

X28 – EXchanging Worldviews, 28:
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EXhibiting and EXemplifying Humanism

Dear: My goal for this chapter is to try to explain the second part of my proposed four-part strategy for handling theists or “true believers” (i.e., those people who behave like little kids who are “real brats”). Again, the four parts are: 1) ridicule them, 2) provide better examples [this chapter], 3) explain to them what they’re doing wrong and how to behave better [the next chapter], and “if they still don’t get it”, then 4) exclude them from cooperative activities [X-30]. Specifically what I want to do in this chapter is to provide you with some illustrations of some examples of how I wish all humans would behave, viz., as humanists.

But before getting to the examples, I want to return to and expand upon an idea that I consider critical, namely, Pindar’s idea that “Custom is King.” I’m sure that his idea is right, and therefore, I’m sure that the most effective way to exterminate the god meme is not *via* laws but by changing customs – which, of course, is an absolutely humongous task. To accomplish that task, it’s necessary to reach essentially everyone “where they live” –not just physically but also mentally.

To change customs in the modern world (even in backward Muslim countries) and during an appropriate time period (which, given the current precarious state of the world, must be measured in, at most, only decades), it’s essential to utilize all facets of “the mass media” (including movies, TV, and the internet). Some examples of the “messages” that I hope the mass media would convey are the following (and within each example, there are actually multiple “messages”):

- The courage and even heroism of so many people, not only to face reality on its own terms but also to do so in spite of pressures to conform to various “social norms” (invariably and authoritatively proclaimed by their societies’ clerics and commonly enforced by their families, acquaintances, social groups, and the “moral majority”),

- The humility and honesty with which so many people have admitted their ignorance, in face of the ignorant arrogance of their persecutors,
- The hideous actions of the persecutors, taken against people in their societies, to preserve the *status quo* – and the power of the clerics, and
- The perseverance of humanists to attempt to help humanity, in many cases regardless of the consequences to themselves.

Thousands of superb examples could be given – and thousands of stories should be told (in books and movies). They would be “the greatest stories ever told”. In this chapter, I’ll give just a few, pathetically brief but (I hope you’ll agree) emotionally stimulating examples. Yet, before I start on the examples, let me repeat some general comments on the direction in which I’m convinced humanity should be “heading”.

As I’ve written before, organized religions certainly aren’t the cause of all humanity’s problems. Even if (or better, “even when”) humanity manages to exterminate the god meme, other serious problems will need to be solved. Yet, I’m also convinced that, if we can exile all supernatural stupidities to the dark ignorance of their origins, if we can replace worship of the gods with exaltation of humanism, then remaining problems will be easier to solve, increasing prospects for worldwide peace and prosperity.

My conviction is based on the progress people have made in the past without any help from any gods. To see what I mean, Dear, please think of some milestones in human evolution: speech, the control of fire, stone-tools, clothing, pottery, stories, drawings, music, the wheel, boats, fishing nets, techniques and tools of agriculture, writing, the theater, binding contracts, systems for promoting justice, and on and on, out to an including the internet. Thereby, humans have taken over from Nature: the evolution of humans is now under human control! And therein, some interconnected prime goals for the entire human system (i.e., humanity) are emerging: extending social justice, expanding peace and prosperity, and thereby, promoting humanity’s intelligent evolution.

And the essence of how to accomplish those interconnected prime goals for humanity seems clear, namely, by each of us doing the best we can. As John Buchan (1875–1940) said in a speech on 12 May 1937: “We can pay our

* Go to other chapters *via*

debts to the past by putting the future in debt to ourselves.” The same idea could be said more forcefully: “To repay your debt to the past, put the future in debt to yourself.” Or maybe rephrase it in a form that I want to put on your grandmother’s tombstone, should I outlive her: “The world is better for her having been here.”

Would that all people would live their lives so that history will judge: “The world is better for their having been here.” And you might agree, Dear, that those who done the most to help human intelligence evolve have been the explorers. Thus, humans have evolved, thus far, by exploring new sounds, new sights, new ways of doing things, new frontiers, new knowledge, new applications of technologies, new methods of governance, and so on. Further, I expect that we’ll continue to evolve by continuing to explore: exploring how our DNA molecules program proteins and control genes, exploring how the brain works, exploring new social arrangements, exploring space, etc. I therefore conclude, Dear, that if you choose to help human intelligence evolve, if history is to judge that the world is better for your having been here, then choose a path of exploration. As an unknown author wrote: “Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”¹

And in horrible contrast to those humans who have pursued the goal of trying to help human intelligence evolve, consider the stupidity of religious “fundamentalists”. Two of their basic assumptions are not only that humans were made by the gods but also that we humans are now at the pinnacle of our evolution! They egotistically conclude that they are “the ultimate” (save for their gods) and that the prime goal is to maintain the *status quo*! What craziness! They follow in the footsteps of the dinosaurs.

As I’ve written before, humans aren’t the descendants of gods. If we work at it, if we intelligently work at the evolution of intelligence, then our descendants will be like gods! We aren’t the descendants of any gods; they will be our progeny! Gods aren’t our ancestors; we’ll be theirs! We weren’t made in God’s image: past gods were made in human imagination, but future gods will evolve from human vision – from the creative application of intelligence. As Bertrand Russell wrote:

¹ Quoted here from a list of quotations assembled by the Josephson Institute of Ethics and posted at the web page <http://www1.aldine.k12.tx.us/employees/Discipline/pdfs/allquotes.pdf>.

A good world needs knowledge, kindness, and courage; it does not need a regretful hankering after the past or a fettering of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago by ignorant men. It needs a fearless outlook and a free intelligence. It needs hope for the future, not looking back all the time toward a past that is dead, which we trust will be far surpassed by the future that our intelligence can create.

And thereby, Dear, and as I've written before, maybe humanity is beginning to envision and pursue a prime goal for this "Human System". Maybe soon we'll be paying homage to a new HI-GOD:

- Helping Intelligence Guide Our Descendants
- Helping Intelligence Generate Our Destiny
- Helping Inventive Genius Obligate Destiny
- Helping Intelligence Go On Developing
- Helping Intelligence Go On – by Doing.

And if you don't like any of those "reverse acronyms" for HI-GOD as the prime goal for humanity, then how about spelling it out: *Let's do our best to help humanity evolve into something better – help our descendants not just survive but thrive!*

That said, let me get back to the plan for this chapter dealing with EXemplifying Humanism. One option I considered was to show you examples of some of the great humanists of the past (the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, the Buddha, Confucius, Democritus, Epicurus, Freud, Gandhi, Hypatia, Ingersoll, and so on, through the rest of the alphabet, out to an including the founder of Stoicism, Zeno of Citium). But whereas I've done some of that already (and will do more in the "excursion" Yx), I thought that maybe I should do something different, namely, to show you a few stories about some modern "little guys": not glorious stories about "humanist heroes of history", but some "gutsy stories" about "little people" with guts. And my decision is derived in large part from the idea that such "gutsy stories" (millions if not billions of them!) provide the best material for telling convincing stories to other "little people" – like the rest of us!

As an otherwise not particularly significant example and because of your own indoctrination, let me start with the following, written by a generous, courageous, and honest ex-Mormon woman, whose name isn't given:²

² Copied from <http://www.exmormon.org/whyift30.htm>.

There are a myriad of different aspects of Mormonism that have affected my life, but I will only touch on one or two of them. Perhaps pointing out some of the things that I have learned over the years will make the lessons easier for others. This is my hope.

My most painful Mormon experience was learning that having faith in something does not necessarily make it true. I will explain. I am 23 years old now, but I was only 12 years old at the time. My aunt was in the late stages of breast cancer. Things looked very grim. She was withering before our eyes. Our family fasted and prayed that she would be saved somehow. It was during this fast that my eldest sister received a “revelation” that if my aunt (who was an inactive member of the Church) started to wear her garments again and became an active member in good standing that she would be healed. My sister immediately called my aunt to tell her the good news. There were a lot of thankful tears of joy and relief. My desperate aunt began wearing her garments and became a model Mormon for as long as her health would allow. We were all sure that her cancer would soon be gone. That did not happen, however. Two or three months later my aunt died. I will never forget my sister’s reaction after my aunt’s death; still with completely blind faith and sincerity, she said, “I wonder why the Lord would tell me that? I just don’t understand.”

I wondered too. The old there-are-just-some-things-the-Lord-doesn’t-mean-for-us-to-understand explanation would not salve over my doubting that time. One thing that I have found over and over in Mormonism is that an explanation or excuse can be divined for just about ANYTHING that doesn’t sit quite right. And if something can’t be explained away, members are told to rely on faith. “If we could explain everything then there would be no faith, and without faith, we couldn’t be tested.” Yes, I’ve heard it all.

There was something reckless and impulsive about telling a dying woman that she would be healed simply because my sister got a feeling that it was true. It’s like letting go of the steering wheel while careening down a busy freeway. Pretty soon there’s going to be a crash, faith or not. I have heard of or been witness to many other instances when blessings that promised healing or Patriarchal Blessings have turned out to be wrong. My great uncle’s Patriarchal Blessing said that he would live to see the second coming of Christ. He died about 30 years ago at the age of 73. (An uninspired Patriarch?)

This is what I mean about an explanation for everything. I would challenge my Mormon friends to think of any potentially faith-shattering experience, and I will give you at least two perfectly acceptable Mormon rebuttals. It is my belief that the Prophet could get up to speak at a General Conference to tell the world that the Church is a big hoax, and at least half of the members would stagger for a moment and then, without skipping a beat, decide that the Prophet must have fallen from God’s favor and was misled.

My own mother has done a lot of extensive studying of Mormonism. She read a lot of books about Joseph Smith and, unable to resolve his lying, conning, and

philandering, concluded that he must have been a fallen prophet. I can only imagine that the alternative (the church isn't true) was too much for her to accept at the time. I can't help but resent the turmoil that my mother and I and so many other people must go through just to find out what an elaborate web of lies they've been stuck in for years and sometimes even a lifetime.

It is my personal opinion that if there is a God, He wants His children to think for themselves and to use their intellect to search for Him in their own special way. I believe there are many different routes back to Him. I do not want a handbook on how to live the perfect life. I want to find out for myself what road I need to take. Strength comes from doing the work and having the courage to forge your own path. I will continue to do just that, using the tools that my loving family, books, and, yes, even the Church, have given me. There is so much wisdom out there that is just within our grasp. It is thrilling for me to imagine all that I have yet to learn.

Within the past year or so I made my final break from the Mormon Church. The information that I gleaned from the Internet, and especially this particular site, has been invaluable in my research. I am so thankful that these resources have been made available to those who are serious about learning the truth about Mormonism.

