Worship edition, in this issue:

Editorial 2
President's Letter 3
A god not worthy of worship 4
Book Review: Heavens on Earth 5
Sponsored items 6
The Heart of Worship 7
Sponsored items 8

Poetry Page sub editor Conrad Didiodata 9
Richard Carrier: a New Book 10
The Evil God Challenge part 2 Stephen Law 11
Worship Music - the glue that binds 12/13
Be on Constant Guard 13/14
AAI's Freethinking Hero: James Randi 15
Editorial

Under new management!

It is with great pleasure that I am receiving the Editor’s position from John Richards, who has done outstanding work in editing Secular World for the past three years and showing the world the values which Atheist Alliance International promotes and to which it is committed, envisioning a world free of superstition, prejudices, and religious beliefs which only serve to promote hate and division.

In my role as Editor, I am personally committed in putting my previous experience in editing Secular Nation magazine and leading the Durham Atheist, Secularist & Humanist society from 2016 to 2019 into work, to ensure that Atheist Alliance International and Secular World continues to develop and flourish.

Whether you were raised in a non-religious environment or in a religious one, later managing to escape from the shackles of religious faith and superstitious belief, it is undoubtedly the case that one man had a considerable impact on your journey toward atheism. That man is none other than James Randi, whose life was dedicated to battling prejudice and superstition in all its forms - in religion, pseudoscience, and the paranormal. Sadly, on the 20th of October 2020, James Randi departed from this world to enter the pantheon of the heroes of science, amongst Carl Sagan, Christopher Hitchens, Stephen Hawking, and others to whom we owe today’s understanding of science and rational thinking.

This issue of Secular World is dedicated to James Randi, whose commitment toward reason has shown us that the way toward truth cannot be shaped by adhering to pseudoscientific claims or blind faith, but by skepticism toward any kind of quackery.

Following the steps of James Randi, Atheist Alliance International, through its work and campaigns, aims to expose pseudoscience, debunk superstitious claims, especially when they come from religious circles, and battle religious privilege. Through our campaigns, we aim to challenge religion and faith where they become an obstacle to human rights and people’s freedoms.

This is reflected in our campaigns in the past few months, particularly in the cases of Mubarak Baal, President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, who has been arrested and illegally detained since April 2020, Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, a 22-year old who was sentenced to be hanged, and Umar Farouk, a 13-year old who was sentenced to 10 years in prison, all on charges of blasphemy in Nigeria. In all cases, AAI has been continuously lobbying for all charges to be dropped, based on our firm position that blasphemy laws must be repealed worldwide, as no religion or faith must be free from criticism or even ridicule.

If we wish to live in a society in which we can intellectually develop as a species, it is important that we learn how to live with each other peacefully and in harmony. “Hell is other people”, the great French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once said, demonstrating how we are ‘condemned’ to co-exist with other people and live with them in a common society.

With this in mind, there is no other way we can live in harmony than acceptance, respect, and tolerating the rights, values, and freedoms of our fellow human beings. It is of vital importance that we speak up when we witness injustices in the world as, following Sartre again, each of us is responsible of taking care of the world we all share and ensuring that it is not a world of hate and division, but a world of love, equality, and kindness.

Angelos Sofocleous
Editor
President’s News

We’ve gone Platinum!

We atheists are a global minority. While some atheists can live quite happily according to their beliefs, others face real challenges. Across the world, many atheists are looked down upon, rejected by friends and family, discriminated against (especially in terms of access to employment, accommodation or other opportunities), denied certain rights, and even persecuted.

The “wrongs” they are accused of include questioning dominant religious beliefs, criticizing religion, or even openly mocking it. Those who commit apostasy — the act of publicly renouncing your religious beliefs — could face the death penalty in Nigeria, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Sudan, Mauritania, and other countries where Islam is the dominant religion.

At Atheist Alliance International, we have been working on behalf of atheists for almost 30 years. Think about that for a moment. Thirty years is a long time for any nonprofit organization to remain active and relevant, but that’s precisely what we have done and are doing. We have developed and sustained the organization by maintaining an active Board of Directors who work without pay but with great conviction in support of our mission and goals.

