianity and, lastly, to Islam.

What are these conditions? Well, self-proclaimed prophets who are ambitious to gather a following need a captive audience. They can't deliver campaign leaflets to hunter-gatherers: there's no letter box! And they can't do street preaching without a street! So, humanity had to develop farming, permanent housing and townships before faiths could begin; they need a settled community.

Another useful condition for spreading a message is literacy. To retain credibility, faith leaders must have a consistent message, so their stories need writing down. This becomes especially important when a leader starts to get 'disciples'; he doesn't want his underlings deviating from the doctrine. A 'scripture' solidifies a leader's authority.

Societies with the necessary features first appeared in the fertile Nile valley and around the Lake of

Galilee in present-day Israel. They were early static populations: hotbeds for the birth of cultural movements.

Naturally, the faiths that caught the popular imagination became the waves that the self-appointed 'men of god' surfed on. These were opportunities that offered comfortable employment without raising a sweat. Cushy white-collar positions with job-for-life security, to use the modern idiom.

It's unsurprising that expansion took place; that the enterprises spread like parasites through a population. It doesn't stretch credibility to suggest that they reached a stage where they encountered rival myth-suppliers and competition began. That was the beginning of the religious conflict that still plagues the Middle East today.

John Richards
AAI Publications Director



President's Letter

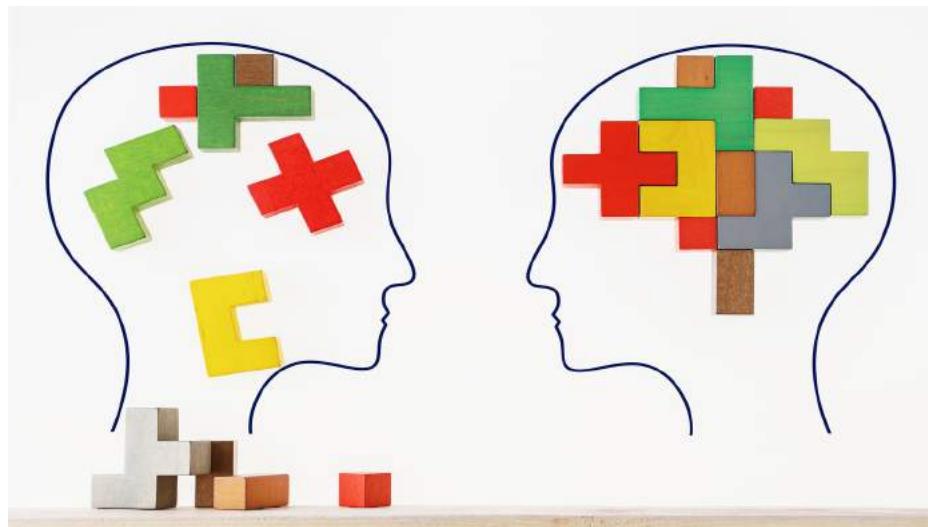
Welcome to 2019

**All of us at
Atheist Alliance
International wish
you the very best.**

I hope 2019 will be the Year for Critical Thinking.

Really,, every year should be a year for Critical Thinking but now is the time when it's needed more than ever before. If you research the topic on the internet, you'll discover there are more entries today than even one year ago. We hear Critical Thinking mentioned more often in the media, but there is also a new kid on the block and he's a serious enemy: Fake News.

People just don't know what to believe nowadays. Spoof articles, conspiracy theories, contrary thought and outright lies get repeated on the internet until we are all bemused. Sometimes it's mixed up with narrative which appears to be the new 'truth'. Political campaign organizers no longer worry about accuracy; instead their concern is to 'win the narrative'.



Even in democracies, candidates and leaders alike enlist internet bots to spread their propaganda. The only treatment for this is to educate the population to think critically.

So what's to organize? The information and resources for critical thinking appear to be scattered. It is hard to find a single source where we can get what we need to proceed with Critical Thinking at all levels.

At AAI we receive requests for teaching materials from many people in education. An education professor in Uganda is looking for children books on the subject; a high school in Guatemala needs more activities for its students so they can practice and learn the skills; a university professor in the USA says his medical students lack critical thinking and asks where he can find course material to teach them.

It is our goal for AAI to become a focus for critical thinking. A place where one can go to find out more about it or how to teach it. We're starting this year with a project to develop an online interactive program for students to learn Critical Thinking. It's a beginning, but we also want to work on programs

of study, from high school to university, that educators can use around the globe.

In a world of increasing chaos, complex issues and divisiveness, Critical Thinking is the only solution. It allows for people to have open discussions and debate the issues. It allows for evidence to rule and bias to be acknowledged. Yet, the only dedicated course leading to an A/AS level qualification in Critical Thinking is being discontinued by assessment authority OCR!

The promotion of Critical Thinking is essential for the betterment of mankind. It's a big challenge but one to which we are fully committed.

Join us this year in promoting Critical Thinking around the world.

Gail Miller
President, Atheist Alliance International



Eggs, bunnies and crosses?



What is going on?

A collision of cultures, that's what.

Following on from *The Reason for the Season* in our last edition, this article sets out to explain the weird mash-up of influences that have produced our modern Easter holiday. Oddly, Easter attempts to commemorate the rebirth of nature, and the death and 'resurrection' of Christ all on one long weekend!

Regular readers will know that our 'Western' religious festivals originated in the Northern hemisphere: Europe and the 'Holy Land', to be exact. Why is that? Well, it's simply because that was the location of the early human cultures whose traditions went on to become the holiday fixtures on our calendar.

Those who read the December 2018 issue of Secular World will also know that the seasons, a higher latitudes phenomenon, are caused by the Earth orbiting the sun while spinning on a *tilted axis*. When the North pole is pointed at 23 degrees towards the sun, it gets summer and, on the other side of the orbit when it is tilted away from the sun, it experiences winter. The tilt has little

effect in the bulge of the tropics so those regions do not experience seasons or variations in day-length.

In-between those positions on the orbit, the Earth's tilt is side-on to the sun so, at the quarter and three-quarter positions, the Northern hemisphere gets spring and fall. The Southern hemisphere gets the opposite seasons from the North.

For the early agrarian societies, spring was the *awakening*: the time of year when the temperature rose, plants started to grow, birds laid eggs and rabbits had baby bunnies. Early men gave thanks to the deity they assumed was responsible for this replacement of winter's cold with a fertile season. Naturally, being a period of *rebirth*, it was assigned to a *mother goddess*: *Eostre* from whom we get our word 'Easter'.

