

# OK! ATHÉE OKIE

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## STRONG VS. WEAK FORMS OF ATHEISM

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A common argument made against atheism is that it is an irrational position because no one can be certain that God does *not* exist. This argument is fraught with deep philosophical problems, but this article is directed to the lay reader, and so I will attempt to keep technical jargon to a minimum.

Typically, this problem has arisen from a misunderstanding of what an atheist really is. Bertrand Russell, a skeptical philosopher who was prominent in the early to mid-twentieth century, once stated that: "An atheist, like a Christian, holds that we *can* know whether or not there is a God." The modern variant of this has been a general assumption by many people that an atheist is someone who claims to know that God doesn't exist.

If we take into consideration that in common parlance, to know something generally means to rationally believe it, it would make sense for the average person to assume that this is what an atheist is, and I would agree.

The assumption accompanying this one, with which I do not agree, is that *certainty* is required to hold a rational belief. I think this is the sticking point between weak and strong atheists.

The response of weak atheists, those who neither claim that God exists *or* does not exist

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is to perceive this general attack on atheism as substantive. They believe that certainty really is required for someone to know that God does not exist, but they remain atheists inasmuch as they do not believe in God. The position of the weak atheist is often called *agnosticism*, and I think the terms are practically interchangeable.

Strong atheists, by contrast, deny that certainty is required to know something. They point to the fact that people who believe certainty is required to know something have many uncertain beliefs, such as the belief that their car will start whenever they turn the key. Since we all know it is possible that, for various reasons, a car might *not* start, people cannot be absolutely certain that their car *will* start. But we do not therefore assume that we cannot know whether our car will start on some given occasion – it is still generally assumed to be entirely rational for a person to expect their car to start under normal circumstances.

If certainty is not required for someone to have knowledge, as the strong atheist believes, then it can be possible to know that God does not exist. The strong atheist has seen no evidence of God, and there is a dearth of convincing theistic arguments. Given this, the strong atheist can *know* that God does not exist, in much the same way as most everyone knows that the Loch Ness Monster does not exist.

# CHURCH MEMORY & RECONCILIATION

FORMER AND FUTURE FOIBLES OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH – [leonids@OklahomaAtheists.org](mailto:leonids@OklahomaAtheists.org)

In its 2000 apologia, “Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past,” Vatican officials reiterated the Vatican II official proclamation that Christ and the Church are unified, Christ being the “spotless bride of the spotless lamb.” Christ has joined himself with the Roman Catholic Church, the proclamation goes, and continuously cares for her as he would for his own body, calling himself the bridegroom (i.e., the head or *ex persona captis*) and coining the Church the bride (i.e., the body or *ex persona corporis*). If that’s not confusing enough, whether it is the head or the body speaking, Christ speaks. They are two, yet (mysteriously) one.

Prepared by the International Theological Commission, the document—a belated response to worldwide pressure to address its two millennia of wrongdoing—was released to set the stage for the Church’s “Request for Forgiveness” theme day on March 12, 2000, a day on which apologies from Roman Catholic pulpits the world over issued forth. Pope John Paul II can add “Memory and Reconciliation” and an updated exorcism guide to the Vatican’s list of recent publications – the latter despite the fact that the his most recent attempt at exorcism failed to vanquish the forces of Satan.

The subtitle of the document “The Church and Faults of the Past” would seem to imply that the commission was somehow apologizing (rather than engaging in apologetics) on behalf the Catholic Church. This initial impression is misleading, however, as the document places blame squarely upon the Church’s “sons and daughters,” and would have us believe that the Church, pure as a crystal clear blue stream, acts with impunity: “From a theological point of view, Vatican II distinguishes between the indefectible fidelity of the Church and the weaknesses of her members, clergy or laity, yesterday and today.” But what is the Church if not its “sons and daughters” *en masse*? Institutions can be viewed as merely the collective actions of its members over time and thus are only as good or bad as the members themselves. Why even make the distinction?

The equivocal phrasings threaded into “Memory and Reconciliation” carry all the moral authority of an alcoholic seeking forgiveness on the extenuating grounds that he was drunk when committing his crimes. Over two dozen times, actual responsibility for any wrongdoing is laid not at the feet of the Church, but its “sons and daughters,” in contravention to the Vatican Council’s definition of the Church as the whole “people of God.” One must wonder if, for the sake of consistency, the Church flatly rejects praise for laudatory actions on the grounds that credit belongs solely to its “sons and daughters.”

The Church endeavors to apologize on behalf of its recalcitrant children, to “express profound regret for the weaknesses of so many of her sons and daughters,” while deifying itself in the document, “[the Church] always acknowledges as her own her sinful sons and daughters...in really taking upon herself the sin of those whom she has generated in Baptism. This is analogous to the way Christ Jesus took on the sin of the world.” This constant distinction between “the Church” and its erring “sons and daughters,” runs counter to the Vatican Council’s definition of the Church as the whole “people of God.”

Not only does the Vatican shed crocodile tears, but also the language it uses in “Memory and Reconciliation” grossly downplays the gravity of the crimes committed by the Church. In an apparent reference to the instructions of church leaders and councils which resulted in the immolation of innumerable Jews, in exiling them from their homelands, and in forcing them into

ghettos, the document says: “The hostility and wariness of numerous Christians toward Jews over the course of time is a painful historic fact.” In a homily delivered on the forgiveness theme, Pope John Paul II referred to “attitudes of mistrust and hostility assumed towards followers of other religions.” That’s a stupendous understatement. Torture, imprisonment of scientists and philosophers, wars of extermination against the likes of the Cathars, Templars, and other excommunicated Christian groups become, in the deluded words of the pope, a product of “the use of violence that some have committed in the service of truth.” What truth? The claim that heretics, Jews and witches are possessed by demons? Similarly, the document euphemistically refers “to intolerance and even the use of force in the service of truth” and the “lack of discernment by many Christians in situations where basic human rights were violated.”