Nevertheless, we are not resting on our laurels. Rather, we are moving forward with new programs and initiatives that will make us even stronger and more effective.

We have added a new AAI component—an Advisory Council made up of some of the most recognizable, productive, and influential voices in world secularism. They will be offering guidance and assistance as we support essential campaigns such as we have been doing for Mubarak Bala, the outspoken atheist in Nigeria arrested for blasphemy. A quick update: Mubarak’s case is scheduled to be heard in December.

We are now blogging daily on Patheos, have opened an AAI Internet Café in the Democratic Republic of Congo, are presenting a live monthly online “Ask the Executive Director Anything” video show, an audio podcast, and supporting numerous other campaigns around the world, all designed to make the world a better place for atheists.

As the only atheist organization with Consultative privileges to the Human Rights Council of the United Nations and the European Union, we are the voice for atheists everywhere. We have created a Right to be Secular Campaign for presentation to the United Nations. This is where you can help us—there’s strength in numbers...

We really need more members to join us. With a larger membership, our voice becomes louder. With more members, we can have more influence at the international level. We really do need you because you make a difference to what we can achieve. If you’re not already a member, won’t you please consider joining us? Click here https://tinyurl.com/yyp766s9

Oh, and you should know this: Guidestar has recently awarded us their highest status. We are now platinum rated. According to Guidestar, “Nonprofit organizations who reach platinum level status are considered the most trusted nonprofit organizations in the United States.”

Not many nonprofits ever achieve this status. This means that our accountability and transparency are indeed exceptional. So when you become a member or donate to one of our campaigns, you can be sure you are supporting an organization with the highest ethical standards and one that is becoming more effective all the time.

Howard Burman
President, Atheist Alliance International

president@atheistalliance.org
A God not Worthy of Worship

As a child I was taught to say my prayers to my creator. I learned in my Catholic Sunday school and through my parents, that a loving god was always watching. This god loved me unconditionally as he did all his earthly creations. When I knelt at my bedside at night and held hands as my family said grace before a meal I found comfort in these acts. I knew that God would be pleased by our words and would bless our family and those we prayed for. These thoughts always brought a smile to my young face.

The deity I was taught to believe in was a benevolent god. He could do no wrong, even when bad things happened, they happened according to His plan. And He had a plan for everyone. A divine path that would lead to Heaven. All sins could be forgiven by the simple act of confession. Worshipping this god was a pleasant experience, it brought our family together and gave hope when things were hard. God would never let me down. Our god was worthy of worship, and I felt happy when I put my hands together to praise him.

As I grew, I learned much about the world I lived in, not all of it pleasant. I learned that I had been sheltered from some of the terrible things that happen in our world. I started to learn about kids in other countries that didn’t have enough to eat. I learned that there were kids in the world whose parents didn’t treat them well. Kids that died from diseases that I was protected from.

There were even kids who had no parents at all. Kids who had no beds to sleep in or shoes to wear. There were kids who didn’t worship the god that I did, or celebrate Christmas or Easter. I learned that my god who created heaven and earth allowed these things to happen.

I decided that I had been selfish in my prayers. I prayed for toys, I prayed for my family, I prayed for things in my life and had neglected the rest of the world. Every night I learned about more misery in the world that my god hadn’t fixed because I had been selfish. I had never gone hungry, had never gone without clothes, or a house, or a bed.

My prayers changed after that. I started to pray and ask god, my god who could do anything, to help these people who had so much less than I. Surely if I prayed hard enough, I would no longer see kids on TV with their ribs poking through their skin and flies on their face. There would be no more missing kids or abused kids. My god would fix it all because I would worship Him and He would help them.

I prayed and prayed and when it seemed that I was receiving no answer, I asked my family why god wasn’t helping. I asked why there was so much suffering if our god loved every person he had created and had the power to do anything at all? I was told that the things that other kids suffered in their lives was also part of God’s plan. That was the path he had laid out for them, my prayers would not change what he had already decided. I was told to appreciate the beauty in the world and what God had blessed me with.