It's strange and rather disturbing to think that 10 years ago I would have been shocked and afraid of the person I have now become. What I now see as a healthy curiosity, I would have then seen as blasphemous, irreverent, even sinful. I do not "walk by faith" anymore. I walk with honor. I walk with dignity. I walk with what I feel is a full appreciation for this world; something I could never have done with the crippled spirit that I used to have.

Right now I am not sure about the existence of God. This is not a frightening thing to me. If anything, it makes me embrace life even more. And if there is a God, I am not entirely certain that he/she is particularly concerned with human beings. With that in mind, I look at life with new eyes. What a precious gift it is to be here. My heaven is now. I will search for my richness and joy here. I will try to complete myself here. Looking at life in this manner means savoring every morsel... both the bitter and the sweet. It is the struggle to become a whole person, it is the learning, it is the growth, that determines the quality of one's life...

Dear: how I wish you'd think carefully, deeply, and quietly (to yourself) about what that brave woman, that humanist hero, has written for you.

As another example, consider the honor and courage displayed in the following, written by a Mormon man. As is indicated in a note presumably added by a moderator at the referenced forum, "This story is actually a letter that a recent ex-Mormon wrote to his Mormon family."³

³ Copied from <http://www.exmormon.org/whyift67.htm>.

An Open Letter To My Family:

A few days before Christmas, I received a package in the mail from mom and dad. In it was a book and a note from mother. The book was entitled: *Our Search For Happiness*, by M. Russell Ballard. I was asked to read the book, which I did, as I have a great many books. I was asked to ponder the book's message, which I did as I have a great many messages. I read also the note which said to me: "Dad and I anguish daily that you will not be in our family chain throughout eternity unless you come back into the church." I have spent considerable time pondering this message as well.

At first I was angry, too angry, in fact, to read the book and give it a fair chance. It sat on my desk in my studio for several weeks, collecting dust. Now, with the book and note digested and my views formulated, I carefully considered my options: 1) Disappear, 2) Lie, 3) Avoid the issue, [or] 4) Be honest.

As strange as it may seem, option number one held a certain appeal for me. It would be easy enough to do: take an assignment overseas, leave no forwarding address, make no contact. Simply vanish. But, as my wise and beautiful wife pointed out, this would only leave behind a gray cloud of unanswered questions. It would simply be unfair. Therefore, this option was eliminated.

Option number two isn't really possible. It's terribly difficult to live a lie. I know. Therein lies the problem with option two: I've spent enough of my life living a lie to please my parents; I can't do it anymore. Option two was thus eliminated.

Then there was option three. Throughout the whole of my adult life, I have run and hid, side-stepped and avoided, fabricated and lied to avoid upsetting mom and dad. This has been the predominant mode of operation in this and most Mormon families as long as I can remember. There is no open, free exchange of ideas in this family, because it's taboo to upset mom and dad or question the dogmatic *status quo*. You don't share your personal beliefs, fears, doubts, dreams, concepts, theories, discoveries, attitudes, opinions, and views because it will just upset mom and dad. You keep your personal, family, and marital problems locked tightly away from prying eyes until they fester into a cancer that eats away at your will to live, because you don't want to upset mom and dad.

The only time I saw dad truly angry with me was a time I expressed myself about something which made mother cry and I thought he was going to come unglued. So I tucked my tail in and crawled back beneath my stone of silence. And there I have been ever since, because I didn't want to upset mom and dad.

Well, I've had all I'm going to take. I'm sick and tired of sneaking around and hiding in theological closets. I've had a belly full of the deception and dissension within our own ranks. I've grown weary of the expense and trouble of visits home, only to sit in

silence as the suspicious stranger. All I want is what any child wants: To be accepted for who they are and not judged for who they are not. I've had it with guilt being used as a weapon against me, held responsible for the emotional well-being of other adults, and saddled with the repayment of spiritual debts incurred by others, and I'm not going to stand for it any longer. I hereby draw a line in the sand and declare publicly for the record: The emotional blackmail stops here.

Some members of my family believe in their heart and soul they will be forever cut off from me, and nothing I say or do can make them feel any better or any worse. I cannot be shut any further outside than I have been already; so to hell with it. I'm going to spill my guts. Which brings me to option four.

I was raised to be honest and truthful, so for the first time in my life, I'm going to be more honest and truthful with my family than I have ever been. I had hoped to avoid this, but it seems as though I've been backed into a corner and an answer has been demanded of me. The gauntlet has been thrown. Our lack of real communication in this family throughout my life makes this all the more difficult. The longer you put off lancing a boil, the more likely it will explode in your face once you do.

Throughout the body of this text, I will undoubtedly make statements that will anger, trouble, shock, and distress many of you. Indeed, collectively my words will shake this family to its very foundation and then turn it on its head. Ordinarily, I would worry that this paper would drive a wedge between me and my siblings, whom I barely know as it is. But this house is so divided already, I can't see how my free expression could damage us any more, and so, I will press on.

I assure you from the bottom of my heart, it is not my intent to make a personal attack on anyone's character. On the contrary, the judgment of others goes to the very heart of this issue and is one of many problems pervading the very fabric of our family dynamic.

I do not expect, nor is it my intention to persuade anyone to my way of thinking. All I want is to honestly express my views with those I care about the most, without the fear of judgment or reprisal. The fundamental difference drawn along theological lines has fractured this family into two warring camps. For many years each side spent their energies cranking up the volume on their brand of rhetoric, with no one willing to sit at the peace table and communicate. So we fell into an interminable silence. This was because – and yes, I'm going to say it – Mormon doctrine sets no place at the table for outsiders. Mother's statement concerning the state of the family in the hereafter makes this very clear: We are not welcome. This is one of many fundamental problems I have with the LDS church.

That last statement will no doubt be taken personally. It's not because I meant it so. It is difficult for people of devout faith to separate themselves from their spiritual beliefs, and therefore, it would be virtually impossible for me to avoid hurting someone's feelings when talking about the basic tenets of their religion, unless I am

in complete agreement. This is yet another reason why we, as a family, have avoided talking at all costs. But this must be done. Someone must clear the air of our differences, and I guess fate has elected me to be the bad guy. So be it. I was brought into this world with three distinct, and innate talents: Speaking, composing music, and writing. I am the communicator in this family, and apparently, this is the burden I was destined to bear.

On the following pages I will attempt, as clearly and articulately as possible, to detail my beliefs and, if I can, how I arrived at them. I do this only because it has been my experience that members of my family feel a great need to be given explanations for one's belief systems. I do this as a courtesy to you, because you are my family and because I hope that it may spark a flame of trust and understanding, not because I feel that one's spiritual beliefs are anyone else's business. I don't.

From the beginning, it has been obvious to me what mom and dad will think of this, and that is what has troubled me the most. I do not wish to hurt my beloved parents and have in fact, in recent years, tried desperately to express my undying love and respect for both of them through my music. Father, when I composed your anthem, it took me three weeks to record just two and a half bars because I would weep like a child each time I sat down at my piano. The keys have tear stains on them now. Mother, I love you more than words could ever express, and my gratitude for the sacrifices you have made to give me the faculties I need to be a productive member of the world can never be fully repaid. But I am no longer a child. I must be allowed to speak openly and freely.

I do not know what J will think. J has never shared her thoughts with me. I don't know what D will think. I do not know my brother. Frankly, I would be hard pressed to recognize him on the street. I don't know what L will say; however (and I don't know why I believe this) somehow I think deep down inside L knows just how truly dysfunctional this family really is. I don't know what Ke will think, but I imagine her advice to me would have been: Don't send it. L and Ke have never been boat rockers. Km, on the other hand, always used to be but now, I have no idea who she is. Km I think, took option number one.

So it comes down to me and here I will tell you what I think. If you don't feel you can handle this, read no further. This is my testimony.

SPIRITUALITY and RELIGION

“There was a time when religion ruled the world. It is known as the Dark Ages.” (Ruth Hermence Green)

Like most people, my belief systems are not yet fully formed. The belief in a higher order within the universe, and all that that may entail, is a complex issue which has harassed the inner most thoughts of humans since time beginning. We are preoccupied with it because we are preoccupied with our own mortality. Belief systems are designed to alleviate, if not fully eradicate, our fear of death, or even

more ominous, what lies beyond. It is the one, great universal truth: That all human beings are terrified of death. This is the foundation of our instinct to survive. Our belief systems relinquish us of this overwhelmingly oppressive burden so that we can be free to be productive. Without this, we would never have the presence of mind to concentrate on anything else. Let's face it, nothing else can compare. When measured against the Behemoth of death and beyond, the schoolyard bully, or that deadline for the monthly report, takes on a whole new perspective. A belief system and its foundational logic, coupled with a generous dollop of an intangible condiment we call faith, provides us with a sense of completeness, peace, belonging, and purpose within the otherwise chaotic cosmos. This feeling of connectivity provided by what we know and augmented with faith for what we do not know, is spirituality.

As our belief systems grow and become more complicated, we develop rituals. Ritual provides the ballast with which to anchor the intangibles of our beliefs to our mundane, routine lives. Rituals are important for they provide a comfortable procedure with which to focus and cast our faith, and they come in many forms: The lighting of a candle, the turning of a prayer wheel, the laying on of hands. Our beliefs and our rituals make us happy and we wish to share our happiness with others and often ask them to join us. As they do, our new companions require explanations as to the purpose of the rituals we perform and we provide this by composing books of doctrine. And in this manner we create religions.

I believe that spirituality and religion are two entirely different things, neither one being dependent upon, or necessarily associated with, the other. I believe that spirituality comes from within each individual, according to his or her own needs, knowledge, and abilities. I believe that religion is a man-made convention, designed to justify beliefs and give them a contextual framework for explanation. I believe that each individual is entitled to their spiritual beliefs regardless of whether or not they are aligned with an established religion. Therefore, I believe that non-membership in an established religion in no way invalidates an individual's beliefs. I believe that spirituality must be found and developed by each individual on their own personal journey toward enlightenment, that it cannot be neatly pre-packaged and labeled: "Salvation-in-a-box." I believe that established religions can, and most often do, provide people with what they're looking for. But I also believe that religious doctrines and precepts must be flexible enough to allow for individuality. Unfortunately, this is most often not the case.

FAITH

"...faith, as well intentioned as it may be, must be built on facts, not fiction; faith in fiction is a damnable false hope." (Thomas Edison)

In February, my work center received a Communications Security Inspection from Headquarters, Tactical Air Command. During the course of the inspection, it was determined that a segment within a series of cryptographic keying material had gone unaccounted for, for a period of 24 hours. This is a gravely serious problem. Indeed,

federal prisons across the nation are filled with men who have made such errors in judgment, and I was terrified. As the Non-Commissioned Officer in charge, it is I who must stand accountable for such problems. I immediately launched myself into an investigation of my own and fortunately, was able to prove that the material was secure during the time in question, but that the documentation had been completed improperly. This is a slightly smaller, but nonetheless, serious problem.

