

Correcting a few Myths

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## NORIEGA'S CONVERSATION

There has been a report that Manuel Noriega has become a born again Christian while in jail awaiting trial. Assuming that this report is true, it is difficult to know whether one should feel that this is a positive development from either society's or Noriega's point of view. Certainly, Noriega's moral outlook left a great deal to be desired. He appears to be a classical sociopath, without moral values or a conscience.

The question that we would raise here is whether a conversion to fundamentalist Christianity *either* suddenly supplies a set of moral values that are better than nothing, *or* whether society is better off having a man as dangerous as Noriega a fundamentalist Christian.

History certainly shows us a number of instances of cruel and inhuman behavior done in the name of Christianity by people who professed to be Chris-

tians. It also shows us many cases of people who used their religion as an excuse for covering up their past evil activities. Whether either of these is Noriega's "reason" for his conversion is something only time will tell. We should not let ourselves be easily deceived by this development, however.

GS

## HOW MANY NON-BELIEVERS ARE THERE?

A recent survey done by the Graduate School of the City University of New York, polled 113,000 people in one of the largest surveys ever done of American religious belief. Among the surprises were that there are as many people who admit to having no religion (8%) as there are people who admit to being Methodists. This translates to 20,000,000 people in the United States. Although we always feel that far fewer people will admit to being non-believers to a pollster than *really* are non-believers, this is an encouraging figure. Although not all of these people are *necessarily* non theists, my guess is that a large enough proportion are (plus all those who wouldn't admit it to a pollster) that we are probably safe in estimating the non-theists at about 20,000,000 in the U.S.

We wonder why almost all of these people are so quiet? Do they still fear for their lives, their safety, or their jobs if their non-belief became known? If so, it is a sad commentary on just how much religious "liberty" we have in the United States.

GS

## THE AMERICAN RATIONALIST

Vol. XXXVI May-June, 1991 No. 1

(ISSN 0003-0708) is published Bi-Monthly by Rationalist Association, Inc., 2001 St. Clair Ave., St. Louis, MO 63144. Second-class postage paid at St. Louis, MO. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The American Rationalist, P.O. Box 994, St. Louis, MO 63188.

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Send all subscriptions, changes of address to: The American Rationalist, P.O. Box 994, St. Louis, MO 63188.

Send all manuscripts and books for review to the editor: Dr. Gordon Stein, P.O. Box 20446, Cranston, R.I. 02920.

Send all book orders to Book Service AR, 2001 St. Clair Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63144.

Subscription: \$6.00 yearly, two years \$11.00 the world over.

Sponsorship: \$10.00 per year. Back issues \$1.00 each.

Life Membership in Rationalist Association: \$175.00.

Renew when subscription is near expiration. See expiration date on your address label. When you move send old and new address.

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Back volumes available, write for information. Back volumes on microfilm available from University Microfilms International, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

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## CHRISTIAN ORIGINS: THE LATEST POOP

U.S. News and World Reports (12/10/90) has summarized some of the latest findings by scholars about the Bible. Here are some of the highlights:

- "It is often called 'The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.' But Jesus didn't write one word of it."

- "And while some of the writings bear the names of those who walked with Him on the dusty roads of Judea, centuries of scholarship have turned up little convincing evidence that His closest disciples did much writing, either."

- "Other scholars have concluded that the Bible is the product of a purely human endeavor, that the identity of the authors is lost forever and that their work has been largely obliterated by centuries of translation and editing."

- "Yet today, there are few Biblical scholars—from liberal skeptics to conservative evangelicals—who believe that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John actually wrote the Gospels."

- "As the Gospels tell it, Jesus assured His followers before He ascended to heaven that one day He would return to them. His disciples took that to mean within a few years."

- "But still there was no official canon. The first step in that direction, according to most modern scholars, came around A.D. 140 in response to the 'Mar-

cionite crises' and the growing threat of gnostic heretics in the church."

- "By the fourth century, the principle was set: The Apostles were the key to acceptance in the canon. Once the Apostles were dead and all their genuine works were in hand, the canon was considered closed."

- "While literally thousands of New Testament fragments have survived antiquity, some dating to as early as A.D. 125, no original Gospel manuscripts are known to exist."

- "And if tradition is correct, he [the Apostle Paul] wrote nearly half of the New Testament . . . For most of Christian history, Paul's authorship of the 13 letters bearing his name was widely accepted. But modern scholarship has raised serious questions, based on content as well as writing style, suggesting that some of the letters are pseudonymous—written by others who used Paul's name to lend them authority."

- "Martin Luther called it [the Epistle of James] 'an epistle of straw' that did not belong in the Bible because it seemed to contradict Paul's teaching that salvation comes by faith as a 'gift of God'—not by good works."