Some centuries later, the Romans adopted Christianity as the state religion and imposed it throughout their conquered lands. It's always easier to adapt an existing tradition than to introduce a new one, so *Saturnalia* was renamed 'Christmas' to celebrate Christ's birth, and the joyous spring festival was morphed into a sombre

remembrance of torture and death followed by 'resurrection'. The absence of evidence means that beliefs can only be maintained by the constant reiteration of stories. So, in order to retain control of their flock, the clerics promote the ritualistic commemoration of these events every year.

After two millennia the pagan origins of our annual religious holidays have been downplayed, but have not completely gone away. Remnants in the form of Holly wreaths, bauble bedecked Christmas trees and chocolate Easter eggs still persist. Commandeering previous traditions is one thing; wiping them out is another thing altogether.

To me it seems that the superimposition of Christ's execution on the celebration for *Eostre*, a motherly goddess involved in new birth, is a strange pairing! Wouldn't a *Welcome to Spring Festival* have been a better match for *The Nativity*? Especially considering that scholars argue about whether Jesus was actually born in June or October!

John Richards

FROM **POLYTHEISM** TO **MONOTHEISM**

The ancients had lots of 'gods'. The Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Norsemen (Vikings) and other cultures had whole pantheons of 'gods'. The Hindus *still* have many 'gods'. Yet today, many believers insist there is only 'one true god'. Why is that?

The early 'gods' were assigned specific roles. Taking all the ancient Egyptian deities together, they had the common overarching job of maintaining the universal order while, individually, Shu was supposed to look after the air, Khnum had responsibility for the Nile's annual flood and Ra was the sun god. They even had bad gods: Apep was the force of chaos, and they deified dead Pharaohs!

In the Norse pantheon there were 39 gods and 45 goddesses! Thor was the god of thunder and battle, Eostre the goddess of spring, Frigg the goddess of marriage, Baldur the god of beauty and Bragi the god of poetry.

The Ancient Greeks had so many gods we've had to put them into several categories: Primordial Deities, Titans and Titanesses, Gigantes, Sea Deities, Sky Deities, etc. Individual deities included Zeus,

king of the gods, Posiedon, god of the sea, Hera, goddess of marriage, Hades, god of the underworld, Dionysus, god of wine, and Apollo, god of music, to name but a few.

The Romans adopted and modified many of the Greek gods. So Aurora was the goddess of the dawn, Bacchus the god of wine, Ceres the goddess of the harvest, Diana the goddess of the hunt, Hercules the god of strength, and Jupiter the king of gods.

The earliest gods were appointed to natural items like rivers and volcanoes or phenomena like drought and sin and they were represented by very crude idols rather than human images. However, as artistic skill improved, so it became possible to make gods more humanoid. The Egyptian gods were often two dimensionally depicted as having the bodies of men and the heads of animals. The Greeks had mastered sculpture and many beautiful three dimensional marble statues of gods, modeled on human anatomy, still survive today. Gods are made in the image of man, not the other way round.

Making gods look like humans enables them to have personalities

that are easy to relate to. They can have characters and emotions like rage and love. They can get drunk, can dance and have tantrums. More gripping stories can be written and audience attention can be better held. Then, when the hat is passed round, the donations will reflect the quality of the entertainment, and *that's the point*: it's a business!

Now peer through the lens of a preacher of long ago. Would you rather be marketing your ability to influence Diana the huntress or Ceres the harvester? Which would drum up most income? Would you prefer to be doorstepping with a suitcase of cleaning products or would you rather sell a god so powerful he can meet every need and cure *all* ills?

Claiming to be an agent of an all-powerful, all-knowing, everywhere, Jack-of-all-trades kind of god opens up many more opportunities to earn by selling lots of 'services'. Expansion of the product range is good commercial practice. It's why cosmetic companies have created lip-salve for our young daughters who mustn't wear lipstick in school.

Monotheism is simply a better business model than polytheism.

An island divided



The island of Cyprus, situated in the Eastern Mediterranean and home to less than a million people, is divided, since 1974, between the Republic of Cyprus and the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC).

In 1960, when Cyprus got its independence from the United Kingdom, the constitution of the newly founded state recognized two communities - the Greek-Cypriot and the Turkish-Cypriot. A prevalent characteristic, as set in the constitution, of each community was its religion. A Christian was considered to be a member of the Greek-Cypriot community, and a Muslim a member of the Turkish-Cypriot community..

Both the Republic of Cyprus and the self-declared TRNC are constitutionally secular states and freedom of religion is protected, as well as practice of religion and expression of one's religious beliefs. However, sections 141-142 of the Cypriot Criminal Code of the Republic of Cyprus enable a de facto blasphemy law which states that it is an offence to insult religions.

Despite the fact that Cyprus is constitutionally secular, religion is prevalent in Cypriot society and is closely tied to the identity of each community. The Republic of Cyprus is a hugely religious state as, according to Eurobarometer Survey 2010, 97% of the population believes that there is a God or some sort of spirit force. The effects of religion are largely negative, especially in the Greek-Cypriot community.

The Greek Orthodox Church in Cyprus plays a major role in education, politics, and social life, and is often consulted when government policies are made. The Archbishop of Cyprus, Chrysostomos II, makes public appearances and comments on government decisions, education, migration, relations between the two communities and other issues. He has often referred with derogatory comments to the Turkish-Cypriot community, to refugees, and to homosexuals. His views are influential to a large proportion of the population in the Republic of Cyprus.

Despite the fact that Greek-Cypriots are a religious

community, there is discontent with the Greek Orthodox Church on the island, due to its wealth, nationalistic and racist stance. The Church's involvement in education, and politics, is not well-received by a sizeable number of Greek-Cypriots.

Various humanist and secular pressure groups battle the Church's influence in politics and education, the biggest one being the Cyprus Humanist Association which is pressuring for the complete secularization of the state, both on a societal and legal basis.

The influence of religion in the Greek-Cypriot community is also obvious in education. In schools, religious ceremonies take place, religious icons exist in classrooms, and morning prayer is obligatory. Some schools even take time off their usual schedule to take students to church and encourage them to attend confession and take the holy communion.

In the Greek-Cypriot community, especially when it concerns one's parents, grandparents and wider family, it is not easy to declare oneself as an atheist.