At the end of my analysis I was left with a choice: Direct culpability toward those of lesser rank beneath me, or accept for myself accountability for the actions of my men. The choice was clear. I would stand and be counted for my duty section.

When Colonel R had finished reading his statement of charges and asked me what position I would take, I told him that I would accept responsibility for Staff Sergeant T and the others. He stared at the paper work on his desk for what seemed to me, an eternity. Then, he looked at me and said, "According to the report of survey, you did not create this problem yourself. Why would you take the punishment for it?" To which I replied, "That's what you pay me to do, sir."

Then, he took the documents on his desk, handed them to the First Sergeant and said, "I think a letter of reprimand would be more appropriate in this case." Secretly, I breathed a great sigh of relief. I had just avoided an Article 15. Then Colonel R asked me where I had learned to exercise such values of responsibility, and I told him that I had learned these things from my father. He shook his head and said, "Your dad must be one hell of a guy. I wish I had had one like that."

I tell this story because I think it illustrates an important point about having faith. I believe I was able to avoid catastrophe because I had faith that I was doing the right thing, and that the right thing would come of it. I had faith that the positive, forward movement of my life would not come to an abrupt end that day. I held out faith that my commander was a man of reason, because I was always taught to have faith in the basic goodness of human kind, and the higher purpose of each individual within the universe. My faith did not fail me that day.

I believe in the power of faith; that its power is dependent upon the strength of conviction within the believer, irrespective of the beliefs themselves. I believe faith has a place in our lives but it is not a universal answer to all questions.

Despite our differences, the cement that has always held this family together is the towering strength of our father. He and he alone has stood as a rock against the wind. The strength of his convictions has sustained all of us at all times even though we have not always agreed with his beliefs, in and of themselves. This is a difficult concept to swallow. How can you believe the messenger, and not the message? If dad believed that stones could fly, would you believe it? Would you believe that he believed it? Would you believe that he believed it so strongly that he could make it happen before your very eyes? This is where your own faith takes over.

SATAN

“Just think of the tragedy of teaching children not to doubt.”(Clarence Darrow)

“Fear paints pictures of ghosts and hangs them in the gallery of ignorance.”
(Robert G. Ingersoll)

There is a maximum-security prison in the great state of Washington. Oddly enough, I happen to know two people there. One is a prison guard, the other is an inmate. The inmate is RP. I grew up with RP, went to school with him, played sports with him, attended church with him and his parents, Rd and Nn. Like other families in the XXth Ward, the Ps did all the right things. Rd was even appointed to the Bishopric. But what a lot of people didn't know, was that late at night while the world huddled behind closed doors and pulled blinds, Rd... would go downstairs to R's room, beat him into submission, and then rape him.

RP went on to have a successful career as a social deviant. He is now serving a life sentence for sex crimes. He lived the life he lived because he was taught well by his father. He preyed on the weak and allowed himself to be manipulated by stronger but equally disturbed malcontents. He suffered from mental illness brought on by a common, social virus called domestic violence. But the devil didn't make him do it.

The world is full of bad people, just as it is filled with good people. As it is throughout the universe, one balances the other. The Yin and the Yang. Bad people do bad things for the same reasons that good people do good things: They are compelled to do so... Through social conditioning, mental illness, learned behavior or simply an opportunity to exploit a situation, bad people do bad things because that is what bad people do. And sometimes even good people do bad things. Dad told me once that the lockers in the dressing rooms at the Temple had locks on them. When I displayed my surprise he shrugged his shoulders and said, “Even in the Temple people steal things.” I guess locks are only meant to keep honest people, honest.

Good people sometimes do bad things because if we allow ourselves, humans can be weak, petty, and opportunistic. It's in our nature, just as it is in our nature to be kind, forgiving, and generous. But we are not manipulated by evil, unseen forces to do bad things any more than we are manipulated by unseen divine forces to do good things. We all do the things we do in order to harvest the results of our behavior. Sometimes children are naughty in order to get attention. Sometimes adults do the same thing.

This past Christmas, D and I intercepted a letter to Santa from a little girl in S. We went down to the mall and started going down the list. By the time we were finished, the trunk of our car was filled with the best Christmas this little girl has probably ever had, and our hearts were filled with a sense of satisfaction that only comes from reaching out to the less fortunate. We did this because we were both taught by good parents to appreciate the sense of peace and joy that comes from doing benevolent things. We did it because we chose to do it. We did it because it made us feel good. To believe otherwise would be to shun personal responsibility.

As a child, I was told that evil spirits, emissaries of a great and powerful devil, were lurking around me at all times, skulking in black shadows and waiting to snatch my soul away if I were bad. I cannot count the number of childhood nightmares and hours of adult therapy this has caused me.

I believe the concept of Satan is counter-productive and serves mostly as an elaborate ruse to keep children from playing with matches, and to allow adults to shirk their responsibilities for exercising poor judgment. To blame an evil spirit, a devil, or some supernatural force for your actions is grossly irresponsible. It has been my experience that people who point their finger at evil spirits when bad things happen are only attempting to exonerate themselves from liability. Conversely, I've never heard those same people give credit to a crafty little angel for taking an apple pie to a shut-in, helping a stranded motorist, or donating time to a charity.

MIRACLES

“Some things have to be believed to be seen.” (Ralph Hodgson)

“The best of seers is he who guesses well.” (Euripides)

I am reminded of a story I heard not too long ago about a man who survived a plane crash in Florida. You may have seen it on the news. The plane came in for a landing and exploded on impact. By the time the aircraft came to a stop at the end of the runway, it was in ten thousand, burning pieces. Everyone aboard that plane died almost instantly except this one, solitary man who, amazingly, walked away from the wreckage.

Then there is the story of F. Since childhood, F had dreamed of flying in Space. In 1985, his dream came true when he was chosen to train as a member of the teachers in space program. His shuttle slot was bumped because of weight considerations and instead, Christa McAuliffe was chosen to be the first teacher in space. To F who watched as the shuttle Challenger exploded, it was a bittersweet miracle that he'd been taken off the crew roster just one week prior to launch.

For both of these men, these were deeply moving spiritual experiences. This is most often the case. Those whose lives are changed by miraculous events often turn to their spiritual beliefs for the answers. And the most troubling of questions? Why me? Why was I spared above all the others? Why was I singled out? What makes me so special?

For many, the experience becomes an affirmation of a higher purpose and they often embark on a new course in life. Miracles can be liberating. They can also be a terrible burden. I know. For my entire life I have been: “M the miracle baby: saved by God for a great and wondrous purpose. Lifted from the clutches of death by the hand of the Almighty Himself, to stand forth in these last days, and lead the armies of the saints against the forces of evil.”

Don't talk to me about miracles, man. I know all about 'em. When I was a child, I would often wonder about my great and wondrous purpose. I would lose sleep over it. Frankly, it scared the living hell out of me, which is one reason I declined a patriarchal blessing. To be told these things when you're only four or five years old adds an ominous load of responsibility to your life, and frankly, I knew I'd never measure up. After all, Joseph Smith had had his great and wondrous purpose, and look what happened to him. And I certainly didn't want to go blasting out of a jailhouse window in a hail of gunfire. I knew when I was baptized at the age of eight, that that was the end of the road for me. From that moment on, I had to be perfect, because God Himself had saved me for a great and wondrous purpose and I simply couldn't mess this one up or I'd pay for it eternally. But secretly, I knew I'd screw it up. Even at that age, I knew deep down inside, I was only human.

No one knows the burden I've carried because of this. No one knows the childhood night terrors I endured for something I never asked for. The men in the examples above were rational adults, capable of deciding for themselves what their experiences meant to them. I, on the other hand, was born an unwitting pawn in a game of spiritual one-upmanship. Raised in a religion built on the myth of miracles, I was gussied up and hung around my family's neck as a medal of honor – a tangible sign of devout faith. I was told that God had saved me above all others for a special purpose and that I now owed Him for it. From the moment of my birth, I was saddled with spiritual debts that others concocted for me out of their own wild imaginations, in an attempt to explain to themselves, what they couldn't otherwise understand...

The religion of my birth is rife with spiritualism. Doubters are always shown a miracle and then challenged to explain it. This is tantamount to a magician requiring his audience to explain the illusion as their payment of admission to the show. But what better way to enlist converts (and indeed, maintain the fold) than with works of wonder? And if that doesn't work, fear or guilt will do well to keep the rabble in line. If you're cynical enough to doubt, then you'll pay for your blasphemy. Survival within the fold means acquiesce or suffer unbearable guilt and fear.

Skeptics have never fared well under the heavy hand of organized religion, particularly Mormonism. To ask if maybe, just maybe, the miracle was created out of the mind of the person themselves, is a leap of faith in their own abilities that many believers are not willing to take. Divine Intervention is an easier answer. But it's not anymore plausible.

GOD

“The idea that God is an oversized white male with a flowing beard who sits in the sky and tallies the fall of every sparrow is ludicrous. But if by ‘God’ one means the set of physical laws that govern the universe, then clearly there is such a God. This God is emotionally unsatisfying... it does not make much sense to pray to the law of gravity. For me, it is far better to grasp the Universe as it really is rather than to persist in delusion, however satisfying and reassuring.” (Carl Sagan)

“I’d love to find God, but religion keeps getting in the way.” (unknown)

At least a thousand books have been written on this subject, and I’ve read a great many of them. Throughout the course of my adult life, I’ve attempted to unlock the mysteries of God. What do I know? I know nothing of God. Oh, I understand a few things, I believe a few other things, but I don’t know a damn thing. And frankly, neither does anyone else, despite what they tell you. The belief in the existence of God always, always, always, comes down to faith. Personally, I’d prefer some evidence, thank you.

I am an agnostic. I do not summarily discount the possible existence of a higher intelligence within the universe, nor am I willing to accept its existence on faith alone. I believe it is my innate right as a rational human being to demand and examine to my satisfaction, physical evidence, before I claim to know or understand anything to be the absolute truth.

We do not accept, on faith alone, the evidence in a legal proceeding. We would not accept on faith alone, the value of a house we wish to purchase. We do not decide on faith alone, the best investment to make with our life’s savings. Detailed intelligence and careful planning, not faith, determine our nation’s military and foreign policy.

Why should the concept of God be any different? The metaphysical, by its very nature, demands the closest of scrutiny. Everyday, in every aspect of our lives, we use reason and logic, often with a healthy dose of skepticism, to guide our decisions, except when it comes to our spiritual beliefs. Then, the rules are thrown completely out the window – and in an even more bizarre twist – those who try to maintain reason are castigated for not investing in the myth. But no one, no thing, not even a deity, is exempt from the demands of rational thought.

One thing I believe I have learned: Too many people spend too much time trying to define and understand God, when they should be trying to understand themselves. Indeed, most of the world’s problems would vanish if people would stop focusing on a possible life not yet lived, and pay more attention to the one they already have.