Saint Cyril and the monks who burned the great Library at Alexandria, destroying 600,000 volumes of knowledge of the ancient world, are overlooked. Where does Pope Innocent III stand? In 1209, he marshaled an army to drive the devil out of the Albigensians in France. When asked how the heretics should be disposed, he said something to the effect of, “Kill them all; God will sort them out.” The 13th century saw the slaughter of an estimated million people in God’s name. No mention of the hundreds of thousands or even, by some estimates, millions of women burned alive as witches during a centuries long span in which popes dispatched inquisitors across Europe to perfunctorily judge the hapless accused. No mention of the wars following the Protestant Reformation. No mention of the extermination of the French Huguenots—Protestants forced to flee France in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. After a 1536 General Edict urged extermination of the Huguenots, years of bloodshed followed, culminating in the devastating French Wars of Religion [1562-1598] and including the atrocious St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre [1572].

The document does not address any specific action or inaction taken by the Church during the Nazi Holocaust. How could its authors in good faith downplay the Holocaust? (This is especially troubling when considering that the Holocaust was born of the Church’s vilification of Jews as “Christ killers.”) Monsignor Tiso, head of the Slovak State, for example, delivered the first trainload of Jews to Auschwitz. Surely the commission could have apologized for the so-called “Vatican ratlines”—the Vatican’s systematic issuing of shelter, money, transport and phony passports to fleeing Nazi leaders seeking to escape prosecution for war crimes. What about the Vatican’s role in sequestering gold seized from Jews in Eastern Europe? Compounding this denial of responsibility, the controversial Pope Pius XII was under consideration by the Church for beatification. Then there’s the case of Cardinal Aloysius Stepinac. During World War II, Stepinac, then archbishop of Zagreb, served as liaison between the Vatican and various fascist political parties, most notably the Croatian terrorist group, Ustasha. In 1941, the Ustashi played a leading role in the formation of Hitler’s puppet state in Croatia. The brutal campaigns swiftly organized against Croatian Jews, Roma, and Serbs helped set the stage for Nazi extermination programs. The archbishop’s diary documents his admiration for the murderous Croatian leader Ante Pavelic, an admiration that continued even after he learned of Pavelic’s genocidal plans. Stepinac’s pastoral letters praise the fascist government, and he called for the cooperation of all Catholics with the fascists. In 1998, John Paul II beatified Stepinac. What on earth are the Church’s standards for beatification? Not only did the Church flirt with fascism, but also the Vatican entered into a deal with Nazi Germany over the notorious *Kirchensteuer* (or “church tax”). A tax on income, in 1943 alone the *Kirchensteuer* directed \$100 million into the coffers of the Vatican.

“Memory and Reconciliation” omits any present-day wrongdoing, so it’s possible that centuries hence, another pope will seek forgiveness of the Church’s “sons and daughters” of today. Nor does the document apologize for any binding Church statements or *Magisterium*, whether extraordinary, i.e., infallible, or ordinary, i.e., non-infallible. The Church has been known to reverse its teachings—it once decreed that inoculating children against disease thwarted God’s will, but it has backed off that position.

The Vatican congratulates itself over “the unconditional trust in the power of Truth which the Pope has shown has met with a generally favorable reception.” Now *that’s* a novel idea!—“trust in the power of Truth.” The self-serving document is marred not only by efforts to evade responsibility, but by galling self-praise:

In this perspective, the actions undertaken by the Holy Father, and those requested by him, regarding the faults of the past have an exemplary and prophetic value for religions as much as for governments and nations, beyond being of value to the Catholic Church...

Vatican officials lay a claim to newfound credibility for recognizing its past wrongdoing, an act analogous in scope to claiming newfound credibility for recognizing the Atlantic Ocean:

Many have noted the increased credibility of ecclesial pronouncements that has resulted from this way of acting...they strengthen her credibility...such acts can increase the credibility of the Christian message.

Through a Concordant and Treaty entered into with the papacy, Benito Mussolini established what is today known as Vatican City, investing in it special financial and political privileges. The Roman Catholic Church has reaped

enormous profits from this arrangement, and today it enjoys the status of being recognized the world over as both a religion and a sovereign monarchical nation-state, occupying a powerful position in international bodies under its “Holy See”—its political wing. Like any other nation-state, it must learn to accept responsibility for its actions, whether blame rests academically with the institution or academically with the members thereof. In “Memory and Reconciliation,” the Vatican has shown once again that it refuses to adopt that course.

## **Oklahoma Atheists (OKC) Events Calendar - Jan 2003**

Jan 8<sup>th</sup> – Book Club @ [Borders](#) (7:06 pm)  
Reading: R.G. Ingersoll’s “[The Gods](#)”

Jan 21<sup>st</sup> – IAMD @ [Location TBA](#) (7:06 pm)  
See [atheists.meetup.com](#) for info. This is a first for us and should prove interesting.

Jan 31<sup>st</sup> – Dining out @ [Galileo's](#) (7:06 pm)  
Monthly chill-out time. Good food, good drinks, good people. Be there or miss out!

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