I was only about six or seven when I started to wonder if our god was worthy of worship. As a Catholic this was a very scary thought. I had only recently learned of the hell that our god had created. I had also learned that the fastest way to get there was to not worship the god that had created me. This gnawed at me, the thought of all the suffering that God allowed and refused to change. I tried to love Him anyway, but there came a point when I had to admit to myself that I was unable to do that. My god was not a loving god, he was cruel and petty.

What followed after was a disillusionment that was devastating to my young mind. It ate at me and confused me, but it didn’t stop me from learning more about the world I lived in. The more I learned and the less I worshipped, the more I would come to understand that my prayers had no effect. They had no effect because there was no one listening.

When I came to the conclusion that there was no god who was allowing such suffering and misery I started to find peace. I found comfort knowing that I was not heaping praise on a monster. I found peace in knowing that not only was the god I was taught to believe not worthy of worship, but that he didn’t exist at all.

Erin Louis
Regular Contributor
In Heavens on Earth, his 15th book, Michael Shermer refers to himself as a ‘matter monist’ – he believes that science has conclusively shown that matter is the only substance in the universe and our brain is the origin of the conscious mind - all thoughts, memories etc. If we term this our ‘soul’, then soul is not a substance distinct from the brain (dualism), so it cannot survive the brain’s dissolution. Hence there cannot be an ‘afterlife’. After examining many examples of ‘near death’ experiences, he concludes they are hallucinations, derived from a misguided attempt by evolution to detect other minds.

Shermer notes that if dying while killing infidels, Islam will reward one with martyrdom - one will go directly to heaven, imagined as a garden full of delights. He considers that the ideas of heaven and hell are simply a ‘carrot and stick’, a contrived moral scheme, although many believe they are real places. Our moral conscience is actually a result of evolution, a by-product of our reasoning abilities.

Shermer carefully considers contemporary scientific attempts to discover the biological cause of aging (so far unsuccessful), with a view to counteracting it. He believes that the best we can hope for, by the systematic removal of the obvious causes of death, is an incremental increase in life-span, reaching a limit of about 125 years.

He is also doubtful that any way (e.g. by freezing) will be found to preserve brains with intact memories, or to reconstitute brains to make them immortal. Accounts of reincarnation are not credible, because far more people have lived than are now alive, so most souls have no one to be reincarnated into!

Meditation, while possibly promoting health, does not mean that consciousness is fundamental.

Shermer is dismissive of all utopian schemes to achieve ‘heaven on earth’, whether of the extreme right or left. They have led to dystopia and murder, because humans are not perfectable. He advocates what he terms ‘protopia’ (i.e. advances by small steps) not utopia.

Shermer is therefore led to conclude that we have no alternative but to recognize that although living in a vast, meaningless universe (how could we possibly be the point of it?), we can derive meaning through our effects, however small, on the world. Each person is unique. We can feel awe and wonder at nature’s laws and use them as our agent for change. The purpose of life is to oppose entropy (disorder) and promote exotropy - that is the challenge to us and also the opportunity for our legacy.

Noteworthy is Shermer’s extensive and detailed list of references to all the subjects mentioned above, which will be very useful for anyone wishing to delve deeper into them.

(Click here to buy this book or copy/paste this url https://tinyurl.com/y5phps4g)
Breaching the Founders’ “Wall of Separation”

Since the first English Christian fundamentalists arrived in the 1600s on the shores of what would become the United States, Christianity has become increasingly embedded in the nation’s social and cultural fabric. This is completely contrary to the Founding Fathers’ original vision of America; it was designed by them to be a secular democratic republic built on evidence-based Enlightenment values, emphatically not religious faith. Indeed, the Founders purposefully intended that a high, strong “wall of separation” should keep church and state apart in the new nation, while allowing individual religious freedom untrammeled by government—and vice versa. But Christians with theocratic dreams keep trying to breach the wall. Through their efforts, God is now in evidence everywhere in American public life—on our money, in our schools, even in high-level-government officials’ speeches. Freedom of—and from—religion is the American promise to all its people whatever their belief—or disbelief. This is what the Founding Fathers intended for their new nation, not the undemocratic theocracy zealous evangelicals are trying to force on American society today.

Shift + Command and click on the pic to buy.