(continued on page 7)

(continued from page 6)

While it is unlikely that someone will be ostracized from their family for being an apostate, it is not well received.

On the other hand, the Turkish-Cypriot community is increasingly secular, and this is one aspect which differentiates it from the mainland Turkish Republic, despite the latter's attempts to influence the former. Religion is largely absent from politics in the self-declared TRNC and religious leaders are not consulted when government decisions are made, in contrast to the Republic of Cyprus where this is occasionally the case.

Moreover, while tradition has close ties with religion in the Greek-Cypriot community, tradition in the Turkish-Cypriot community is largely devoid of religious significance. Even though most Turkish-Cypriots identify as Muslim, very few actually practice Islamic

rules on alcohol, prayer, and fasting.

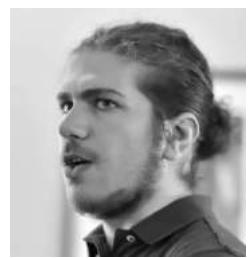
Despite the secularity of the Turkish-Cypriot community, some aspects of society, such as education, have religious characteristics which are tied to national pride. Religious education class is mandatory in Turkish-Cypriot schools. Recently, Imam Hatip schools have been built aimed at training Muslim clerics.

Mainland Turkey's increasing influence strives to Islamicize the Turkish-Cypriot community and to make religion more influential in politics. The increasing Islamic radicalization of northern Cyprus will see society becoming less tolerant to atheists. Recently, a number of events have taken place which included violence towards non-religious individuals. Religion in Cyprus acts as a barrier of communication between the two communities as a number of misconceptions and misbeliefs are held towards each other's religion.

Religion has traditionally been something that separated the two Cypriot communities, but, nowadays, when people aspire to unite their island, understanding of the common identity of the two communities is vital. In this process, religion needs to be left outside, as it does not facilitate peace on the island.

Angelos Sofocleos

*Editor of Secular Nation,
Atheist Alliance of America*



Many thanks to Samin Gokcekus for her insight into religiosity in the Turkish-Cypriot community.

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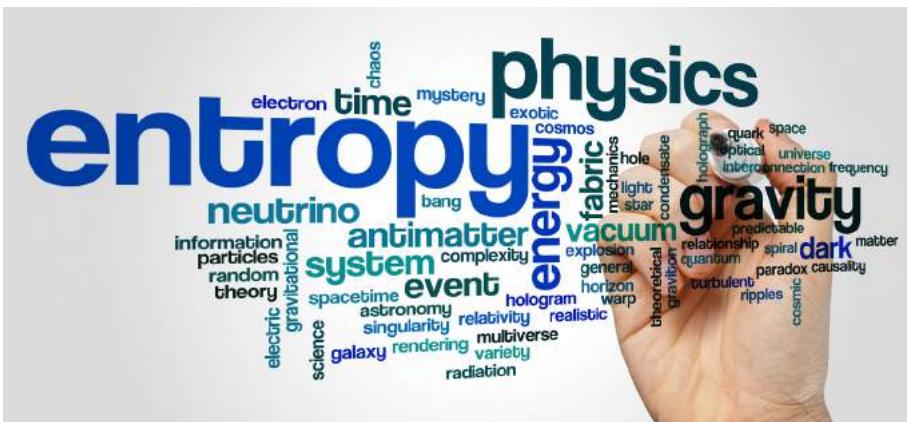
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Feel the Spin

a novel
by Marshall Moskow





I'm disorder: you're entropy
 We're a phase of the heat death of the universe
 Made of, what seems eternal,
 but is probably finite when it's gathered up as us.

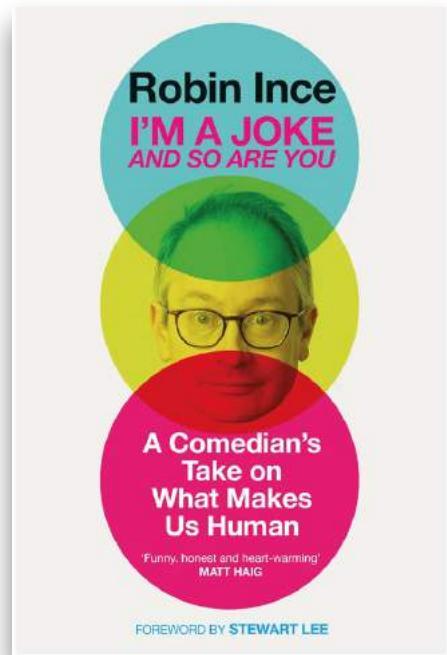
I'm up quarks, down quarks, charmed quarks and strange
 quarks, I'm strange...
 Leptons and electrons, muons and gluons,
 Maybe tiny, tiny, vibrating strings
 All gathered up together once in a primordial atom: A
 nothing,

But a nothing with a lot of potential
 Rubbing shoulder to shoulder but, before shoulders, or
 thoughts,
 Waiting for gravity, matter and time
 We were potential and probability and, maybe, with a
 destiny...

And, now, we're Oxygen and Sodium, Hydrogen and
 Nitrogen
 Phosphorus and Calcium and, maybe, a tiny bit of Uranium
 Assembled by law and equation but,
 Seemingly, not outside instruction

Though some might say an Elon Musk simulation
 A Periodic menagerie, A particle zoo
 A bacterial multitude, waiting for my heat death
 But, currently, very, very, pre-occupied with being alive...

By Robin Ince
Taken from Cosmic Shambles 2018



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 and funny in equal measure."

*Richard Wiseman, Professor of
 Psychology*

"One of the UK's most
 accomplished, versatile
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Robin Ince

Robin Ince is co-presenter of the award-winning BBC Radio 4 show, *The Infinite Monkey Cage*. He has won the Time Out Outstanding Achievement in Comedy, was nominated for a British Comedy Award for Best Live show, and has won three Chortle Awards.



Things theists say...

"These quack preachers are giving religion a bad name!"

Sometimes Christians send me videos of preachers laying their hands on the genitals of their followers to 'help' them have a baby, or getting their flock to eat grass! The senders complain about them.

Guess what I do... I ask them how they can tell a false preacher from a real one, of course! "Supposing," I say, "you are on the management committee of a church and you have several applicants for the post of church leader. How are you going to determine whether they are quacks or not?" Often that's when they leave the conversation. Is that such a difficult question to answer though?