- "... disputes over translation [of the Bible] have always dogged Biblical scholarship. Even with the help of archeology and philology, absolute judgments as to the meaning of a 3,000-year-old language remain impossible. 'All our accounts of the Bible,' writes Bloom [author of *Book of J*], 'are scholarly fictions or religious fantasies.'"

- "Until the 10th century, the book [Revelation] was omitted from most Greek New Testaments. In the West, it was accepted in the fifth century . . . Martin Luther rejected the book as 'neither apostolic nor prophetic' and Reformers John Calvin and Huldreich Zwingli regarded it with suspicion."

Conclusion? We rationalists have been right all along in rejecting the Bible as the Word of God and have the confidence of modern scholarship to back us up. So keep swinging—you can only hit home runs.

BK

## FROM AR READERS

### Comments on AR Abortion Issue

#### DEAR DR. STEIN,

The arguments offered by Professors Boss and Fulmer, while erudite and thoughtful, continue in the traditional form the polarized contest around this troublesome issue. The touchstone of their positions, as with all other presentations I have seen on the subject, is personal sensibility. They quite properly proceed from the question, "What is right?"; and commonly an inescapable and integral aspect of "rightness" in personal and public life is the nature of individual conviction, ordinarily the foundation of responsible intention in an enlightened society.

However, humanity has reached the point, indeed long surpassed it, beyond which it can no longer afford to judge the abortion matter according to personally held precepts, in all their multifarious variety. The

level of world population has increased well beyond the capacity of natural and man-made systems to sustain it and still maintain a healthful balance between organisms and their environment. Mankind will not abandon the technology that characterizes modern times, which has proved so deadly to the biosphere. The only reasonable alternative is the stabilizing and then the reduction of human population levels in all but endemic tribal societies.

All tools to accomplish that necessary goal must be employed. In spite of the widest application of family planning and contraception practices, there will always be many unwanted pregnancies. It will eventually have to be universally understood that the return to health of our common world must have first priority when such matters are considered. It will then follow that all policy decisions concerning human reproduction will favor its control and reduction.

As with payment of taxes, military conscription, education of children and immunization against disease, it will be deemed necessary to allow abortion on demand as responsible public policy, accruing ultimately to the welfare of every society that embraces it and the greater world beyond. It simply can no longer be left to the vagaries of individual opinion.

Marty Rosman

#### Dear Dr. Stein:

Although most abortions are of embryos, there is a noticeable lack of use of that word by the "pro-lifers." They prefer to speak as though the unborn are children. Actually, they are physiologically parts of the mother, and when there is "kicking" inside the womb by a fetus, this is analogous to reflexive contractions in leg muscles. Both leg muscles and fetuses are alive; neither are reasonably termed "persons." However, even if such a term is applied, it makes no difference. The real issue in both abortion and execution of criminals is misapplication of human empathy, not personhood or "human rights." And to term abortion immoral is to beg the question. It is that which we want to decide.

Those who empathize with embryos forget how elementary these forms are. Human appearance is not detectable until the twelfth week, which is sometimes given as the end of the embryonic stage. Considering the suffering associated with raising unwanted children, it is wise to curb one's tendency to sympathize with a dying embryo. Besides, it is absurd to imagine pain in any but a quite momentary and elementary form in an embryo or fetus. The organization of ideas necessary to any consciousness of fear and other apprehensions is clearly not possible in the brain of an embryo or fetus, and "pain" is largely fear, as is evident in the self-control possible to a well-advised dental patient.

Dr. Boss's reference to increased child abuse, etc., since 1973 lacks reasonable attention to differences over the nation. For instance, a clipping from October, 1970, an Associated Press release, announces a great drop in deaths of mothers from abortions in California, since their legalization of abortion. What has been the history of child abuse, poverty in motherhood, delinquent fatherhood, and teenage parenting

in California since 1970? What is it in Arkansas or New York, and how does it link up with their changes in legislation?

A certain amount of callousness about death of living tissue is surely necessary. A living cabbage is ripped from the soil and brazenly cooked almost before it quits breathing its carbon dioxide. An adult catfish is cruelly hooked and thrown into a basket to die gasping pitifully for breath. Many of us are convinced that we could have drowned at two years of age without the least awareness of what was going on or any regrets about a lost future, and without any but elementary and short-lived pain.

Harry E. Mongold

Editor:

Your publication is always excellent, always stimulating, each issue more than a dated periodical, rather a valued addition to one's permanent library. Enclosed herewith is my check for renewal.

Marvin Miller

I recently received your July–August, 1990 issue. Thank you very much for giving me ammunition to fight off the “holy” hordes.

Victor Mendoza

I look forward to receiving your periodical than any other that I get! You have a certain academic (the word is “class”) that many other publications don't have.