Thomas Walters, the newly appointed professor of natural philosophy and astronomy at Tideland College, strode confidently into the faculty lounge and scanned the room. He observed that a couple of gray-haired men had glanced in his direction, frowned, and immediately returned to their reading. He was exhilarated, yet his pounding heart evidenced a touch of anxiety as well...

Marshall Moskow has written an absorbing historical drama about science, faith, and social upheaval during the period of reconstruction after the American Civil War. The reader follows the experiences of Thomas, his family, two former slaves employed by him; a professor of Latin from Germany with a secret past; and three questioning, rambunctious students.

Shift + Command and click on the pic to buy
The Heart of Worship

In the modern world, worship is an explicitly religious phenomenon, largely associated with music. For those who have not lived in a religious community it can feel foreign and unnatural. I assure you, it is even stranger than you think.

In past ages, hymns were common. The many verses outlined stories, theology, and affirmations of faith. Oddly these songs have become an interesting preservation of doctrine. Read them with a clear eye and you will see some strange, strange things. The stories behind the writing of many of the most popular had a common theme: surrender.

John Newton wrote “Amazing Grace” as a minister. He was once a slave trader, capturing ships crammed with human bodies across the Atlantic Passage. He was converted after a near death experience during a violent storm and became a pastor and, much later, an abolitionist. He surrendered his guilt to fear and tried to be a better man.

At the beginning of the twentieth century there was a change to the music used in services. In the tent revivals of the Great Awakening there was no way to distribute hymnals so choruses began to feature. This repeating part of the song gave people a chance to learn quickly and sing along to at least part of it.

By the time of the Jesus Freaks of the 70’s many songs were nothing but choruses, hypnotically repeated. Altar calls featured endless stanzas, that moved the audience. People would raise their hands and sway repeating the same words like a mantra until they were drawn into religious ecstasy.

Modern worship songs like “The Heart of Worship” by Matt Redman also have their stories. These words were written after a congregation switched off their music system in an attempt to get back to the heart of worship.

When the music fades, all is stripped away, and I simply come, Longing just to bring something that’s of worth that will bless your heart I’ll give you more than a song, for a song in itself is not what you have required...

I’m coming back to the heart of worship, and it’s all about you, Jesus

If these songs sound like attempts at mass hypnosis that’s because they are. Even those who are resistant to such techniques may look around and see others blessed by god. I had a laugh with a dear friend when we confided about the times we didn’t “feel the spirit.” It turns out we both tried so hard that we each convinced the other, if not ourselves, that we had been touched by god...

That’s the funny thing about worship. It is powerfully effective when sincere. And the goal is always the same. To make you give up more and more of yourself, bit by bit, until nothing matters but Jesus.

A believer would find this goal noble and moving. They do not understand the horror of the free mind for this kind of self erasure, for this kind of mental slavery.

What we so often forget is that worship is fear response. It is a way to deal with a threat. We all know fight or flight. We might remember freeze. But we forget fawn. To fawn is to try to placate. To give slavish devotion and servile flattery in the hope that we will not be harmed.

You see worship isn’t simply music. It’s a surrender to and communion with god. Because surrender is the only answer Christianity has. Listen to pastors on the problem of evil. Christianity has no answers for such hard questions. Appeals to love and faith are calls for surrender. To let the feeling of connection overwhelm the senses and allow doubts to flow away on the tide. It is an inoculation and a defense against critical thinking. It is practice in the surrender of the self. The last and most horrific violation that you must perform to be worthy of ‘salvation’...

Lilith Exvangelical
Regular contributor
All of our cool merchandise can be seen and purchased here: https://www.atheistalliance.org/our-shop/

Our Right to Be Secular Campaign has already accumulated thousands of signatures but we need thousands more before we take it to the United Nations Human Rights Council where we are the only atheist organization with consultation status.

If you haven’t already done so, please consider signing the petition. If you have, please consider encouraging your friends to do the same. Even if they are not atheists, they may well agree that atheists should have rights equivalent to those guaranteed to the religious. The more people who sign, the louder our voice will be at the UN! Granting the right to be secular should be a basic human right. Help us to make that a reality!