IN CLOSING

“Go forth, my book, and take whatever pounding the heavy-fisted destinies prepare.” (Leonard Bacon)

This has been a short treatise on a very long subject. There are additional topics I could have discussed – some I have considered at great length, and others I’ve given little attention to. But I think I’ve satisfactorily covered a representative cross-section of the major issues.

In my life I have penned a textbook, a novel, and countless essays and short stories; I’ve drafted innumerable citations, letters, reports, instructions, career guides,

pamphlets, and newspaper articles. But these few, short pages have been the most difficult words I have ever put to paper.

For the first eighteen years of my life, I was kept in the cradle of the Rocky Mountains and spoon fed a steady diet of Mormonism. For the last eighteen years I have traveled the world, feasting on its intellectual delicacies. I have determined for myself, through first-hand experience, what sits well in my stomach. So before I brace myself for the onslaught of pity for “losing my spirit,” or admonishments for “throwing away my eternal salvation,” let me be very clear on this: I do not have a problem that requires fixing. Please believe me when I tell you that I don’t wish to be rude, but I must be very firm. I don’t need to “have a dialogue” about these issues, nor do I need to “hear the truth.” Living the gospel more fully each day will not bring me happiness.

I am not unhappy to begin with. It has taken me the better part of my adult life to escape the grinding weight of depression I lived with growing up. This feeling returns anew each time I visit home. I once read an account of a POW in North Vietnam who talked of how his captors would lock him in a cage, suspended in the air, restricted such that he could not move his arms or legs. He could not sit or turn around. He couldn’t even tilt his head enough to look at his feet. This would best describe the feelings of manipulation and control I remember of my Mormon adolescence. It is difficult to even talk about it.

But with the completion of this document, and now for the first time, the open airing of my position, I can begin exorcising my demons and start living my own life – a life I build for myself according to my own needs and those of my community – not a proscribed life with a wash-and-wear tag and a one-size-fits-all label.

This letter requires no response. If you wish to respond, I welcome your thoughts, but please, I don’t wish to engage in a debate. I already know how you feel. I harbor no animosity toward anyone. I love and respect all of you, regardless of your beliefs. All I ask is the same in return.

Peace be with you all. I sincerely hope you find what you’re looking for.

Your Brother,
M

Dear, please think for a moment about the stirring movie that could be made, showing the heroic achievements of “M”. Just thinking about it stirs me; I hope that it similarly stirs you.

As my third example, Dear, please consider the following “deconversion story” written by an ex-Christian, David P. Crews, describing how he honestly searched for understanding, while trying to help others.⁴

Opening Up – My Journey from Religion to Rationalism

Introduction

For those who may be interested, I present here a brief explication of my own journey from belief to unbelief, in hopes that it may give insight or even encourage someone to follow the path of reason in their own lives. Some who make the transition from religious belief to rational, non-theistic thought do so with little fanfare or angst. Perhaps they did not come from a particularly religious background, or always had difficulties with the required beliefs of their own religious authorities. For others, such as myself, who took Christianity and God completely seriously and devoted much of our lives to deep and complex study of the scriptures and their interpretation, that shift was a very major event in life.

In my Christian life, I was often a teacher, but never a preacher in the traditional sense. I did write and publish (in 1994) a book about the New Testament that helped start an ongoing movement in Christianity called Preterism. This book has been utilized as a teaching tool in a number of churches, and has been distributed to several foreign countries as well. My religious position has been established fairly strongly in that regard, and that book demonstrates just how far a journey I have taken to bring me, finally, to a rational, nontheistic view. I will tell something of my Christian upbringing that led to that book, and the story of how it came to be, in order to establish the context for the important shifts in understanding that came later.

I am not certain if I can adequately explain all the details of my “deconversion”, but I can at least show the pathway I followed and give some taste of the emotional reactions I had along the way. It is my fortune that I did not have to battle or lose friends or family (at least not yet), and that I have had a marvelous spouse who has traveled a nearly parallel pathway with me.

This, then, is the story of one serious believer’s journey into disbelief and how that came as such a surprise. It is the story of how that shift has jolted, then changed me forever. It tells of my consternation and bemusement at my own mental process. Finally, it is the story of a transcendent life and how that has meaning, now, for myself and, perhaps, for others who may also have traveled this way or may sense the need to.

1999 - The Other Side

“In what a strange place I find myself, staring at alien light – listening for the howling to emerge from my lips. I should howl. Most men would, given this jolt. How strange, again, that I do not. I have only just now come through the paradigm

⁴ Copied from <http://www.newrational.com/joy/journey.html>.

shift.” [Dear: in quotations such as this one, the author is quoting himself (unless he indicates otherwise).]

Paradigm shift. A faddish phrase. A term used loosely by people who are wont to misuse their words. Like the boy who cried wolf, these careless ones use up important and powerful words like “literally” and “awesome” in trivial and casual chatter, devaluing them for their true uses. Yet, some things are literally true, some things are truly engendering of awe, and there really are paradigm shifts that honestly deserve that specially defining term. I know.

In the end, it did not take much to pop the bubble of belief, but that is itself remarkable considering my background in a fundamentalist style church that some outside of it have even labeled cultist. This was the Church of Christ, in which I was raised from my birth.

1971 - The Lord is my Shepherd

“Without a shepherd, the sheep cannot find their way home; and without a shepherd, we cannot find our way to our final home.” (David Crews, age 16, from a sermon given at the Church of Christ)

Unlike other more strictly fundamentalist groups, the Church of Christ does not insist that everything in the Bible be taken literally, but much of the accepted interpretation of the church is a literal view, especially of prophetic things such as the bodily resurrection of believers. I was fortunate enough to have been brought up in a “thinking” family that encouraged me to research all that I heard and ascertain for myself if it made sense and if it correlated with the scriptures. In part, this attitude comes from the stance of the Church of Christ itself, as it claims membership in the “Restoration Movement” begun in the mid-1800s by men like Alexander Campbell.

[Incidentally, Dear, as I’ll show you in Yx, Alexander Campbell was Sidney Rigdon’s “mentor” (until Rigdon went beyond what Campbell promoted); therefore, Mormonism is really another variation of Campbell’s “Church of Christ”, which probably explains the full name of your mother’s church (viz., “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints”, with the “Saints” being the self-anointed names of Sidney Rigdon, Joseph Smith, Jr., et al. and the “Latter-Day” meaning their conviction that “the second coming” of Christ would occur “soon”).]

This movement was a response to all the denominational fractures that had manifested throughout the centuries of the Reformation Movement (the intent to “reform” the Catholic church). The purpose of Campbell and his followers was to cease trying to reform the old churches and simply return to the Bible version of the original (single) church and to “restore” to that image – no more or less than what is taught and or exemplified in the New Testament (thus the appellation, “the Church of Christ,” and the strong insistence on not referring to itself as a denomination).

This premise and purpose is logical, commendable, and even noble – if the basic underlying assumption is accepted: that the Bible (as we have it now) is the true and inspired word of God, and therefore reliable for modeling the church. All of the Church of Christ’s doctrine and logic is based on that foundational assumption. It is obvious that, if that assumption is ever proven false, then the entire structure of the Church of Christ falls down completely, no matter how elaborate or noble or large the structure is.

As a child, I naturally accepted the Church’s doctrines at face value, as I assumed my siblings, parents, and grandparents did, too. In fact, my Grandfather, Marvin Bateman, was constantly “preaching” and teaching us about the Bible at any opportunity. Although not formally educated, this longtime oilfield engineer had schooled himself in the scriptures far beyond the level of most seminarians. We children loved him dearly, but grew wary of “getting caught” by him and not being able to remove ourselves from his rather lengthy and involved studies in order to go play.

By the time I was in high school, I had begun to be impatient with the Church’s foibles and uncomfortable with some of its hypocrisies, but I never doubted the basic view of the Bible I was given. Then, one day, I almost got “caught” by Granddad and was trying to politely retreat when he said something that shocked me. He said that those who believed that Christ was coming a second time were mistaken! I could not fathom such a seemingly outrageous statement coming from my conservative Granddad, but it was certainly interesting! I was hooked. For the first time in my life, I really listened to him.

I listened as he told me about his view of prophecy in the Bible – a view now called the “preterist” interpretation, which Granddad had been developing on his own for over 30 years. He had taken the Restoration Movement charge to heart and had done the exceedingly difficult exercise of going back to square one and seeing just what the Bible really said without re-introducing one’s own preconceptions. The view of the New Testament he developed was logical, consistent, and inclusive of all the scriptures, including the “difficult” ones like Revelation. Finally, the Bible made sense to me without rationalization.

The Church of Christ’s interpretation of the Bible was still fundamentally inadequate to me. What Granddad had done was to take some early writer’s understandings that most of the prophecies of the New Testament belonged only to the time of the people involved (“preterist” comes from the Latin meaning “before” or “in the past”) and extend or apply that concept across the board to show that *all* of the prophecies were fulfilled and that God’s involvement with us today is spiritual in nature rather than physical.

I knew that this was an epiphany [or “awakening”] for me. I spent the next 10 years or so learning from Granddad and from my own studies, trying to solidify the new interpretation in my mind and overcoming my own trained-in preconceptions. I felt

that if I could organize and refine this amazing view, surely the rest of the church would find this so compelling that they would adopt it as true. I decided to write a book. This was my mission, but I knew I needed to mature some more, finalize my research, and gain the credibility of age and seminary-level research before I could expect to write the book or have it accepted by those critical of any new view.

I took lessons in Koine Greek, in order to better translate and understand the “original” texts of the New Testament. Also, I did some original research at the Library of Congress to see to what extent, if any, this interpretation had been seen or spoken of before, finding quite a few intriguing books going back over 100 years. Many of these writers knew that the bulk of the Bible prophecies referred to the early times of the original church, but all of them still held to a futurist interpretation of the “second coming” and other “end time” prophecies.

I began writing the actual text of the book in 1990, and decided the only way this book would actually become published was if I produced it myself. In order to control the production of my book completely, I formed my own publishing company, New Light Publishing, in 1994. *Prophecy Fulfilled – God’s Perfect Church* was published in that year.

All during this time, I assumed that I and a few family members were the only ones who knew and held to the preterist view. Interestingly, however, just prior to publication, I found out I was not alone! There were many others who had come to essentially the same conclusions independently of one another, and had formed an ongoing community with journals, seminars, and other connections. Kingdom Counsel (now the International Preterist Association) held a preterism seminar in Pennsylvania in the summer of 1994, and I attended it to introduce my book.

