

OK|ATHÉE OKIE

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THERE'S NO GOLD IN THEM THAR HILLS

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What folly 'tis to hazard life for ill.
—Shakespeare

Is it incumbent upon us unbelievers to act as whistle-blowers? Ought we confront religious believers known to us, especially those who sacrifice excessively in service of superstitions, squandering time, energy, and resources to do “god’s work?” When we acquiesce to religious correctness, we help society reinforce their fanatical devotion, their addiction to religion. Because it is erroneously regarded as proof of their integrity, their addiction wins them widespread admiration. By contrast, the addiction of illicit drug abusers wins them widespread scorn and much worse.

“Working for God on earth does not pay much, but His retirement plan is out of this world,” declares a chain email in vogue purporting to honor the “positive side of life.” That retirement plan is insolvent: the reward for martyrdom and self-sacrifice on behalf of the divine is oblivion. Pascal’s amoral wager is double-edged. Choosing from among the many gods people have invented down the ages, religious believers are never certain the correct gods were selected for them, that theirs is the one true faith. Gods willing to damn heretics are gods those willing to damn

supplicants dedicated to false gods. Why then should not everyone conduct their lives as if no gods and no afterlife exist?

With naïve flock members in their thrall, many religious leaders have used charities as facades to lure the downtrodden to their sects. “In the rural backwaters and isolated tribal hamlets of countries like India, missionaries routinely peddle the fruits of generosity—food and medicine—as ‘inducements’ for conversion to Christianity,” writes Stephan R. Welch in the February/March 2004 issue of *Free Inquiry*. Exploiting charitable impulses, religious leaders convince validation-seeking followers they owe their compassion to deities, and that their selflessness will be repaid manifold...upon their deaths (meanwhile, they must be content with a divine IOU). But altruism needs no deities, no empty promises of salvation and eternal bliss. Our species owes its very existence to our inclination to cooperate. Accordingly, our brains react as though they wish to make cooperation intrinsically delightful: when we cooperate, our brains reward us with blood flow to our pleasure pathways—areas rich in neurons responsive to dopamine, the neurotransmitter at the center of compulsive behaviors. Just as our brains intrinsically reward civility, they punish incivility, because when we act disharmoniously we risk social isolation. When we risk social isolation—a potentially life-threatening state—our brains sound an alarm: emotional pain stimulates the same region of the brain stimulated by physical pain.

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Setting out to do their “god’s work,” quixotic religious believers cannot rely on their leaders to steer them clear of danger. In the wake of missionary murders in Yemen, Timothy Tennett, director of missions programs at Gordon–Conwell Theological Seminary (South Hamilton, Mass.), told Jeffrey McDonald of the *Christian Science Monitor*, “Somebody is going to have to risk their life to bring the Gospel to the Yemenites.” What a touching display of concern for human life by this Pied Piper! Money can compel some church leaders to take into account the loss of life. “After Sept. 11, 2001, Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., stopped sending student interns to mission fields in Pakistan, Lebanon, and Muslim–majority areas of India,” according to McDonald. “Recent murders mean that policy will stay in place indefinitely,” said Don Fanning, director of the university’s Center for Global Ministry, as quoted by McDonald. “That’s kind of a practical response concerning the liability of the university.” Readers will be moved to tears by Fanning’s afterthought: “To push gullible kids into harm’s way isn’t a good idea, anyway.”

We should also resolve to rescue religious devotees for their personal safety. Abnegating their duty to protect themselves and their loved ones Religious believers may discount imminent threats to their safety, deluding themselves with the conviction that vigilant guardian angels and deities continuously watch their backs. Religious abusers of authority prey on the naïve presumption that piety *ipso facto* confers moral rectitude, an unfounded presumption that is not only demonstrably false but also hazardous. Donning religious garb as sheep’s clothes, for centuries the moral equivalent of lecherous wolves have entered the priesthood and raped women and children with impunity. “The demonic seducers of women were labeled incubi; of men, succubi,” the late Carl Sagan wrote in *The Demon-Haunted World* (Random House, 1996). “There are cases in which nuns reported, in some befuddlement, a striking resemblance between the incubus and the priest–confessor, or the bishop, and awoke the next morning, as one fifteenth–century chronicler put it, to ‘find themselves polluted just as if they had commingled with a man.’” Lulled into a false sense of security, some religious believers drop their moral guards in the presence of depraved pious con artists, whom they believe are above reproach.