If I can re-engage them, I tell them that I have an idea for how it

might be done. I suggest that a genuine preacher should have better communication and a better relationship with god than a fake one; they must agree. "So," I go on, "shouldn't a real preacher's prayers be answered more often than those coming from a false scoundrel?" They can't deny it.

"OK. Then we only need to devise a method for testing that hypothesis and we should be able to sort the quacks from the proper priests and pastors, shouldn't we?" Then I tell them that an experiment like that has already been done.

The John Templeton Foundation, a Christian organization, spent \$2.4m over three years from 2003 to 2006, on the Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer (STEP). It was a well carried out scientific investigation, with a large sample size, appropriate controls and double blind recording; a randomized controlled trial (RCT).

Following heart by-pass surgery, 1,800 patients were assigned to groups, one group was openly prayed for, another group was secretly prayed for and a third group was not prayed for at all. How long it took for them to recover back to health was recorded.

The results were disappointing for the Templeton Foundation: they had wasted their money. No difference was found between the

'prayed for' and 'not prayed for' groups. Worse than that, those in the group that knew they were being prayed for took significantly longer to recover!

Now, this investigation did not involve preachers, quack or otherwise, but it does show the ineffectiveness of prayer. That casts doubt on the claim to have a hotline to god, to be 'genuine', made by all those who pray, including preachers.

Interestingly, the prayer test could help doubters - they could do it on themselves! Even Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has admitted having doubts, he said,

"The other day I was praying over something as I was running, and I ended up saying to God 'look this is all very well, but isn't it about time you did something, if you're there?' Which is probably not what the Archbishop of Canterbury should say."
(September 14th 2014 BBC)

Why doesn't Justin Welby set himself a prayer test to settle the matter one way or the other? Otherwise we might be entitled to think, "If it looks like a preacher and sounds like a preacher, it's a quack..."

John Richards

<https://tinyurl.com/yd6x2afj>

From Courtney's Archive

Anish's tale



Divine Dole Queue by Sebastian

My parents are religious and I am the black sheep of the family. My story is mostly concerned with the Hindu religion and how stupid it is.

There are several gods in India (apparently 2000+) and most of them must be jobless according to me. My mom told me a story which was my first step to atheism.

There's this famous god called Ganesha. He has the head of an elephant and body of a human. He was created by the lady goddess Parvati who is the wife of the God of Destruction. Funny part is, she made him with clay and sand and did some mumbo jumbo and voila, out emerged this god (at first he was completely human looking, like he didn't have the elephant head when his construction was done).

What happened next in the story was this woman asked her child to stay out of their house and guard it, not let anybody in, as she was about to do something important in the house (apparently they lived in the Himalayas tallest point and they magically had a house) this young kid stood there and then entered the destruction God Shiva to the scene, saying he wanted to go in.

The child said, "No." Apparently Shiva didn't know it was *his* child and launched his Trident in anger which separated the head of the kid from his body.

The mother finds this and, through a goddess, begs Shiva to restore it. Shiva sends his minions to find a human but apparently in the Himalayas they find a baby elephant and they bring that and Shiva beheads the elephant and fits in this kid's head and voila, he's back to life.

After this story I raised near about countless questions and mom was like faith must not be questioned. Science cannot explain everything. This is where I was like, "Stuff faith!"

And when I saw George Carlin's YouTube videos after this incident I had my thoughts confirmed that god is nonsense.

Anish

**Courtney Heard
AKA Godless Mom**

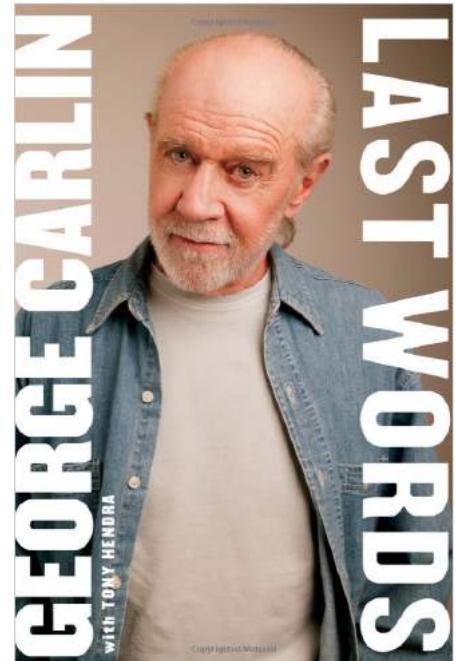


<http://godlessmom.com>



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Last Words is the story of the man behind some of the most seminal comedy of the last half century, blending his signature acerbic humor with never-before-told stories from his own life, including encounters with a Who's Who of 1970s celebrity—from Lenny Bruce to Hugh Hefner—and the origins of some of his most famous stand-up routines.

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Applying Logic to the God Proposition

The fifth article in the series



Argument from Religious Experience

By cherry picking their own religious experiences from all the assorted descriptions of 'godly experiences' made by others, the believer tries to turn their own experiences into evidence for their (own) God. To do this they must ignore every other claimed religious experience that contradicts theirs.

Hence when we actually bring back in all the evidence that they deliberately neglect, the conclusion goes the other way. (This is superbly argued from every angle and against nearly every possible excuse by John Loftus in [The Outsider Test for Faith](#), with an excellent response to his remaining critics in [The Christian Delusion](#), Chapter 4.)

We have evidence of alleged divine communications going back tens of thousands of years (in shamanic cave art, the crafting of religious icons, ritual burials, and eventually shrines, temples, and actual writing, on stone and clay, then parchment, papyrus and paper). Theism predicts that all communications from the divine would be consistently the same at all times in history and across all

geographical regions, and presciently in line with the true facts of the world and human existence, right from the start.

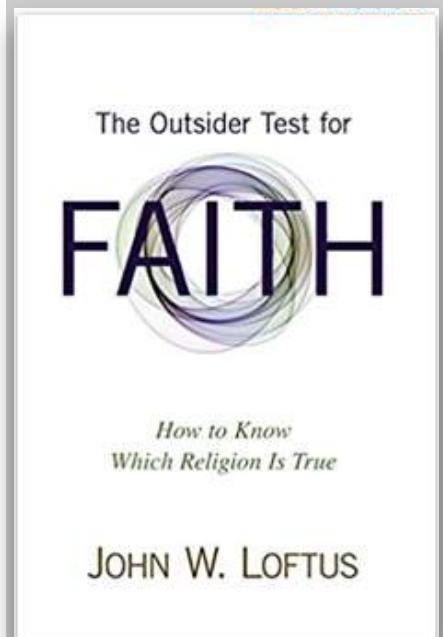
Atheism predicts instead, that these communications will be pervasively inconsistent across time and space, and full of factual errors about the world and human existence, exactly matching the level of ignorance prevalent in the culture "experiencing the divine" at that time. And guess what?