1994 - God is Spirit

“Spiritualizing the scriptures is the true key to understanding them and making them consistent and logical, for they are spiritual in essence.” (David Crews, Prophecy Fulfilled, p. 357)

“...why may we not believe that when Jesus, who is the creator of all worlds, asks the Father that his beloved ones may behold his glory, he means that the blazing constellations with their attendant planets may be the field for eternal exploration... on the part of the saints, who, with bodies incapable of weariness and entirely at the dictation of the spirit, shall with the rapidity of thought, pass through and examine all parts of God’s universe?” (William Urmy, 1900)

In order to follow what comes next, the reader should understand a fundamental aspect of the preterist interpretation of the Bible. The central problem of religion in presuming a God is the simple lack of empirical evidence for one. If we were to be presented with obvious, scientifically valid proof of God’s existence, we would not need evangelists or the Bible. We would believe what we see and know, just like we believe in the air we breathe and the food we eat. Without experiencing for ourselves

the kind of physical presence of God that the Bible stories report, it becomes necessary to explain why God no longer appears to us, speaks to us, or interacts with us directly or physically. The only way to do that consistently is to presume that God is a “spirit being” (as in some dimension untouchable by us) and that all his dealings with us are in and of that “spiritual realm.” In short, we have to completely spiritualize the scriptures in order to make God square up with the lack of facts for his direct presence and interactions with us.

This approach actually ties in very well with the scriptures. It is only the long traditions and desires of men that make physical concepts of God, Heaven, and our bodily Resurrection attractive and doctrinally orthodox. This spiritualizing interpretation is the only way I could understand God and make the New Testament work for me. The careful observer will also note that such a viewpoint presumes that we, too, are actually spirit beings, with the necessary implication that our physical lives and pursuits are very small and meaningless things in the face of a spiritual eternity and the assumption of our undying spiritual “bodies” which may inhabit our poor fleshly bodies for a mere blink of time.

If this were true, of course, it would seem a great comfort to know that we were to experience such a metamorphosis. This world might, indeed, seem small and unimportant. So it seemed to me, once.

A Traveler

In a strange, self referent journey Comes, at last, on marvel's wind, One apart, adroitly striding Through the rollings of a star, Out of the endless Age of youth; Into the mundane now And quickly, quickly passing On - to where he was before and never Was at all before his thought began. He has a task. He has a role, To make his journey speak – To describe history, To give warning and laughter, To enlighten and entreat – To plead and to soothe those Who follow out of the first Time. And yet, this journey seems Often strange to one Not content with only now, Uncomforted with merely days – One half-stepped into eternity. (David Crews, May, 1992)

During my honest pursuit of truth and through my development of this spiritualized view of mankind, I did not realize that I had walked right up to the very edge of my world. The bubble of belief in God and the Bible had been stretched to the point that nothing of it was real, in a physical worldly sense. God was spirit, we were spirit, the prophecies were spiritual, the end time events, heaven, time – everything of religious value was spiritual in nature and not provable or apprehensible in this physical realm. It only took one small step to walk through the wall of the bubble of belief and cause it to burst.

So, what finally triggered that for me? It is in some sense ironic. The entire structure of the Christian church, the beliefs of millions, and the contents of my publication, which I spent decades of my life engaged with, all have their basis in one thing – a book. The biblical scriptures are the sole source of knowledge about the Judeo-Christian God. Many things have been said and written based on those scriptures, but

it all comes down to the verses themselves. That is the foundation and bedrock and the sole and inherently authoritative origin of all such understandings and beliefs. A book – or rather a library of books.

With my back pressed up against my spiritual bubble of belief, I began to read some new books. These were things I had never bothered to read before, or if I had, I would have either dismissed them out of hand as unfounded speculation of unbelievers, or I would have reacted defensively to immediately seek and develop a Christian/Biblical “answer” to any threats to belief or to the truth of the Bible.

I am not certain which volume was the first crack, but I think it might have been Paul William Roberts book on the search for the original Magi... In reading this wonderful account of his trip to Iran, he said things that suddenly made some other things make sense. A real eye-opener and a shock to me was the demonstration of the influence of Zoroastrianism on the Jewish people, and especially in the writings of Paul. Here, in this ancient religion, were many of the principal concepts of the New Testament religion pre-dating that source text by millennia, and obviously an original influence on Christianity.

The concepts of a personal friend God (a “Daddy” God), Heaven and Hell, the devil, angels, a prophesied messiah and a second coming – all came not from Judaism itself, but from the ancient Persian religion of Zoroaster that preceded it and directly influenced it during those times the Jewish people were taken captive en masse to those lands. Generations of Israel’s people grew up during those times knowing nothing of their Jewish religion – only the religion of their captors. When they were returned to their own lands, they had to have the Law of Moses read aloud to them – they had never heard it read or taught before! The influence of the Persian religion could not have been averted, and it is obvious once one knows about it.

This led me to investigating other influences on Christianity, most importantly that of the Gnostics and the Mystery religions of paganism. Much of what Paul wrote is gnostic in nature, even though he has been “cleaned up” and recast as anti-gnostic. Some of the structures of the original “Jewish” Christianity, such as the duality of the Priestly and Kingly messiahs, have been preserved up through the ages in the shadows and ritual elements of the Knights Templar and vaguely on into Freemasonry (see Knight and Lomas and Gardner).

These readings worked hand-in-hand with other books that questioned orthodox secular understandings concerning human history and the nature of civilization. The wonderful speculative books of Graham Hancock, the new understandings about Egypt and archeoastronomy from Bauval and others, the important early human dispersion ideas reflected in the common myths of the world as exemplified in “Hamlet’s Mill” and the encompassing work on myth by Joseph Campbell, all came at me with an undeterrable force.

It was like watching a huge mosaic or jigsaw puzzle come together piece by piece to build a wonderful and incredibly huge picture. This vision was much larger than anything I had ever seen before. Then I read Daniel Quinn's "Ishmael" and "The Story of B." Whether you agree or not with his final assessments, these are stories that grab you by the scruff and shake up your world. If you have not read them, do not miss these books!

For a list of other books that influenced my paradigm shift, I encourage you to check my book list. I am certain that there are many more to be investigated.

From reading one library, the Bible, I optimized my birth universe – the universe of Christianity vis-à-vis the Church of Christ. I optimized it into a spiritualized perfection that left nothing, really, to hang one's hat upon. By reading another library entirely, I found another universe. One less contrived to please and placate men, perhaps, but one that is reflective of and searching in the REAL universe that surrounds us, and the real and very ancient history of our species upon this planet.

I must admit that I held on to my Christian belief in God for a very long time into this transitional reading process. I did not want God to be unreal! I had much invested in Him! I thought there would be nothing left without Him. I once believed that anyone "losing their faith" would lead wretched and angry lives or else would drift into "make up your own religion" New Age ideas that I assumed were totally meaningless. Now I know that both ideas are false. I have not lost my faith, you see. I know right where I put it. It waits in that small box called Religion that I can no longer enter, for now I am much too large to fit inside.

Find me a God with whom to struggle And I shall gladly play for truth And an end to our tears. Let Him stand forth, And I shall measure His foot. I shall show Him our children, Both bright of eye and broken Asunder. And I shall require of Him His name. (David Crews, May, 1999)

1999 - A Bubble Bursts

One day in 1999, I stopped in my tracks because I suddenly realized that I no longer believed in God as I conceived of God before. It was really an instantaneous moment of realization – a "pop" of the bubble. I had simply read too much that made sense and that superseded the concepts I previously held. Those earlier ideas seemed so small all of a sudden. Now, outside of that old box, I flew far above it in the airs and spaces of an uncharted universe. This observation brought with it a sudden sense of vertigo. Looking down from this place was breathtaking and frightening. However, it is when the floor is pulled out from under one that things get truly interesting!

When it finally got through to me that my God was an illusion, I had many negative emotions. I was dismayed, disappointed, angry, and very sad. I will not say that I was devastated – for I had always prepared myself to seek and attain truths, many of which were not orthodox or easily owned, and this training paid off in making it easier to evaluate this new reality with some dispassion and curiosity. After a while,

it was the curiosity that won out. I had read so much, by now, of different ideas about the world and human history that I realized my old beliefs were only a small subset of the doings of mankind and to hold on to them would be only a hindrance. I gently packed them all away and put them in my mental attic.

Well, then. Where do I land? Where can I find my base of operations and establish a center from which bearings may be taken in this uncharted territory? There is a natural philosophy that underlies all other philosophies. It is that of the child before she becomes indoctrinated by religions or cultures. It is the simple philosophy of knowing only what we see and hear and touch. It is the mindset upon which all the storied accomplishments of scientific mankind is based. It is the philosophy of being rational.

Rationalism is the simplest “clean slate”, “square one” philosophy one can assume. This worldview can entertain endless new ideas, but can only accept them as true if they are based on empirical evidence that can be repeated by someone else under the same circumstances. Under this view, extraordinary claims, such as the claim of a non-physical, invisible God, require extraordinary proofs before they can be accepted as rational. We understand that the human mind is creative and imaginative. It can dream up many fictions. We must be cautious and we must be rigorous in our analysis of such claims.

This is the place I landed. Rational thought. Rationalism. It is not a religion, but a stance. I began to read, once again. This time, I read the works of the rationalist authors such as Bertrand Russell and Joseph McCabe. I also began to examine works very critical of the Bible and of the religions founded on the Bible (such as Coote & Coote, Freke & Gandy, and Laurence Gardner). It became obvious that I had self-censored my own religious education by never reading such things before. I had always dismissed them out of hand. Now, the man behind the curtain was revealed with all his ancient gears and levers exposed for what they really are.

After this, I began to sense a change in my attitude toward this paradigm shift. I realized, I think, that all the anger, sadness, and angst that I initially felt, belonged in the box with the rest of my old religious philosophy. I realized that I am alive right now and that “right now” is important! My initial dismay and disorientation had given way to a new resolve to live my life fully in each moment. I realized that I was creating a new philosophy for myself – one of real happiness and joy in Life Right Now. This philosophy has an interesting benefit: a very important increase in self-worth assessment.

The Christian religion is founded on the concept that we humans are sinful, depraved, and worthless, and would be totally doomed except for the overriding and unfathomable grace of God. Even as a believer, I had overcome much of that idea in my preterist views, but the fundamental theme remained and filtered my assessment of myself. No matter what else, I knew it was impossible to compare myself with the powers and knowledge of God.

With God suddenly gone, I realized that even though I still knew little about my own species' origin, and still do not pretend to claim great knowledge about the universe in general, I, like all of us human beings, am in a unique position of power and responsibility. With all the mystery of the cosmos surrounding us, it is a fact now that our human brains are the most densely complex objects that we are aware of in the entire universe!

Does this mean that we should puff ourselves up and do whatever we want? Actually, it means that we should be proud of who and what we are, but be very aware that we are part of a gigantic system and are not essentially separate from the world we live in. It is the Christian religion that asserts that we are separate from our environment and that the entire world and universe is doomed to destruction at any moment by God. It is the Christian's logical view that this Earth does not matter, and neither do our earthly lives. I now beg to differ.