Please shift, control and click the link, then sign: https://www.gopetition.com/petitions/the-right-to-be-secular.html
Bishop, I can fly
Said the tailor to the bishop.
Just watch me try!
And with a couple of things
That looked like wings
To the big, big roof of the church he climbed.

The tailor has passed away
Said the people to the bishop.
A farcical affair.
Broken-winged he crashed
And now lies smashed
On the hard, hard city square.

The bishop walked by,
It’s nothing but a lie.
A man is not a bird.
No man will ever fly.
Said the bishop to the tailor.

Let the church bells ring
It was nothing but a lie.
A man is not a bird.
No man will ever fly.
Said the bishop to the people.

by Bertold Brecht

Conrad Didiodato
Poetry Page
sub-editor
A New Book from our contributor Dr Carrier!

Jesus mythicist, Dr Richard Carrier has been so kind to Secular World journal, allowing us to use his material, that I am giving him a full page recommendation this month. Like many of us, his activities have been rather curtailed by COVID 19 lately, but that has given him an opportunity to complete another book.

He is a very congenial fellow who I enjoyed interviewing over two years ago - see here https://youtu.be/yUq6j8eayQ

As you may notice, I've got a bit better at making videos since then!

Here are Richards' own words about his new book:

My new book will soon be available in kindle and print (audio should arrive early next year). Jesus from Outer Space: What the Earliest Christians Really Believed about Christ.

You can pre-order kindle and print editions now (orders should go out by end of October). But advance copies have gone out to reviewers, and one is already scheduled to publish. Robert M. Price reviews JFO S in an upcoming issue of his Journal of Higher Criticism (probably in issue 15.3 or 15.4).

Outer Space pares down the argument of my extensive peer reviewed monograph On the Historicity of Jesus from nearly 700 pages to about 200. No footnotes, no digressions, minimal citations (it includes a page-by-page concordance to OHJ where you will find all of those things). And no math (or rather, no obvious math— it's actually all there, but now hidden behind colloquial English). It also sticks to only the essential arguments and facts, so anyone reading it can't resort so easily to the fallacy of "arguing against a minor point not even relevant to the conclusion" and claiming to have refuted its thesis (an otherwise common practice among critics).

JFOS also re-frames and expands some of those key arguments for a mythical Jesus in ways that more clearly explain them, and more clearly show why they are hard to rebut, and that more decisively refute what have become "the usual rebuttals," which tend to be misinformed and illogical. Here there will be fewer places for critics to hide.

But this book isn't actually written for scholars, though it may be useful to them when used in conjunction with OHJ as sort of an appendix. JFOS is a colloquial treatment for everyday readers—and it demonstrates with real examples why scholars in Jesus studies can't really be trusted on this issue anymore. But it also keeps things simple and brief, so even a scholar can't hide behind excuses like "the book is too long" or "there is too much in it" or "it got confusing."

Moreover, because JFOS expands and focuses its arguments, and contains built-in responses to critics of OHJ, all serious critics will now need to consult JFOS first before making erroneous or uninformed rebuttals to OHJ. But this new book's greatest feature is its appeal to any reader.

Dr. Richard Carrier
Ancient Historian
There are at least two problems of evil. The logical problem begins with the thought that the claim:
(1) There exists an omnipotent, omniscient and maximally good god, is logically inconsistent with the claim that:
(2) Evil exists.

Under ‘evil’ I mean to include both suffering and morally blameworthy actions. The argument then proceeds as follows. Clearly, (2) is true. Therefore, (1) is false. Note that the amount of evil is irrelevant to this version of the argument – all it requires is that there is some, no matter how little. Perhaps the logical problem of evil does not pose such a great challenge to theism. To deal with it, it would suffice to show that an all-powerful, all-knowing and maximally good god might allow some evil for the sake of a greater good.

A second problem – the evidential problem, rests not on the thought that (2) is logically incompatible with (1), but on the thought that (2) provides us with good evidence against (1). The amount of evil does now become relevant. Even if we acknowledge that God might have reason to allow some evil, surely there can be no good reason for quite so much? We can sharpen the problem by noting that God will presumably not allow any gratuitous suffering to exist. There must be a good reason for every last ounce of it.

