

The Atheist

February 1998

Defining Atheism Series

It seems that religious people are happy to define us in ways that suit them. Many of us have different opinions on exactly what it means to be an Atheist. In order to stimulate intelligent conversation amongst ourselves, we thought it might be a good idea to let ACA members get on a soapbox and expound their views. If your complex personal philosophy that took years to arrive at can be compressed onto a single page, we would be glad to hear from you. Send your thoughts, or comments, to John Koonz at koonz@tenet.edu.

Atheism Defined

The word atheism means “without god” (fr Greek a + theos [fr Sanskrit dyaus]), or more broadly “without supernaturalism.” No UFOs, channeling, telekinesis, e.s.p., remote viewing, ghosts, or ouija boards. Must we lose all the fun things? Are fantasy and imagination denied to atheists?

Hardly. Material realism is the cornucopia from which arise music, mathematical theory, and every other creative human endeavor. It is the opposite of theism, or religion, which is the catalepsy that freezes the human in his tracks, prepares him for death, and frightens him into such bogus escapes as spirituality and reincarnation.

But does atheism not prescribe anything positive? Recently an ACLU official asked me why, beyond state/church separation cases, she should join an atheist organization. I mentioned Madalyn O’Hair’s reasons, and she replied, “If you were O’Hair’s p.r. person, she should have fired you.” She wanted me to proselytize, to convert her to atheism, assuming that it was just another religion. In my view, it is not. It is a very basic way of approaching life, not a program for living it.

The implications of simple atheism are enormous. O’Hair put it well: “If you can be made to believe that you are going to a heaven when you die, you will be willing to spend your life in a slum. If you can be made to believe that you have a life after death, you can be made to believe that you ought to die for your country in some fool senseless war.”

Because it is not a program, there cannot be one official atheist spokesperson, any more than there can be official atheist positions. We might beware of anyone who claims otherwise. In my life, atheism has meant to live independently, to prepare my family to be self-reliant. This has entailed home birth, home schooling, independent scholarship in my work, and a generally anti-statist approach to the legal, medical, military, religious, and educational establishments. Although a maverick, I have learned the value of cooperation with like-minded persons. I would not expect other atheists to follow that pattern, since abilities and circumstances differ.

Atheists frequently disagree among themselves. My friend Frank Zindler recently slammed home schooling in the *American Atheist*, writing that some parents lack qualification to be teachers, and that it has been a religious movement. He does not know that home schooling has historically been an atheist movement, from its origin in the notions of Nobel-prizewinning atheist George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), mentor of atheist Alexander Sutherland Neill (1883–1973), founder of Summerhill School and mentor of John Caldwell Holt (1923–1985), mentor of my family and founder of the home schooling movement in America, who was also an atheist. My name has found its way into at least as many “Who’s Whos” as Frank’s, so I dare remind him that learning is far more important than teaching; and as to qualifications to teach, I have but one: I care for my children.

Atheists are essentially individualists, with all that this implies.

—David L. Kent

Book Review

As soon as I read the back cover, I knew I was going to enjoy reading James Randi’s *The Mask of Nostradamus*. For the inside flap, Carl Sagan had written; “We may disagree with Randi on specific points, but we ignore him at our peril.” Randi’s writing tends to pack a bigger punch than Sagan’s. I have come to really enjoy Randi’s no-holds-barred approach to investigating crackpots and frauds. In *The Mask of Nostradamus*, Randi turns his critical eye to the writings of Michel de Notredame, the famous 16th-century prophet.

Randi begins by telling about the life of Michel de Notredame. In doing so, he includes some interesting details about 16th-century politics. It seems that the outwardly Roman Catholic Nostradamus, as he chose to be called, had some secret Protestant leanings. Nostradamus was a shrewd man, however, and managed to avoid the wrath of a Holy Inquisition that tended to frown upon both divination and Calvinism. Interestingly, many influential and high-ranking people within the Church placed a great deal of faith in astrology and other forms of divination. I found this amusing, given the extent to which modern Christians despise such activities.

Randi goes on to list six types of verses found in Nostradamus' prophetic quatrains. For example, type Q3K are supposed to have predicted the future but, in fact, only tell us of things that happened before the quatrain was written. Next, he examines ten famous Nostradamian verses. In each case, Randi can provide a much more parsimonious explanation than any given by true believers in prophecy.

I was disappointed that Randi did not provide the rational explanations for more quatrains. Every year, my students bring up the subject of Nostradamus, usually in response to some tabloid headline. I wish I knew more about each one. Of course that would require inordinate amounts of research time, and the true believers would not be convinced anyway.

As we approach the totally arbitrary millennium, we can expect to hear many references to Nostradamus. As atheists, the best thing we can do is arm ourselves with some knowledge, and speak out whenever possible. In my science classes, the end of the world is a perennial topic of conversation. A surprising number of kids are truly frightened that the end is very near. Unfortunately, these kids view Nostradamian predictions as an independent confirmation of what their fundamentalist preachers are telling them.

—John Koonz

The Mask of Nostradamus by James Randi. Published by Charles Scribner's Sons Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990. (This book is also listed in the Prometheus Books catalog.)