We observe exactly what atheism predicts; not what theism predicts. Theists must resort to adding excuses for their experience, which only makes it even more improbable.

Thus, the actual evidence of religious experience is highly probable for atheism, and highly *improbable* for theism. This disparity in probabilities entails that the evidence from religious experience argues that God does not exist.

Dr Carrier refers to this book by John W Loftus

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



Dr. Richard Carrier
Ancient Historian



John Loftus is an escaped preacher who is available for speaking engagements

www.debunking-christianity.com

<https://tinyurl.com/ya6fg873>

'My religion/conspiracy theory EXPLAINS WHAT ALTERNATIVE THEORIES CAN'T and is CONSISTENT WITH THE EVIDENCE'

from [Stephen Law's blog](#) 23rd September 2017

Your editor wears another hat: I am also the Chairman of a Skeptics in the Pub. My skeptical duties include observing a lot of expert speakers and, some time ago, I attended a presentation by a young psychologist who had just completed his PhD on Conspiracy Theory. He gave us an interesting run down of the characteristics of conspiracy theories which enable them to be identified as such.

In the Q and A, I asked, "I couldn't help noticing that most of the features of a conspiracy theory are also common to religious beliefs. Is this just my bias or is it a real effect?" Before the speaker could answer, there was a round of applause! This does not normally happen for a question, but I guess it tells us something about a skeptical audience!

Here's Stephen Law's blog on the subject of conspiracy theories:

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The recipe for generating a successful new religion or conspiracy theory usually involves two key components:

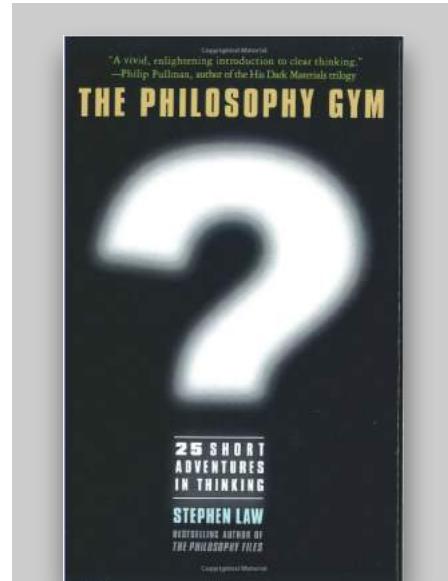
1. identify supposed 'mysteries' that appealing to your preferred unseen intelligence (Men In Black, God,

gremlins, fairies, the CIA) operating behind the scene easily solves. For example, why the twin towers came down like that, how life began, why you can't find your keys.

2. be ingenious at explaining stuff away. Any apparent evidence against your theory can always be accounted for given some ingenuity, e.g. if you believe in Young Earth Creationism, cook up explanations for the fossil record, etc.; if you believe in a good, loving god, cook up explanations for all the horrendous suffering we see in nature; if you believe the royal family are alien shape-shifters, cook up explanations for why they're never spotted in alien form, how they could possibly have got here, infiltrated the royal blood line, etc. Consistency with the available evidence can always, by such means, be achieved.

So, you can now (often correctly!) declare that:

- (i) your new religion or conspiracy theory explains, by appeal to hidden agency, what orthodox theories do not or cannot, and
- (ii) your new belief system is also consistent with the evidence!



**Buy  
Stephen Law's book  
by clicking [here](#).**

British philosopher and editor Stephen Law explores 25 of life's Big Questions in a sprightly volume designed to be a "course in thinking". He addresses queries both grand and eternal such as "Does God Exist?" and "Where Did the Universe Come From?"

Publishers Weekly

If you think your belief system is reasonable because it ticks boxes (i) and (ii), I suggest you think again.

Many utterly ludicrous belief systems also tick both boxes. That can't be the reason your belief system is reasonable if, indeed, it is...

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



# The Sly Circularity of the Kalām Cosmological Argument



**Youtuber Alex O'Connor refutes the Kalaam Cosmological Argument famously championed by top apologist, William Lane Craig.**

*"The universe has a cause."*

The claim seems uncontroversial enough. David Hume was perhaps more right than he could have known when he wrote of the human mind's propensity to associate cause with effect regardless of whether it has a rational basis for doing so. Increasing evidence suggests that the principle of causality may well be something not learned through experience, as he had suggested, but biologically and psychologically inherited, which would render us creatures made naturally uncomfortable by the prospect of an effect occurring without a corresponding cause. It is upon this intuitive inclination—an inclination which ultimately has no basis in rational thought—that rests one of the most popular and persuasive arguments for the existence of a supernatural first mover (or, more bravely, a god): The Kalām cosmological argument.

Taking its Arabic name from its roots in Islamic theology and championed today by Dr. William

Lane Craig of ReasonableFaith.org, the argument generally takes the following form:

- Premise one: Everything that begins to exist has a cause;
- Premise two: The universe began to exist;
- Conclusion: Therefore, the universe has a cause.

To grant credit where it is due, this argument benefits from logical validity. This means that it cannot be the case that the conclusion is false if the premises are true, since the former logically follows from the latter. That makes the task of refuting this syllogism a plain one, one or both of the premises must be shown to be false.

I often find, in the efforts of others to do just this, a subordination of the importance of the first premise to the importance of the second. In an attempt to reverse this philosophical injustice, I shall simply grant the second premise. Of course, it may be the case, despite the overwhelming evidence that our universe is not an eternal one, that something came before it (if 'before' can even make sense in such a context), or that it is only one of many coexisting in a multiverse. On this point it is fair to remain agnostic, and so I will not attempt to

prove false the claim that the universe began to exist.

However, I will stress that in granting that 'the universe began to exist', we are really granting that 'the universe began to exist out of nothing'. If the universe were created out of pre-existing material, we would be left with the question of where this material itself came from, and the argument would prove nothing important. If 'beginning to exist' means anything philosophically in this context, it must mean beginning to exist from nothing.