Many argue that not only is there little reason to suppose that the god of classical monism exists, the sheer quantity of evil that exists provides us with overwhelming empirical evidence that he doesn’t. Those theists who maintain that belief in God, if not proved, is at least not unreasonable, are mistaken. Far from being a question reason cannot decide, the claim that the god of classical monism exists seems to be straightforwardly empirically falsified.

Theodicies

Faced with this objection, theists may respond in various ways. They may suggest we possess good grounds for believing that, not only is there a creator, this being does indeed have the properties attributed to him by traditional monism. They may also suggest that the problem of evil can, to a significant extent, be dealt with. Many theistic explanations of evil have been offered, including the following:

- Simple free-will solution
- We are not blind automata, but free agents. As a consequence of God having given us free will, we sometimes choose to do wrong and suffering ensues. However, free will allows for certain important goods, such as the possibility of morally virtuous action.

God could have created a universe populated with puppet beings that always did as God wants. But the behavior of such puppet beings lacks the dimension of moral responsibility that makes our actions morally virtuous. By cutting our strings and setting us free, God inevitably allowed some evil. But this evil is more than outweighed by the important goods that free will allows.

Stephen Law
Editor of Think, the journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy

Stephen Law has written several books. They make philosophy accessible to the general reader and some are aimed at children.

Purchase them here: https://tinyurl.com/yazzkkun7
Worship Music

The Glue That Binds Us

Having grown up in the Roman Catholic milieu of Long Island, New York, during the 1960s and 1970s, worship was and always had been the Mass. Vatican II changed all that. Gone was the Latin mass and new ways of doing things were being introduced. The Ecumenical Movement in the Catholic Church, among other things, brought what was considered ‘new and daring’ ideas into the Liturgy.

One of the biggest changes was the addition of ‘Folk Mass’ into the Sunday cadence of services. Gone were the hymns accompanied by the ubiquitous pipe organs. In their place were several of the younger parishioners strumming acoustic guitars and belting out Kumbaya and other quasi-religious folk tunes. All in all, it was rather tepid although it did improve the attendance numbers of the young in the parishes.

My wife and I moved from Long Island to Greenpoint, Brooklyn after we were married. Soon after, our new neighbors invited us to attend a service at their church. They, like us, were raised Catholic and told us about the wonderful services at their church which was just a few blocks away. What I did not know is that the church, Christ Tabernacle, was part of the Brooklyn Tabernacle family of churches. The main church is probably best known for its choir: The Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir. They have recorded numerous albums and CDs, winning five Dove Awards and six Grammy Awards.

At the time, the main choir in Brooklyn consisted of a number of singers from the main church as well as singers from Christ Tabernacle and the other churches in the fold. Christ Tabernacle’s music ministry was led by a Julliard-trained pianist and consisted of professional NYC musicians. The choir was about 100 strong and was well rehearsed. The sound system was state of the art and the people that manned it were professional sound engineers.

The performance that day was incredible. You left with the overwhelming desire to go back and hear it again and again. In between the musical offerings were various ‘words’, or sermons, first by elders and then by the pastor. These consisted of expositions of various passages of scripture all centering around a common theme for that Sunday with each followed by one or two songs by the choir. After the pastor’s sermon four to five rousing numbers by the choir ended the service.

The best musical experience I had had up until that time was seeing the Rolling Stones live in West Berlin in 1982. This was just as moving.

The desire to hear more of that music was the driving force that kicked off a two-year stint of me and my young family attending that church. For a brief while I played bass during the morning service and got to know the musicians and choir members well.

As time went on and I read the scriptures for insight, doctrinal issues started to rear its ugly head. Questions directed to church leaders about different interpretations of scripture were met with, “This is what we believe. If this is not what you believe you are welcome to find another church.”

This presented a dilemma. Finding a church that aligns more with one’s reading of scripture is easy; walking away from that music was not so easy. There were a number of people who stayed in the church for exactly that reason: for the music they would hear every Sunday. Most would attend both the morning and evening services. It wasn’t the gospel or the various ministries doing ‘the Lord’s work’ that kept them there; it was the music.