When we seek to sway the religious faithful, we seek what can be tantamount to asking them to invalidate a part of their identity, to turn their backs on their family, friends and cherished ideals. In the face of our unassailable arguments, the faithful cling more tightly to their blind faith, shunning reason. Our professed disbelief reviving their suppressed doubts, they may even grudgingly concede that their religious stance is logically untenable and fall back on espousing faith for its own sake.

Our primary goal being to encourage them to reconsider their faith, we must remember we needn't summarily disabuse the devout of their supernatural illusions; we need only inspire them to question the source of their faith. Their faith will be shaken when they come to terms with the fact that it derives from lifelong indoctrination. Over time, they can come to their senses and reject their faith as naïve childhood delusions, with our telling them no gods exist being one of many catalysts. Since millions have disavowed their received dogma, we don't face insurmountable odds.

We should say to religious believers that they could challenge themselves to do better than to be satisfied wearing blinders, they can challenge themselves to reach their own conclusions. It's not the fault of those steeped in faith at an early age that they were duped—lacking mature reasoning capacities, children make easy prey for doctrinaires. But as self-respecting and responsible adults, they should discard their belief in the supernatural just as they outgrew Santa Claus.

On inspection, our moral dilemma unfolds into the moral imperative to resolve to manumit the devout in our lives from further exploitation, to emancipate them from the indignity of credulity. We who have seen religions destroy lives should confront this stubborn dysfunction, just as we would intervene when friends and family members conduct themselves in any other self-destructive ways. Can we in good conscience ignore the plight of those religious addicts who are victims of indoctrination and fear tactics?

Lest they fall prey to other vulturine faiths, we must encourage new apostates to think more critically. We should praise the virtues of superstition-free living, introducing them to the liberation attending the repudiation of received dogma and the appreciation of the higher ideals offered by secular rationalist values. When we deliver the angst-inducing news that we are mortals inhabiting an indifferent universe, we can help new apostates cope with this harsh reality. We should tell them the myth of heaven makes life superfluous, giving people reasons to die, *not* reasons to live. We should speak of the life-affirming pleasures of free inquiry and discovery. We should tell them this: Our genes are copies of rugged forerunners that survived, in harsh environments, at least long enough to bring our ancestors to childbearing age; our genetic heritages, our survival instincts, are hundreds of millions of years in the making. For self-preservation, nature endows us with extraordinary resiliency; in the face of adversity, that innate resiliency can see us through. Shouldn't we impart this knowledge to those friends and family members who have much at stake?

Thomas Jefferson on Freethought

“...shake off all the fears of servile prejudices under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal for every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a god because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear. You will naturally examine first the religion of your own country. Read the bible then, as you would read Livy or Tacitus. The testimony of the writer weighs in their favor in one scale, and their not being against the laws of nature does not weigh against them. But those facts in the bible which contradict the laws of nature, must be examined with more care, and under a variety of faces. Here you must recur to the pretensions of the writer to inspiration from god. Examine upon what evidence his pretensions are founded, and whether that evidence is so strong as that [its falsehood] would be more improbable than a change of the laws of nature in the case he relates...

“Do not be frightened from this enquiry by any fear of [its] consequences. If it ends in a belief that there is no god, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in [its] exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you. If you find reason to believe there is a god, a consciousness that you are acting under his eye, and that he approves you, will be a vast additional incitement. If that there be a future state, the hope of a happy existence in that increases the appetite to deserve it; if that Jesus was also a god, you will be comforted by a belief of his aid and love. In fine, I repeat that you must lay aside all prejudice on both sides, and neither believe nor reject any thing because any other person, or description of persons have rejected or believed it. Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable not for the rightness but uprightness of the decision...”

Thomas Jefferson, from a letter to his nephew Peter Carr dated August 10, 1787

June 2004 Freethought Calendar

Jun 10th – Church/state meetup – 8:00 pm

Please vote for your favorite location at

<http://churchandstate.meetup.com>

Jun 15th – Atheists meetup – 8:00 pm

Please vote for your favorite location at

<http://atheists.meetup.com>

Jun 25th – Monthly Dining Out – 7:06 pm

Join us for food, fellowship, & fun at Galileo's Bar & Grill in the Paseo district.

Jun 26th – Agnostics meetup – 1:00 pm

Please vote for your favorite location at

<http://agnostic.meetup.com>



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