It is with this in mind that we should assess the first premise: 'Everything that begins to exist has a cause.' This phrase, in all its unassuming simplicity, has the potential to strike its reader as a truism, but it pays to ask yourself an important and relevant question: when have you ever actually known something to begin to exist? Have you ever seen something begin to exist, or even heard of such a thing? You may be inclined to answer that this happens all the time. Just this morning my coffee began to exist – only, it didn't really begin to exist at all, rather it was the product of a rearrangement of preexisting matter.

*(continued on page 14)*

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Bear in mind that if the Kālām seeks to draw a parallel between things within the universe beginning to exist and the universe itself beginning to exist, they must ‘begin to exist’ in the same fashion. We have already concluded that, for philosophical relevance, the argument must deal with things that begin to exist from nothing. Since this was palpably not the case with my coffee, it is an inappropriate comparison.

What, then, within the universe, has truly begun to exist *from nothing* at a particular point in the past? Nothing. The answer is nothing. Matter cannot be created or destroyed, and thus nothing in physical existence ever ‘began to exist’ in the sense we are interested in. Not my coffee, nor my father, nor the Burj Khalifa. Even something as seemingly abstract as an idea cannot begin to exist from nothing, since ideas are ultimately nothing more than signals in the brain, and hence physical in nature. It is this

realization that allows us to dispel the first premise as founded on an equivocation fallacy, since the concept of ‘beginning to exist’ is being used, it seems, inconsistently.

Nonetheless, it might be said, this (always conserved) mass must collectively have an origin. This is of course correct, but this origin consists in the very beginning of the universe itself, when all matter simultaneously began to exist. That is to say, no matter has ever begun to exist except when the universe itself came into being some 13.8 billion years ago. The only thing that ever actually began to exist from nothing is the universe itself, and even this is only the case because of our granting the entire first premise of the Kālām.

Consider the implications of this. If the only thing that ever began to exist (in the relevant sense) is the universe, then the premise, ‘Everything that begins to exist has a cause’ becomes ‘The universe has a cause’, since the universe *is* everything that begins to exist. It should be immediately apparent that

this premise is identical to the conclusion, and thus the Kālām can also be rendered as follows:

- Premise one: The universe [that is, everything that begins to exist] has a cause;
- Premise two: The universe began to exist;
- Conclusion: Therefore, the universe has a cause.

As is clear, the second premise is in fact irrelevant, and the argument is now transparently circular. It says nothing whatsoever, since the first premise states the same as the conclusion, and therefore is not an argument, but a mere claim. A claim which, to be at all convincing, will require a far superior argument to support it than this unimpressive attempt.

Alex O'Connor  
Cosmic Skeptic



Alex is an example of that peculiarly modern phenomenon, the young intellectual Youtuber.

Historically, youngsters had to have extreme musical or sporting ability in order to get an audience, but technology has enabled anyone who has access to some reasonably affordable computer hardware, and an internet connection, to broadcast anything that can be digitized.

Alex, and a few other bright young men are in the vanguard of a movement to transmit deep thinking to their followers and patrons.

He has just started at Oxford University and is already campaigning!



Alex's latest video is on Free Speech  
<https://youtu.be/JMbM8HcFRCQ>

Please join the 240k subscribers to his channel

<https://tinyurl.com/yc7lh45v>

**This man has a glittering career ahead of him**

## About the Editor

# John Richards, Anti-theist



Click on the photos to watch;



At the risk of being accused of self promotion, I wondered if you'd like to know more about ME! You know me as the editor of Secular World, which is a job I was offered a year ago and have been loving ever since, however, I also have several other strings to my bow.

I'm a retired Science teacher who can't stop and who has discovered, from interacting with a lot of religious folks on social media, that my job is far from done. One of the big advantages of being retired is that you become your own boss so you can spend your days pursuing your personal mission instead of having to do your employer's bidding.

My mission consists mostly of acting as a keyboard warrior correcting the ignorance that fills the heads of believers, but I am allowed out sometimes! That picture shows me presenting to Middlesborough Skeptics on Why Intelligent Design is not Science. (No, it wasn't taken back in the days of black and white chemical photography! It was taken in November 2017 by a digital cameraman who just likes the tones of monochrome.)

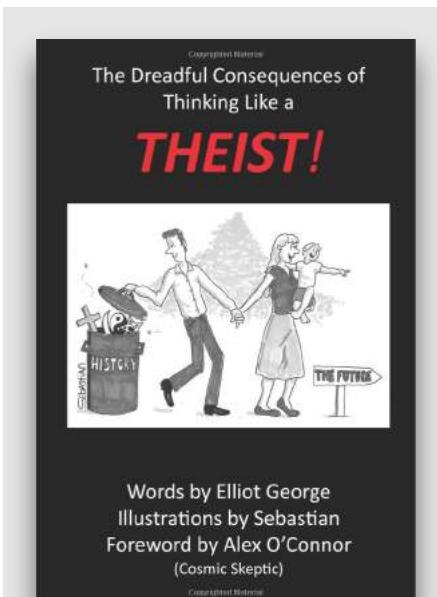
Five years ago, I started a Skeptics in the pub group in our local town which enables me to invite lots of interesting expert guests on all sorts of subjects and I now get invited to speak myself. I've been all over England addressing Skeptics and Humanists and have ventured overseas!

I also debate against theists, even, occasionally, in their own churches! Subjects that I have presented or debated on include: God versus Science, Creation versus Science, Evolution versus Intelligent Design, The Authenticity of the Bible, Religions cause more Harm than Good, The Unimportance of Belief and so on.

I have also written some anti-theistic books, for which I used the pseudonym 'Elliot George' (I've since dropped that nom-de-plume as it became clear that there was little reason to hide) and I have a patreon site where I regularly post articles, audio and videos with some cartoons by my friend Sebastian. My latest project consist of making 2 minute videos with the title, Things Theists Say.

Please visit:

[www.patreon.com/user?u=5850943](http://www.patreon.com/user?u=5850943)



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"I was very impressed with Mr George's book. He covers many of the fallacies that Theists use and explains them very well."

# Escape from Faith

## Ex-Seventh Day Adventist

The last time I attended a Seventh-day Adventist church I heard a man marvel about how the water table was balanced just right for us, ignoring that large sections of land are too wet or too dry.. This was an insult to my lifelong pursuit of science. I was also finding divine command theory insulting. It is easy to leave the SDA when you stop spending time with them.