Another side benefit of the rational view, already alluded to, is the huge increase I experienced in my appetite for reading new information. The joy is that I can read all things now without filtering them through a Christian worldview.

2001 - "It is better to create what you want than to get what you expect."

Now that I am all grown up and very much on my own, what shall become of me? I now determined that the question should rather be put, "what shall I become?" The pre-eminent characteristics of mankind are that we are self-aware and that we create things. It is evident now that I must create what I am to be and what I am to do with the rest of my life. As Christians, we do this by default – going about making our worldly lives work while assuming that the real life is the one to come when we will be eternal beings with God in a heavenly realm. Now I can see that the ongoing creation of our lives is the most important prime task of living. How is it that such a truism can seem so revolutionary? This is the price of the religious indoctrination in which we were enveloped.

2002 - Opening Up

I live an exuberant and invigorating life now, for I know to value it at every instant and to do so in intensity and with great honor toward it. I also believe in nurturing the creative energies I possess and focus them on the arts and crafts that I pursue both professionally and informally.

As a philosophical position, I am based in rationalism, but I consider my current process to be one of "opening up." This means that I do not wish to become dogmatic about rationalism as a "tribal philosophy" like some hardened skeptics would have it. This is why I have not used the words atheism or agnosticism to describe my position. I feel that those terms are too defining and restricting, placing one necessarily in a structure of assertions that I do not wish to be subject to. Is there a God? I don't know (agnostic view), but I would welcome proof of one (rationalist

view). Until such a proof shows up, I must assume as a practical matter that no such God exists (atheistic view). But, I am always open to new information!

2002 - New research

The rationalistic position is where I expected to stay for a while, but the process of opening up and learning new things has pulled at my leash and made me perk up and investigate even newer things. It is invigorating to be truly wide-open and positively receptive to new philosophies and interpretations of reality. There is much danger of getting caught up in things of no rational value, though, if one is naive or witless about their explorations. This is why so many have been tempted into shallow and derivative pseudo-religions and superstitions. I feel that I have an advantage due to my journey, in that I can approach such new concepts with a background of scholarship, research, scientific skepticism, and the personal experience of having been consumed by a humanly constructed religious system. These things will help me temper and evaluate new concepts as they are encountered. I do not intend to ever be fooled again.

That said, however, I have found recently that, aside from the obviously shallow manifestations currently popular in our society, many of the so-called “New Age” ideas have much truth and depth to them. I am continually having my mind prodded by the terrific array of published thought – things I had no clue about before my big shift. Now I’m paying attention and it is very enlightening. The ideas of value, of course, are the ones that are not “new” at all, but very, very old indeed.

Much of my current interest and (academic!) research is into the role of so-called “entheogens” in the establishment of the original religions of mankind, many tens of thousands of years in the past. Entheogens were the psycho-active plants that were fundamental to the Vedic Indian religion (much of the Rig Veda is a praising of ‘soma’, the vision-inducing plant of their culture), the Greek Mystery religions (which used a hallucinogen in their final Inner Mystery rites), and is even used seriously today in many tribal societies, particularly in the Amazon basin (such as the powerful Ayahuasca sacrament). The system of beliefs and techniques that developed out of plant usage became the first real religion of humanity and is still practiced today as a practical matter all over the world.

This is what we call “shamanism” and it deals with healing and communing with nature through seemingly “mystical” experiences. While at first glance, I might have dismissed this as just more fiction, I was impressed with two aspects of it. First, the beliefs and the reported experiences are remarkably similar throughout the world’s tribal societies. Australian bush people, Amazonian curenderos, and African shamans all have the same experiences, report the same things, and operate in much the same manner as each other. Second, I was fascinated by the observations of the author Jeremy Narby in his book *Cosmic Serpents*, where, after experiencing ayahuasca visions for himself, realized that much of the imagery was consistent with DNA strands. The experienced shamans told him that their knowledge of the plants came directly from the plants – that is: *the plants themselves told the shamans* how to use

them for healing and other purposes. Narby's observation is very intriguing in suggesting that these substances may provide a mechanism (empirical evidence!) by which one DNA being may communicate with another DNA being! There are further implications in all of this that deal with the nature and number of intelligent beings in our world.

I do not know if this is something real or not, but I am proceeding with my rational analysis and have begun to investigate the practices of "core shamanism" as it is presented in our culture today. It is exciting to be surprised by new information, and I certainly did not expect to proceed from my default rationalist position to actively investigate what most people would consider the epitome of mysticism! But, that is the way my world works now, and I think it is a wonderful way to be living.

I said it long ago, back before I stepped through that bubble wall of my old paradigm. *"Knowing the truth changes us... If our perceptions prove to be imprecise, let us humbly adjust them and go on into a new and more complete understanding. We must not be afraid to open all the doors and examine every doctrine."* (David Crews, *Prophecy Fulfilled*, p. 361)

I have opened all the doors, now, and I hope this telling of my story will in some way help others to get their bearings as well. I can only say that I am now truly alive and truly happy in each eternal moment and the only thing I fear is the wasting of human potential. I will conclude by sharing a Morning Dedication that I like to read or speak to myself every day. I hope your journey will be as rewarding and interesting as mine has been and continues to be!

There is only this universe. I exist. There is only this life. I am here. There is only this day. I am here now. There is only this body. I choose my path. I shall live this day with sacred attention to learn, create, love, and serve, in each eternal Now.

Maybe Hollywood would be reluctant to create a movie telling Crews' story, concerned that it would be "too intellectual for the masses" (and therefore not profitable), but Dear, wouldn't it stimulate you? It would be a story of a thinking person struggling to recognize and come to terms with reality and becoming (for reasons that I'll explain in later chapters) a master of Zen, without knowing it – which is the best way!

Now, Dear, I was going to include other "deconversion stories" here, but there's insufficient space. My original plan was to include stories from people who quit Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam, but again, space restrictions impose. Yet, I urge you to explore such stories on your own: type "deconversion stories" or "ex-Mormon" or "ex-Christian" or "Islam apostate" or similar in Google – and then try to constrain yourself! There are thousands (if not tens of thousands such stories on the web) – and I

* Go to other chapters *via*

should admit that I selected the three stories (included above) almost at random: it's just that, when I read them, I was moved, wanting to say to their authors something similar to: "It's an honor to share this planet with you. Best wishes for your continued growth."

And although I've tried to constrain myself, there's another "deconversion story" that's so compelling that I really want to show you at least a little of it. It's very long; it's by a woman who identifies herself as "Christ-on-a-stick"; it's at the Internet Infidels Discussion Board.⁵ Some excerpts follow.

A new dawn was creeping over the horizon. This one wasn't about the writings of Paul and whether or not he'd possibly just been a misogynistic control freak. It wasn't about the church's hand-wringing and legalistic nit-picking over the interpretation of the Bible's many vagaries and how they applied to us as modern Christians. And it **definitely** wasn't about how I was perhaps so "deficient in faith" and unworthy of the Holy Spirit's reassurance that I was stalled in my spiritual growth for no good reason. It was about my finally getting a full view of the rich tapestry woven throughout history, that now revealed a picture of the three Abrahamic traditions as splintering branches of man-made belief influenced by time, culture, and the human struggle for truth in an uncertain world. EUREKA!!!...

It was really starting to hit home that everything I'd believed about what was right and good or wrong and sinful had been based on one of two things: other people's say-so and the Bible. I'd never allowed myself – or been encouraged – to critically *examine* those beliefs, because the warnings were many and dire. The church had done an excellent job of keeping me insulated and protected: all lines of inquiry were redirected in a never-ending circle back to the inerrant Word of God, and when that seemed fuzzy, "the Lord works in mysterious ways"... I was starting to feel quite foolish for never having thought to step outside the circle before, and a little bit resentful of having been actively **discouraged** from doing so. I remembered how I had been inspired, years before, to seek deeper understanding of my faith in order to be able to defend it, and how my questioning and search for knowledge had been so vehemently discouraged...

Sometimes, though, I felt a distinct sense of what I can only describe as betrayal – as though I had been tricked... and I suppose I was. While I've never doubted the good *intentions* of the many people in my life who contributed to my indoctrination into Christianity, I still couldn't immediately shake the sense of resentment that comes when someone realizes that they've been lied to. Of course, I realized that the people who "taught" me **truly believed** what they were teaching; however, what rankled most was the recollection of the countless times I'd been *discouraged from questioning of any kind, shielded from any dissenting opinions or information, and*

⁵ At <http://www.iidb.org/vbb/showthread.php?s=&threadid=72552> .

flat-out told that there was something wrong with my desire to seek knowledge outside of the tightly constructed box of belief...

I eventually came to the view that there is no good or defensible reason to discourage the questioning of ANY belief – the only reason is fear. Any belief system that has something to fear from open inquiry and critical examination is worth being suspicious of, and all of my experiences have led me to believe that any exhortation to employ “blind faith” is likely to be synonymous with an assurance, in hushed tones, that “there’s no need to look behind that curtain. Just *believe* in your heart that it’s the Great and Powerful”.

“Christ-on-a-stick” ends her stunning “testimony” about her deconversion with the following beautiful allegory.⁶ Please, Dear, read it carefully – and think about it!

The Forest

I suppose that I must have been born in The Forest, because I don’t remember being Anywhere Else before it. All of my earliest childhood memories were there, and I grew up living there with my parents. The rest of our family and all of our friends lived there, too – in fact, everyone we knew lived in The Forest! I was happy there; it was safe, and comfortable, and everyone else seemed happy too. People even talked, a lot, about how much better The Forest was than Anywhere Else, and how glad and thankful they were to be allowed to live there.

So I was happy and thankful too.

When I got to be old enough, my parents and a lot of other people helped me to understand exactly whom I should be thankful TO for my wonderful life in The Forest. They explained to me that besides for the father that I lived with, I had another father – and he was also The Father of everyone else who lived in The Forest! We couldn’t actually see him or talk to him in person, although it was said that people living in The Forest a long, long time before sometimes did – and we were very lucky, because some of those people had written down stories about their experiences with The Father, so we would know he was real. Also, we could talk to The Father anytime – and even though he wouldn’t talk back, so we could hear him like we heard other people, he had promised he would always listen to us and he would answer by showing us signs or giving us special feelings deep inside.

There were lots of stories that I learned growing up in The Forest, about The Father and important things that had happened a long time ago. I listened to them and learned them all, even though they didn’t always make sense. I trusted that my parents knew best and that whatever they told me must be true. Besides, everyone

⁶ Copied from <http://www.iidb.org/vbb/showthread.php?t=72552&page=4>; written by “Christ-on-a-stick”.

else believed the stories too, so I figured that if I didn't understand parts of them it was just because I was still young and had much to learn.