Not soon after we stopped attending Christ Tabernacle we moved to North Carolina, a place which has been described by some as the buckle of the Bible Belt. Over the past two decades, I have seen the

Continued on p 13
complexion of religion change from the traditional Baptist churches that dotted the landscape to the new mega-churches. I’ve seen these mega-churches grow in number and watched friends who attended the old fashion Baptist churches leave them and start attending these new houses of worship.

A few of the larger traditional churches saw the writing on the wall and, like the Catholic Church decades earlier, yielded to the modern trends and began having services with a worship band and professional sound systems. In the local music paper you will always see advertisements for musicians to join these worship bands interspersed with the regular ads by secular bands looking for musicians.

These days, if you are looking to open a church, music is what is going to get people in the doors and music, more than anything else, is going to keep them there.

Richard Lawrence
Contributor

There was a preacher who fell in the ocean and he couldn’t swim. When a boat came by, the captain yelled, “Do you need help, sir?” The preacher calmly said “No, God will save me.” A little later, another boat came by and a fisherman asked, “Hey, do you need help?” The preacher replied again, “No God will save me.” Eventually the preacher drowned & went to heaven. The preacher asked God, “Why didn’t you save me?” God replied, “Fool, I sent you two boats!”

Where do you think this is? (Clue: it’s a town in the Middle East...)

- The mayor, when asked if the town contained any gay people, said, “We have no such thing. If you mean what I think you mean, then no. Thank God, this city is holy and pure.”
- An eight year old girl was spat upon and called a “whore” by an outraged crowd of local men while she was simply trying to walk to school.
- A woman on a bus, who was sitting with her children, was asked to move to the back in order to maintain segregation of the sexes. This led to rioting by local supporters of segregation who smashed the windows of several occupied buses with hammers.

This disturbing series of events took place in Beit Shemesh, a town in central Israel that happens to be mentioned in the Bible. If you guessed that you were hearing about Islam, don’t be too hard on yourself. The media in the West has provided an endless series of examples of this type of affront to human decency linked either with Islamic regimes or Islamofascist political-military groups operating within states with weak central governments. But the example of Beit Shemesh, which is under the local influence of “Ultra Orthodox” Jews, is a reminder that the three Abrahamic religions differ only in circumstance, not in essential character.

Christianity, Islam, and Judaism all elevate scriptural authority over human judgment; all seek to control women and closely define their permissible roles (which control is rooted in a fear and revulsion toward female sexuality); commonly recommend mistreating children; and constantly seek to expand their authority and control beyond the temple and private home into public life, politics, and civil society, even where they are formally forbidden from doing so. In other words, to impose their insalubrious beliefs upon everyone around them.

Right now we associate Muslims with blowing up things, but Christianity had its thousand year reign of terror, and a large segment of the Jewish world embraced terrorism associated with the Zionist movement during and after WWII. Some of these Zionist terrorists are still considered heroes in Israel, where

Continued on p 14
they were elected or appointed to high office.

Of course, many regard the character of the Israeli governance of the Occupied Territories to be a form of terrorism, and the acknowledged use by Israel of such tactics as collective punishment gives force to this point of view. But at least the Palestinians are treated more humanely than when they were under Arab supervision.

Any of the Abrahamic cults are extremely dangerous when not domesticated by a civil society with a strong central government and a cultural commitment to human rights. The “Christian world” no longer tolerates unbridled Christianity. Its fangs filed down, its claws clipped, it is confined to its empty, echoing cathedrals.

Judaism never had a chance to unleash the force of its jealous, vicious god upon the world. Its extremism is confined to relatively insular Orthodox communities, the government of Israel, while uneasily tolerating much of the antics of the Haredim within its borders, obviously places a far higher priority on maintaining sane relations with some of the secular, responsible governments around the world.

Islam seems to be a problem not because it is worse in any essential way than the other two peas in the Abrahamic pod but, because it finds itself, at this historical moment, with the ability to express and enforce its beliefs. One would like to say that this will blow over in a century or so, except that we now have weapons of mass destruction, and imagine in what condition the human species might be in now if the Crusaders had nuclear devices... We must be ever vigilant, because threats to secular authority come from all directions.