The SDA church is a Protestant denomination that tends to think most other denominations are apostate while other Christians think Adventist are kooks. In my personal observation many of the denominations of Baptist, Presbyterians, Nazarenes, and Methodist are interchangeable to their members and number well over 50 million across the United States, while Adventist do not form a coalition with any other groups and number less than a million within the United States. Like many people raised in the Adventist church I was home schooled in a rural area. I grew up near Methodist grandparents and the Methodist church was less than an hour walk from my home, a place where many in my village met every Sunday. But I rarely associated with my grandparents or our village, instead going to church every Saturday in a city over half an hour



drive with other Adventists from scattered villages.

I start out with these points because I think they are both the strengths and weaknesses of Adventism. Adventists are encouraged to study, and in so doing many find out how evolution works. Adventists are encouraged to self segregate from other denominations, and a few either notice the hypocrisy and corruption at Adventist schools or find themselves lonely in a small geriatric church. Adventists are encouraged to share their faith, to witness that their prayers do not cure an Indian man of blindness while the money they brought can be given to a local doctor to remove a tumor from a woman. Adventists install hours of creationism and biblical literacy in the education of their children, telling us that if we were to critically question the claims of our church it would hold up to scrutiny. For myself and many like me the plan backfired.

By the time I was a preteen I was already interested in science, reinterpreting what I read in secular encyclopedias through a creationist lens. It became apparent to me that there are at least four species of clover in my backyard. I also learned there are several species of cats, bears, deer, citrus, fowl, and drupe. I

was given the explanation of evolution within created kinds, but there was no interest within the church in finding out how fast species diverge nor how we can identify relationships. I was told that both evolution and creationism are matters of faith, that we don't have evidence one way or the other. Since this was something I wanted to know it became my mission to become a scientist, the first one to find evidence one way or the other. If I was going to be a scientist in heaven I might as well start now.

It was during these years, when I was 14, one cloudless morning we were shocked to see how far faith could go. I did not become an atheist then, but September 11th 2001 is one of my clearest freshest memories. Although I understood that the motive was more than just about religion, I slowly realized that rejecting Islam was not just because I was not born in a Muslim family, but also because I was rejecting divine command theory. I eventually came to realize faith itself was at fault, that people who say their god would never command violence fail to realize morality has nothing to do with God.

(continued on page 17)

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I continued to call myself an Adventist for about the next 10 years. In the middle of this time I went on a few short mission trips and came back with other ideas while noticing a little bit of racism in my partners. The latter half of that decade belonged to the libertarian wave, a community that introduced me to deism and ways of thinking that involved horizontal rather than vertical ethical systems. It also helped that I became immersed in science fiction shows, one an American/Canadian franchise about aliens that tricked humans into worshiping them, many of the episodes seeming to talk about Christianity; another about a culturally pluralistic interplanetary federation, introducing me to secular humanism. The paleo diet, a memplex that spread in libertarian circles, also threw a last punch at my Adventism, showing me the church don't understand the implications of human morphology. (I still decided to not eat pigs, but for ethical reasons instead.)

I only went to church a few times in 2012, rather spending my time talking to people of varying backgrounds online, mostly about politics but keeping an open mind about other things. In 2009 my state introduced same-sex marriage, but I joined a voter referendum to reject it based on fear mongering from my church. In 2012, when I stopped calling myself an Adventist, I voted in support of a citizen initiative for same-sex marriage. I was still looking for a reason to continue in the church, hoping that maybe my church could evolve to be progressive, perhaps we could support religious freedom for other churches while rejecting it for ourselves. The more I thought about it the more I realized I should stop giving them my money. I thought

maybe there is a god that supports gay marriage, hates groveling and doesn't want us to circumcise babies, but no one knows of him, especially not the biblical patriarchs.

One night, as my thoughts drifted into the realization that my Universe could be vast and lonely, I asked Google, how to become an atheist. That was it. I could keep it to myself. I could become vocal. I could look for other atheist. The only criterion is that I mustn't believe in a god. I fitted that requirement because I couldn't mentally place any being above morality or the Universe, so I didn't believe in God.

I was just suddenly alone with no one hearing my thoughts; just free. I knew that one day I was going to die, but that I no longer had to live for the impossible standards of a judgmental being who say we deserve the torture and execution he arranged for an innocent man 2000 years back. Huge amounts of guilt were gone; guilt over things I realized I shouldn't feel guilty about. All the evolution I had read about was suddenly making sense. What I knew was right and wrong was becoming clear without having to go through god. A month or two latter I decided to do what I had always wanted to do. Admitting to myself that I am gay, I searched for a boyfriend.

That year I developed a strong anger for monotheistic religion, experiencing how it affects the LGBT who grow up in it, how it isolates communities, how it miss-educated me. With the threat that my family would cut me off I was forced to move in with the guy I was talking to. I soon broke-up with my boyfriend, returning home realizing that many gay youth must feel overly dependent on their lovers because they have been ostracized by their religious parents.

When I returned to my family I decided I needed to find a support

network, like I'd had at church. I decided I needed to find not just lovers, but friends. When I was in my local library studying evolution one day, I found a bookmark telling me about a small local community of atheists and humanists, and I visited libertarian colonies in a nearby state. The humanists talked about using rainbow flags to mark safe homes for LGBT teens who need to escape abusive parents, while the libertarians tolerated gays but said we should depend on our boyfriends.

These days my community is mostly the local humanist group, a few of whom have taken me to LGBT Pride. We sometimes go out for potlucks, walks, movies, book clubs, and meetings. My only complaint is it is not yet enough for someone who really needs people to notice us. There are still LGBT in the churches who believe what is preached. There are still Christians who think LGBT want Jesus to take this "burden" away. There are people who need to see that our networks exist and are ready to help. Each and everyone of you is hope for a single mother or a gay teenager trapped in a judgmental community. You might find only one reason to attend your local humanist potlucks, but it's an important one.

That reason is to make heaven on Earth for those who have lost hope in an afterlife.

**Editor's note:** the author of this touching story has, understandably asked to remain anonymous for the present. I have published it in full with very minor edits, even though it is twice the length of our guidelines, because it is so well written.

If any readers would like to submit their own story or an article on a topic of possible interest to Secular World, please email me at:

[secularworld@atheistalliance.org](mailto:secularworld@atheistalliance.org)

# AAI Freethinking Hero Threatened by Gunmen

**The dangers of being an atheist in theistic country**

The last edition of Secular World featured Indian rationalist Professor Narendra Nayak as the subject of our regular inside back cover article headed Atheist Alliance International's Freethinking Hero. Since then, Narendra has been identified as a target by Hindu extremists who have been arrested in connection with the murder of journalist Gauri Lankesh. Fortunately, he has not been harmed and has been given security guard protection.