An Open Letter to the Board of Directors

Due to recent changes made which have gone against consensus of the board in session, or rules made at the incorporation of the Atheist Community of Austin, such as: replacement of board members without publication or notification of elections or effective dates, changes of venue for board meetings, changes of times for board meetings, and failure of notification of board members or late notification, I request that the board discuss with proper notification to all members beforehand the need for a mechanism by which votes can be taken, recorded, and the results published and posted with the effect of law within the Atheist Community of Austin, and that officers and board members be bound to such formal decisions and not have the power to make changes without further action of the board.

I would also like to get a list of all the present board members; something I have tried and failed to do several times.

A sample resolution:

Be it resolved by the board of the Atheist Community of Austin that at the request of any board member the consensus style of decision making will be abandoned and a formal vote will be taken with at least two weeks notification beforehand to all board members. Verbal request at a regular board meeting is sufficient to effect this policy or written request to both co-chairpersons and the treasurer by certified post will also suffice.

The results of such votes will be published and posted so that all members will be notified and will become law within the Atheist Community of Austin at the time the votes are counted unless some other provision is made in the motion voted on.

Clearly there are other issues pertaining to this that need deciding. Should Robert's Rule of Order apply? Timelines for publication of results?

The board should make an inspection of the rules of incorporation and the issue of precedence, and how such changes are provided for in the Atheist Community of Austin should be considered. We are overdue to consider this matter which was shelved at the meetings following our incorporation last year.

Respectfully,
John M. Dolph

(These issues were discussed at a meeting of the board on February 8. It was agreed that we have not been communicating

efficiently, and John Dolph has kindly volunteered to serve as interim secretary until the next scheduled election to help us with this problem.—Ed.)

The Atheist Experience

The Atheist Experience cable access television show got off to a great start on Sunday, January 11. Ray Blevins, Joe Zamecki, and Don Rhoades did a fantastic job fielding questions from curious viewers. Several callers complimented our hosts on their calm, professional deportment. It is truly an honor to be part of an organization that shines such a bright light on atheism.

The mission statement for the show is: To promote the Atheist Community of Austin by providing an educational format for Atheist views.

“The Atheist Experience” needs your help. If you would like to appear on the show, or are interested in helping in any way, please contact Ray Blevins or Kellen Von Houser. “The Atheist Experience” now airs live every Sunday from 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. on cable channel 16.

Got the Munchies?

On the way back from Padre Island I saw a sign for a “Christian Restaurant.” I was driving a van full of screaming junior high kids at 70 mph, so I didn’t get a really good look at the place. I am still curious, though. In what sense is this restaurant a “Christian Restaurant”? Does it serve the kind of food eaten exclusively by Christians? If so, exactly what food would that be, and how is it different from the food eaten by atheists?

Or, does this restaurant actually cook Christians? If so, how would a customer order a meal? Would it be possible to get a Southern Baptist over-easy with a side of Catholic (hold the transubstantiated Eucharist stuffing)? Do they have a buffet?

Or, does this restaurant only serve Christians? Is it run by Christians that don’t want Infidels, Buddhists, Jews, and other such people to buy their products? Does that make much business sense?

I saw the sign on the westbound side of Highway 358 in Corpus Christi (where else, right?). If you know anything about this, please write. —John Koonz

Alabama Group Denies God on Steps of State Capitol

A sign denying the existence of God was placed on the steps of the Alabama state capitol in December, the latest turn in a war of words over the exercise of religion in public places. “There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell,” said the sign by the Alabama Freethought Association, a group of atheists, agnostics, and secular humanists. “There is only our natural world. Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds,” it said. The sign was left at the foot of the Capitol steps opposite a nativity scene set up by the Association for Judeo-Christian Values, a religious rights organization. Members of the secular group said they were reacting to the nativity scene, which had been placed there in response to a U.S. District Court injunction on October 29 against school-sponsored religious activities in DeKalb County. Governor Fob James took part in the rally against the injunction and strongly criticized the court decision. The governor had said other religious expressions would be allowed on the grounds of the state capitol, but he declined comment on the atheists’ actions. Freethought Association spokesperson Adam Butler said the group wanted to ensure equal access was granted to the capitol grounds for supporters of all outlooks, religious or secular. “If during the next few weeks we are indeed given equal access and our sign is allowed to stay, then we do not oppose the nativity scene’s presence here, at least not from a legal standpoint,” he said. The Freethought Association was one of the plaintiffs in an American Civil Liberties Union case against Etowah County Circuit Judge Roy Moore, who was sued last year for displaying the Ten Commandments on the wall of his courtroom.

—AOL News, Reuters

Leave the matter of religion to the family altar, the church, and the private schools, supported entirely by private contributions. Keep the church and the state forever separated. —Ulysses S. Grant

Announcements

Blood Drive ACA will sponsor a blood drive sometime around the first Sunday after the first full moon following the spring equinox. Arrangements are being made to establish an ACA blood bank account should one of us ever need blood. More details on this later.

Lecture Series We are hosting a guest speaker on the first Sunday of every month. Lectures will be held at the Furr's Cafeteria in Northcross Mall from 11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. A question and answer session will follow. Admission is free. On March 1, Texas Middle School Science teacher John Koonz will speak on "Teaching Evolution in the Public Schools."

For more information about any of these coming events, call (512) 371-2911 or e-mail atheist@atheist-community.org