In the USA, where I live, politicians on the right constantly strive to insert Christianity into governance at all levels, into the public schools, the military and the courts. There are plenty of them who still aspire to abolish the teaching of evolution in the public schools, and they periodically, if temporarily, succeed in several of our more backward states. But an equally pernicious threat to human rights has its origin in a misguided liberal impulse toward multiculturalism.

This cowardly, hand-wringing impotence is at its most obscene when it causes those in power to turn their backs on the victims of religious extremism, as part of a confused, masochistic worship of “tolerance.” Recent examples of this pathology can be found in the unwillingness of the New York City government to do much of anything to protect the health and lives of babies who are periodically infected, and sometimes killed, by Rabbis practicing metzitzah b’peh. This is a barbaric circumcision ritual where the Rabbi sucks the blood from the infant’s freshly cut penis with his mouth. Infants are still, today, being abused and infected in this way, because those with the ability to stop this outrage have decided that the yearly sacrifice of a few babies is preferable to offending religious sensibilities.

Those of us fortunate enough to live outside the purview of the Ayatollahs and Mullahs, should, therefore, avoid smugness when we regard the medieval barbarism of the Muslim world. We refrain from stoning adulteresses to death because Judeo-Christianity is fundamentally more humane than Islam, but because we’ve put our religions in a box and our Enlightened political culture and institutions stand guard over that box.

While we help our Muslim brothers and sisters to build their boxes, we should keep an eye on our own, because the Priests and Rabbis will never stop trying to break out...
ATHEIST ALLIANCE INTERNATIONAL’S

★★★★ FREE THINKING HERO ★★★★

James Randi

The world lost The Amazing James Randi on October 20, 2020, aged 92. It may seem odd to eulogize a professional deceiver, but magicians deceive overtly; we know they are performing tricks for entertainment, and James Randi was one of the best. His understanding of the art of illusion turned into a lifelong mission to reveal those who were personally benefiting by falsely claiming to possess miraculous abilities. Many cheats were exposed under the glare of his spotlight, one of the most public instances featured the spoon bender Uri Geller. Uri copped out of Randi’s challenge to bend the spoon he offered him on a TV chat show saying that his powers had suddenly and mysteriously stopped working. Truth was Geller knew he hadn’t prepared that spoon himself beforehand.

Randi devoted many years to rooting out charlatans who were dishonestly making fortunes by milking the gullible. One major success was the exposing of televangelist Peter Popoff who falsely claimed that God gave him the names, addresses and ailments of audience members during religious services so that he could ‘cure’ them by faith healing. Randi revealed that the information was actually provided by Popoff’s wife on a radio link to an earpiece.

Comedian Robin Ince recalls, “One moment that has always stayed with me from when I interviewed him at The Amazing Meeting was the way his voice cracked as he told the story of Peter Popoff. Popoff was a “preacher” who pretended god told him who was in the audience, where they lived and what was wrong with them. The voice of God was actually the voice of Popoff’s wife. His ‘gift from god’ was actually a gift from a high end electrical store that was popped in his ear. I don’t know how many times Randi had told that story, but as he recalled what he heard when his team tapped into the Popoff frequency, the emotion was still there. Not only were they scamming the audience, they were mocking them and laughing at them. Some may see Randi as a smart Alec, but at that moment, I saw a deep humanity that drove him to debunk the cruel hucksters and faith healers.”

In 1964, Randi issued the first version of The One Million Dollar Paranormal Challenge: an offer to pay out one million U.S. dollars to anyone who could demonstrate a supernatural or paranormal ability under agreed-upon scientific testing criteria. Over a thousand people applied to take it, but none have been successful.

Randi was the co-founder of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI), and also founded the James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF). These foundations continue to make grants to non-profit groups that encourage critical thinking and a fact-based world view.

We are forever indebted to James for the expression “woo-woo”, which has been adopted by the scientific community as the blanket term for paranormal, occult, and supernatural claims.

John Richards
Publications
Director AAI
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/

Do you have the write stuff?

Would you like to write for Secular World Magazine or our Website?
Send submissions to: 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/