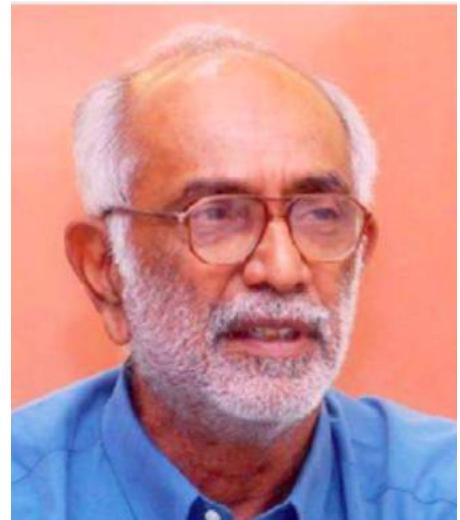
One of the arrested, Rajesh Bangera, the arms trainer of the group, revealed that Narendra, the President of the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations, was under surveillance for two days by recruits trained to carry out an attack. Officers found a diary belonging to the prime suspect of the accused with entries listing the names of the gang members chosen for the attacks and their intended victims. They are now under lock and key, so,

hopefully, Narendra will be safe.

Why do believers want to kill us? Well, they often have a mission to spread their faith and yet they fear that their belief systems are vulnerable to criticism. To this end, two things have happened:

1. Over the centuries, words have been coined by believers for the purpose of labeling, insulting and demonizing non-members of their group: words like, 'heathen', 'gentile' and 'infidel'.
2. Legislation has been enacted to punish people who act in a way that the leaders of a religion might find challenging. So, we have 'blasphemy' for protecting the faith from questioning or criticism, 'heresy' for offending the leaders and 'apostasy' for criminalizing quitting a faith.

The vulnerability of faiths is due to them only being supported by argument. As we all know, an argument can be contested - that's



what the word is used to mean: two opposing positions in vociferous disagreement. If they had evidence and not just argument, faiths would be no more vulnerable to criticism than our understanding of the effect of gravity. Who argues over what will happen if someone jumps off a roof?

Atheists are victimized all over the world: in the Bible belt of the USA it's best to stay 'in the closet' if you want a job or accommodation, and in thirteen different Muslim areas the punishment for revealing that you are an atheist can include execution. These are not tourist destinations but, if you do find yourself in the following countries, you'd better keep quiet about your atheism: Afghanistan, Iran, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Nigeria, Pakistan, Qatar and the Yemen.

Yes, believers may start out with persuasion, but don't be fooled, the silk glove hides an iron fist.

**Cool Jewellery!** Click here: <https://tinyurl.com/ybl832nt>



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Earrings  
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## ATHEIST ALLIANCE INTERNATIONAL'S

### **★★★ FREE THINKING HERO ★★★**

# The Late Prof. Arunachalam Kumar

**Founder Member of Dakshina Kannada Rationalist Association**



On the 8th December, 2018 it will be a year after the passing away of Prof. Arunachalam Kumar, the eminent teacher of Anatomy, researcher and genius. He followed his principles right to his end. His body was donated to the Anatomy Department of Kasturba Medical College, Mangalore where preparations are on to dissect and preserve it so that his memory shall be permanently kept in the place he loved the most - the dissection hall.

When I visited him last month he said that, despite of all his problems, he refuses to believe in any supernatural power and remains a staunch rationalist. During the course of our conversation he wanted to speak about it to all those interested to clear any misconceptions that people may have about him possibly having had a death bed conversion. So, we organized a meeting and this is my report of the event.

He spoke about how his development as a rationalist came about because of his mother who had a rational streak in her. He recalled how she would go to temples not to worship the gods but to give alms to the beggars. At the same time she would not allow a

lower caste maid to enter the kitchen! He also mentioned that, despite her liberal views, she classified people into Brahmins and Shudras - according to her anyone who wasn't a Brahmin was a Shudra!

He told us about his childhood days which started the process of questioning the norms of society. He also spoke about incidents from his time as a medical student and how his long hair had brought trouble. Going back to those days he recalled how he was soundly ticked off by his surgery professor, Dr.C.R.Ballal, for cutting the finger of his glove to help him with surgery! Incidentally Dr.C.R.Ballal was in the audience and laughed at this incident. He also recalled incidents from his student days when some of the professors had sworn not to pass him till he had his hair cut and how he had resisted those attempts! In fact he jocularly mentioned that the main aim of those treating him for cancer was to see that his hair fell off and they had not succeeded to date!

He expressed his gratitude towards his students who had stood by him during times of crisis and recalled one who had instructed his sister to remit a certain amount to his account from her location in

Canada, as he had been worried that the Prof would not have any financial resources after retirement from service! His students had undertaken a drive to collect funds for his treatment and it had grown to a substantial sum and keeps growing.

He recalled instances of how rational thinking had made him undertake research into various topics and had stood him in good stead throughout his life. But, he said that his role in the movement was limited to occasional talks. However he expressed his appreciation for those working for the taking the movement to the people to make them think and question.

To add something which was not in the press note, I would like to mention that he was quite frank and open about the details of his personal life too!

**Prof Narendra Nayak**  
*President of the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations*





ATHEIST  
ALLIANCE  
INTERNATIONAL



## Volunteer Opportunities

AAI has opportunities for volunteers in many countries.

To apply, go to: <https://www.atheistalliance.org/volunteer/>

To be considered for a Directorship

apply here: [www.atheistalliance.org/apply-aai-board-role/](http://www.atheistalliance.org/apply-aai-board-role/)

## Do you have the write stuff?



*Would you like to write for Secular World Magazine or our Website?*

**Send submissions to:** [secularworld@atheistalliance.org](mailto:secularworld@atheistalliance.org)

**Join us !**

AAI's vision is a secular world where public policy, scientific inquiry and education are not influenced by religious beliefs, but based upon sound reasoning, rationality and evidence, and where individuals who lack religious beliefs enjoy free speech, freedom of association and freedom to participate in public life.

**To join, go [here](#):** [www.atheistalliance.org/aai-membership/](http://www.atheistalliance.org/aai-membership/)