I'd always been told that the Other Places – basically, anywhere outside The Forest – were not places that anyone in their right mind would WANT to go. They were said to be scary, ugly and dangerous places, especially dangerous to anyone who lived in The Forest. Sometimes, people we knew talked about loved ones who had left The Forest and never came back. They were always very sad, and hoped that the loved ones would someday come back. Sometimes they talked to The Father and asked if maybe he could find a way to help bring their loved ones back. Sometimes they did come back, and everyone was very happy again. Some of those who came back told us, very seriously, that they had discovered for themselves how true all the bad things we heard about the Other Places were. They always seemed very happy to be back in The Forest, and warned the rest of us not to be fooled like they had.

Sometimes they talked about Someone Else that we couldn't see or talk to, sort of like The Father, except for that he was very bad, and instead of loving us and watching out for us, what he really wanted was to hurt us and make us want to leave The Forest. They said that he even had friends, like The Father, who had some special powers, and that they were especially dangerous, because they were always trying to find ways to trick us into thinking bad thoughts and maybe even wanting to leave The Forest.

I was pretty scared of them. Sometimes I had nightmares about them coming to get me, but my parents told me not to worry because The Father's special friends were stronger and would surely protect me from any harm.

Other than when people would tell stories about it, I didn't really think too much about the Other Places until I got older.

And I became very, very curious.

One day, I just couldn't contain my curiosity any longer. Even though I felt very guilty, I went to the edge of The Forest and found one of the paths that led to the Other Places. At first, I just peered out through the dense trees and caught a glimpse of what was on the other side. It didn't look scary or ugly, but I felt very bad because I was doing something wrong and so I went back home. But I found myself drawn back to the path, and after I'd peeked out at the path beyond The Forest a few times, I decided that maybe it would be okay to walk out just a little way.

I was very, very surprised! And it was confusing, because as I made my way down the path, it wasn't really ugly or scary at all. I even met some people who said they had been living out there for a long time, and they seemed very happy. They didn't seem to have any desire to live in The Forest, even though they knew where it was and that they would be welcomed there. I didn't know quite what to make of this; I'd

always been told that everyone living on the outside was very unhappy, even if they didn't realize it. But these people didn't seem to be pretending, or deluded either.

For quite some time, even though I still lived in The Forest, I began visiting the Other Places more frequently. After a while I started finding out some very interesting things, things that didn't fit in with everything I'd been taught in The Forest but that made a lot of sense. The more I learned, the more I wanted to learn, and so I continued further and further down the path, seeking out new information along the way, until one day I realized that I had gone too far to go home to the Forest. I was a little scared, but I knew that I could always go back eventually if I wanted to.

As time passed, I discovered that all the stories I'd learned growing up in The Forest really were only stories and hadn't really happened. At first, it was hard to understand why everyone there believed them and taught them to their children, if they weren't true. But I figured out that there were a lot of people who were born in The Forest and never left The Forest, so they truly didn't realize that the stories were made up. When they grew up and had children of their own, they naturally passed the stories on because they had been told that it was the right thing to do. I even found out that there were OTHER Forests besides the one that I had come from, and that the people who lived in them did exactly the same thing! Their stories were usually a little different, but they believed in them just as much.

As I traveled further down the path, I eventually began to wonder about something other than the stories. At first it was just a little question in the corner of my mind, and I didn't really want to think about it too much, because I'd always been told it was a silly question, one that only bad or stupid people asked. But I couldn't help it, and I didn't think I was bad or stupid. So I let myself think about it, finally. After all, I'd come so far that The Forest seemed too far away to ever return to, even if I'd wanted to. There was nothing to fear.

And I realized that The Father was only made-up, too.

At first this made me feel a little foolish, but I realized that it wasn't really because I was foolish that I had believed in him. I'd simply believed – and trusted, as children do, in what I was taught. If I hadn't followed the path out of The Forest, I would probably still believe.

I knew that I had passed the Point of No Return.

So I turned and looked back, toward the place I'd come from... The Forest. Although I could no longer actually see it, it was still there in my mind's eye, as clear as ever. Looking back in the direction of that now far-away place, I found myself imagining that I could see The Father standing there at the entrance. Of course, I'd never actually seen him, but even so I could visualize what I'd always thought he would be like – with warmly welcoming arms for his children and an aura of gentle kindness.

Just for a moment, I was sorry that he wasn't real.

But I knew what I had to do, and so I raised my arm to wave goodbye.

As I waved, he began to fade away. It was to be expected, of course, since he was just a vision, but it still felt a little like saying goodbye to an old friend.

When the illusion had faded entirely, I turned back around and continued down the path, toward whatever was yet to come. I was seeing the world around me with new eyes, strange and wonderful at the same time, and I had the sudden sense that if I wanted to, I could fly.

And although I'm sure that I haven't shown you enough about her story to convince you that it would be a "block-buster" movie, if you read her entire story, I think you'd agree. Maybe you'd agree, though, that her allegory could be made into a tremendous "cartoon" – and should be!

Now, Dear, I'm painfully aware that the examples included above don't adequately illustrate the case I want to make: it's not that I've shown you only "the tip of the iceberg", I've shown you three snowflakes (and part of a fourth) caught almost at random during a snowstorm! Besides: what I've shown you so far is only a part of the story. The rest of the story comes after the storm (after the stormy confrontations of individuals with their indoctrination), after the rainbow (after they find themselves and find that the world isn't the black vs. white picture painted by their religions), during the bright, beautiful spring days that follow. These are the stories about what people who reject religion choose to do with the rest of their lives, stories about people doing what they can to help solve humanity's problems intelligently, stories about people becoming humanists.

Here, again, the number of stories that could be told – that *should* be told – is immense. You can find thousands of such stories on the internet, searching with terms such as "humanist heroes", "history of humanism", "great humanists", and similar. Alternatively, you go directly to stories (in books and on the internet) to learn about such heroes as Epicurus, Hypatia, Khayyam, Abelard, Avarroes, da Vinci, Erasmus, More, Buno, Galileo, Kepler, both Roger and Francis Bacon, Spinoza, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Volney, Diderot, d'Holbach, Voltaire, Paine, Jefferson, Franklin, Adams, Lincoln, Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Francis Wright, Elizabeth Scranton, Matilda Gage, Susan Anthony, Emma Goldman, Darwin, Ingersoll, Dewey, Russell, Robeson, Freud, Einstein, Edison, Pauling, Salk, and many, many

more. Movies should be made about each; their stories inspire; thinking about such people tempted me to title this chapter: “EXtolling and even EXalting EXemplary Humanists.”

To see just one of so many current examples, perhaps you’d like to read the interview of Frank Zindler, who when he was twelve years old, was awarded an eight-year scholarship to attend the Wisconsin-Synod seminary (of the Lutheran Church), but he was unable to accept the scholarship. Currently, he’s the Editor of American Atheists Press. In this interview,⁷ he relays his rather sudden deconversion when he was in college:

For my entire freshman year, I was virtually the only defender of Christianity – admittedly a very dilute, anemic form of the religion into which I had been born. Then, in my sophomore year just before Thanksgiving, that feeble specter too was exorcised from my life.

It was one of those all-night bull sessions in the dorm. As so often was the case, I was defending Christianity against the onslaught of friends and other students. Then it happened: the spark was struck that caused the mental hydrogen inside my Hindenburg-sized ego to explode. More in jest than in earnest, my best friend asked me a fatal question: “If God is omnipotent, can he build a wall so sturdy that he cannot tear it down?”

That was it. The timing was perfect. I had learned enough about formal logic by that time to consider the question seriously rather than shrug it off, as I would have done a year earlier – or the way virtually all religious apologists do even today. Instantaneously, it seems, I realized that an infinite being is a self-contradiction, what philosophers call a logical incoherence.

We spent the night deriving amusing theorems pertaining to infinite beings.

If God is infinite, he must be everywhere. There is no place in which he can NOT be. But if that be so, he is not omnipotent.

If God is everywhere, he is in the Devil too. If we oppose the Devil, we are opposing God. If God has to be everywhere, he must be inside the people who claim he does not exist. If he is infinitely powerful, no human power could withstand him, and so it must be God himself forcing those tongues to claim he does not exist.

If God is infinitely good, is everywhere, and is omnipotent, the entire world must be good of necessity. Hitler must have been a good guy after all, since an infinitely good

⁷ The interview is at <http://www.eloquentatheist.com/?p=16>.

being would not be able to allow the existence of evil. Of course, an inability to allow evil would be incompatible with his omnipotence...

It was a dizzying night, the most important one in my life. From that day until now, I have been an Atheist.

Yet, foremost among the examples of “exemplary humanists” should be included the many brave ex-Muslims, who not only are courageously finding their own ways but are doing so under threats of being killed as “apostates”, with Muslim clerics issuing “fatwas” calling for their murder. There isn’t space, here, to show you an adequate number of examples. I encourage you to search on the internet on your own. But even with the space restrictions of this chapter, I want to mention a few. I mention more in my blog.⁸

One is Ali Sina. In **P-3** (dealing with “Some Purposes Pursued”), I showed you some of what he wrote about “The Purpose of Life”. Recall his:

The purpose of our life is to advance the human civilization. What is the purpose of the life of a bee? The purpose of her life is to provide for her hive and make sure that future generations thrive. The purpose of our lives is no different. It is to live, to be happy and to pass this happiness to others. We must realize that we are part of this universe. Like all other objects, and creatures in it, we have a job to do. Our job is to evolve, live happily, learn and pass that learning to others and contribute to the vast pool of human knowledge.

Also, a few chapters ago (in **X-24**), I showed you the “Letter to Humanity” signed by 12 ex-Muslims, now humanists, all of whom risked their life by signing the “Manifesto”.⁹ Here, as my first additional example, consider the following article written by the heroic ex-Muslim Azam Kamguian.¹⁰

⁸ At <http://zenofzero.blogspot.com>.

⁹ Again, the twelve signatories were: Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Chahla Chafiq, Caroline Fourest, Bernard-Henri Lévy, Irshad Manji, Mehdi Mozaffari, Maryam Namazie, Taslima Nasreen, Salman Rushdie, Antoine Sfeir, Philippe Val, and Ibn Warraq.

¹⁰ Copied from <http://www.eclipse.co.uk/thoughts/azam.htm>, along with the following information about the author.

Azam Kamguian is an Iranian writer and women’s rights activist. She was born in 1958 and started her political activities as a socialist in 1976. She was a medical student at Pahlavi University in Shiraz until arrested and imprisoned for a year for organizing student protests. The second time she was imprisoned for political activities was after the Islamic Republic of Iran took power. Azam was released from prison in 1983 – her real political identity undiscovered. Lest this be discovered, placing her life in real danger, Azam fled to Kurdistan, a free region at that time, and continued the struggle. She lived there for eight years until the beginning of 1990s, when she left Kurdistan for America.

Atheism Central for Secondary Schools

God is a myth and the future of humanity is in its own hands. Humans are not god's creatures but are part of nature, in which they have evolved and are living and growing. Humans and not god have created the meaning and the purpose of life. By their rational thought, their power of reason and their ability as advanced animals, humans have made the earthy life and all the good in it. God is an unknown force [whose] power and might is as big as human's ignorance and powerlessness. It seems as if god is the creator, the supernatural power above all humans and the universe, but all evidence and humans rational understanding indicates the contrary.

Science is not compatible with religion; in fact religion is the enemy of science. Science reveals where religion conceals. Religious dogmas cannot be verified through the scientific method. Priests, rabbis and mullahs are all spreading ignorance and superstition.

All popes, rabbis and Ayat-Allahs live upon the labor of others, they earn nothing themselves. They not only contribute nothing toward happiness and the well being of mankind, but also make the life for people miserable. They trade and traffic in ignorance and fear. Giving churches, mosques and temples subsidies by permitting them to remain tax-exempt is forcing the majority of people to pay more taxes. Atheists hold that anyone has the legal right to be religious, but that the costs of religion should be born by those who practice it. All cardinals, rabbis and Ayat Allahs should earn their living by working like other people, pay taxes, and make real contribution to the society and the social life.

One of the worst effects of religion on human's life is religion's anti-life teaching. Religion teaches that life is of no importance; it is a preparation for death and life after death. Religion considers our lives unimportant. Life is the only thing we have and should be lived to the fullest end. We live once and should live our lives according to our will and wishes, with pride, joy, and dignity. Instead of building churches, temples and mosques, we should build more parks, schools, day-care centers, and what we need for a healthy and happy life in this world. Instead of

Azam Kamguian has been writing since 1979. She has written several books including "Islam, Women, Challenges and Perspectives", "Feminism, Socialism and Human Nature", "Women's Liberation and Political Processes in the Middle East" and "On Religion". Currently she is working on two new books: on Iranian women's movement for equality, and on religion and atheism. Azam's numerous articles and interviews on women, religion and social issues have been published in various Persian as well as English, Swedish, Finish, Danish, French, Turkish and Arabic journals and magazines. She is the member of the editorial of two women magazines in Arabic and Persian languages: *Al - Nesa* and *Medusa*.

Azam Kamguian is the chair and the spokesperson for Committee to Defend Women's Rights in the Middle East, and also a member of the management committee of the Middle Eastern Centre for Women's Studies. Throughout her activities, Azam has organized several campaigns in the defense of women's rights in the Middle East and have advocated Middle Eastern women's rights in various international and national conferences and seminars. Currently, she lives and works in London.

worshipping god, we [should] love each other and should live for each other, without any fear of unknowns.

This life is what we have, [and therefore] let's make the most of it for ourselves and for others who follow us. We believe in the potential of humanity, in the power of reason, in the value of truth, and in the comfort of love. We have the potential to make the world a better place – free from fear, superstition, poverty, irrational persecution, and harmful dogma. We promote freedom of the mind as the ultimate freedom. The world will be a better place without god and religion.

Religion is women's enemy. Domination of the female by male is the cornerstone of all religions. Before talking about any equality, religion should be abandoned. All rabbis and religious Jews [thank] god... for not creating them a woman. Many sorts of Christian priests in high or low ranks molest children and violate their dignity and basic human rights. We have witnessed what mollas and Ayat-Allahs have done to women at least in the last three decades. Indeed, women and children are the first who benefit from secularism and atheism.

Sexuality is an important part of our physical being and social structure. All religions suppress human's sexual desires. Established religions deny access to free information regarding physical processes and human sexuality. Churches, mosques, and temples dictate to people on what, when, and where to read and what they are allowed to watch on TV or cinemas. Laws governing human relationships are patterned according to religious rules. These relationships should be based on the individual desires of the parts of the relationships. Neither the state nor the church should have any right to dictate with whom people can cohabit. This is any person's absolute freedom as an individual. Atheists are against god's control and religious dictates on people's sex life.

If the educational system is not free from the anti-women, anti-science, and anti-life teachings of religions, discrimination, superstition, and fear will remain strong and will be reproduced. In the lack of a complete and absolute separation of religion from the state, cruelty and irrationality of religions will control our lives. If the backward principles of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are not challenged by atheistic enlightenment, they will continue to humiliate people and spread the seed of hatred and violence.

Religions are no longer only “the opium of masses”, “the heart of a heartless world” and “the soul of a soulless condition”, in some parts of the world, they act as an organized body to make bloodbaths, commit atrocities, spread terrorism, and practice misogyny. Secularism and atheism are the solution for ignorance, misogyny, cruelty, hatred, and atrocities committed by religions. Atheists stand against god and religions and are for human dignity and freedom of mind, for truth and love, and for a better material condition of life.

So, long live atheism! Long live atheists who try to make the world a better place to live!

Another example of a living “humanist hero” (or heroine) is Taslima Nasreen. The following is an example of her writings; it was published in the June 2000 issue of UNESCO’s *The Courier*.

NO PROGRESS WITHOUT A SECULAR SOCIETY

[Taslima Nasreen. Born in Bangladesh, Ms. Nasreen has led a twin career as a doctor and writer. She is the author of six novels, several collections of poetry and essays, and an autobiography. Her works have been translated into over a dozen languages. Two of her novels, *Shame* and *My Girlhood*, were banned in her country, where Islamic fundamentalists issued a fatwa against her. Accused by her government of blasphemy, Ms. Nasreen has been living in exile since 1994. She has received numerous international awards, including India’s Ananda Award, the European Parliament’s Sakharov Prize and the International Humanist Award from the United States.]

Every day, women continue to be victims of rape, trafficking, acid-throwing, dowry deaths, and other kinds of torture. At the opening of this new century, women are still not considered as equal human beings in many parts of the world. Religion and patriarchy continue to have an all-encroaching hold on their lives, maintaining and justifying their age-old oppression. In some South Asian societies, this hold is even increasing. I do not believe that there can be real equality in a society dominated by religion.

Western countries speak repeatedly about the necessity of economic development to alleviate poverty. But this is not enough. Societies such as Saudi Arabia may be economically developed, but women are deprived of all rights.

The supremacy of religion is incompatible with freedom of expression, women’s rights and democracy. This is why I see religion as the main enemy of women’s development.

We have to act on several fronts at once. First of all, improving access to education. In a society like Bangladesh, 80 per cent of women are illiterate. For centuries women have been taught they are the slaves of men. It is very hard to change their minds, to make them aware of their oppression, to give them a sense of their independence.

This educational effort has to go hand in hand with a secular feminist movement in society. Such movements have to start within the country, and they cannot take hold when people are uneducated and unaware of their oppression. I’m not sure you can accomplish much from the outside, except to expose in the media the atrocities women in all too many countries face in their day-to-day lives.

In Muslim countries, this movement is emerging, but very timidly, and it has a slim margin of maneuver. It has the uphill task of fighting for the repeal of religious laws and the introduction of a uniform civil code. So far, it tends to be constituted by a few individual feminists who are forced to be diplomatic, to compromise with fundamentalists, be they men or women. But they are trying to change the system, step by step, and it will take a very long time. People are not yet ready to do away with religious laws that impact upon every aspect of society, from education and health to the workplace and the home.

For women's status to change, we also need enlightened leaders who believe in equality. In countries such as mine, women with a strong voice do not have the support of political leaders, whether they be men or women. Look at the countries in which women are in politics, or even heads of state. Does it follow that women in those countries are emancipated? Because of long-standing vested interests, such leaders continue to back measures that oppress women. They are not ideologically committed to changing these conditions. In South Asia, most of the women who become heads of state are religious, and like men, they adhere to the religious objectives of the Establishment.

I am the victim of a country where the prime minister is a woman. Because I went one step too far in denouncing religion and the oppression that it keeps women under, I had to leave my country. I have seen women oppose me when I talked about women's rights. They said straight out that God did not believe that women should have so many rights.

And I have met men in my country who are against what is said in the religious scriptures and believe in equality between men and women. It does not depend on gender. It depends on one's conscience. Muslim women who are wearing the veil and glorifying their subservience are obviously not going to better the lives of the oppressed.

Until a society is not based on religion and women are considered equal to men before the law, I do not think that politics will advance the cause of women. In Western countries, women are educated, they are treated equally, they have access to jobs. In these conditions, their participation in politics has a meaning.

Education, a secular feminist movement, and leaders – both men and women – committed to equality and justice. This is what it will take to change the dire conditions which too many women still face today. It will take a very long time, but we are here to work towards that end.

I encourage you, Dear, to learn more about Taslima Nasreen; she is definitely one who should be exalted; she wrote:¹¹

¹¹ This, and much more, is at her website at <http://www.taslimanasrin.com/index2.html>.

Humankind is facing an uncertain future. The probability of new kinds of rivalry and conflict looms large. In particular, the conflict is between two different ideas, secularism and fundamentalism. I don't agree with those who think the conflict is between two religions, namely Christianity and Islam, or Judaism and Islam. After all there are fundamentalists in every religious community. I don't agree with those people who think that the crusades of the Middle Ages are going to be repeated soon. Nor do I think that this is a conflict between the East and the West. To me, this conflict is basically between modern, rational, logical thinking and irrational, blind faith. To me, this is a conflict between modernity and anti-modernism. While some strive to go forward, others strive to go backward. It is a conflict between the future and the past, between innovation and tradition, between those who value freedom and those who do not.

Muslim clerics issue fatwas calling for the murder of such people; in contrast, their virtues should be extolled: what honesty, what intelligence, what bravery, what courage – in short, what heroes!

Would that “the masses” would exalt such real heroes (rather than sports and other entertainment “heroes” and various fictitious gods and prophets); would that such heroes would be described in popular books, movies, and TV series. And yet, Dear, notice that a tremendous advance has been made during the past decade, courtesy the creators of the wonderful internet. I agree with “Alan Gil” (I don't know if that's a pseudonym), who in his “deconversion story” wrote:¹²

I believe that the arrival of the Internet will prove to be the single greatest force in liberating the minds of mankind from the yoke of religion and that it may happen with comparatively startling rapidity.

In his “Catholic deconversion story”,¹³ the Brazilian “Fernando Silva” (a pseudonym?) said it beautifully and succinctly:

Praise the Internet, not the Lord.

Please, Dear, search the internet to learn about other such humanist heroes (but constrain yourself!) and do whatever is necessary to keep the internet free from control by religious kooks. And oh, yes, also get some exercise!

¹² Copied from <http://www.positiveatheism.org/mail/eml8317.htm> .

¹³ At <http://www.positiveatheism.org/mail/eml8453.htm> .