Ken G. Pinke

I eagerly look forward to each new issue and enjoy them immensely.

John T. Porter

Yours is one of the finest freethinker's publications available today. I look forward to reading *The American Rationalist* for many years to come. Please keep up the good work.

David A. Marks

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## Quotelines by Katz

“It's an experience like no other experience I can describe, the best thing that can happen to a scientist, realizing that something that's happening in his or her mind exactly corresponds to something that's happening in nature. It's startling every time it occurs. One is surprised that a construct of the mind can actually be realized in the honest-to-goodness world out there. A great shock, and a great, great joy.”

—Leo Kadanoff, in James Gleick's  
*Chaos: Making a New Science*

“Religions are born and may die, but superstition is immortal.”

—Will and Ariel Durant in  
*The Age of Reason Begins*

“Gospel: Signifies good news. The good news that the gospel of the Christians came to announce to them that their God is a God of wrath, that he has predestined the far greater number of them to hell-fire, that their happiness depends on their pious imbecility, their holy credulity, their sacred ravings, on the evil they do to one another through hatred of one for another, . . . and on their antipathy for and persecution of all who do not agree with them or resemble them.”

—Voltaire in his *Philosophical Dictionary*  
(under item “Gospel”)

“The Pope has revealed that the hope for spiritual rebirth is in the East. He thinks the rest of us, especially those in the U.S., have sunk into materialism and hedonism. As a result, he does not think the future of the church is in the U.S.”

—The Rev. Richard McBrien, chairman of the  
dept. of theology at Notre Dame.

Joseph Sobran lampooned the school prayer proposal, saying that “religion is not the proper province of the public schools. I feel about prayer in the public schools roughly the way I feel about prayer in gas stations: You can pray there if you want to, but that's not really what the place is for.”

“Whenever one finds oneself inclined to bitterness, it is a sign of emotional failure.”

—Bertrand Russell

The Rev. Dean Kelly of the National Council of Churches said his mainstream Protestant and Eastern Orthodox organization opposes the diplomatic exchange for both constitutional and theological reasons. “Theologically, we believe that it perpetuates the medieval misconception that the Church of Christ (or any church) is or can be a temporal power. The fact that 106 nations are still involved in that diplomatic protocol surviving the Middle Ages is no reason for the U.S. to feel obliged to help perpetuate it; those 106 nations may not have the equivalent of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.”

# The Misconceptions of Evolution

By Ransom R. Traxler

In spite of our technical society and our public school system, most people believe in many misconceptions about evolution. This is due, in part, to educators who wish to avoid controversy or who do not fully understand the subject they teach. Furthermore, anti-evolutionists knowingly propagate these erroneous beliefs in their religious crusade against science. As a systematic biologist (in whose field organic evolution belongs), I wish to correct a few of these myths. These statements are not just personal beliefs—they are facts and concepts supported by volumes of research and agreed upon by those scientists who are most knowledgeable about the subject.

**Evolution is just a theory.** Evolution is a valid scientific theory, just like electricity, gravity, atoms, light, cells, and disease-causing germs are valid scientific theories, also. For example, we are taught that the earth orbits the sun; scientists call this the heliocentric theory. A theory in science is a highly-tested, verified and demonstrated explanation for observed facts, not “a guess or conjecture.” To state that evolution is only a theory is the same as stating that gravity is only a theory. Knowing this, who would still wish to contest it by jumping off a building?

**Evolution is not based on facts.** There are facts and theories about evolution. The facts of evolution are that the earth is billions of years old and that the life on it has changed over that time. The fossil record is clear that life living today differs greatly from that living, say, 300 million years ago. In between we have a vast collection of fossils that, as one looks at younger and younger specimens, become more modern-looking. The theories of evolution are about what caused this metamorphosis. We know several mechanisms that can produce changes in organisms: natural selection, genetic drift, the founder effect, genetic recombination and mutations are just a few. The debates scientists have are about the mechanism of evolution, not the fact that it has occurred. Practicing scientists do not doubt evolution.

**Darwin invented evolution.** Would one say that Newton invented gravity or Einstein invented time? The evidence for evolution had been known by scientists for centuries. In the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the early naturalists, who were also clergy, discovered that the earth was very old and that life was very different in the past. However, evolution was not generally accepted because no one knew how it was happening. In the nineteenth century Darwin was the first to propose a valid mechanism to explain what produced evolution. Since then his mechanism, natural selection, has been thoroughly

tested and was rapidly accepted by scientists everywhere. Likewise, continental drift was thought of since Benjamin Franklin's time, but it was not until the 1960's that a valid mechanism, plate tectonics, was discovered. Today scientists accept it as they accept evolution. We now have several mechanisms that explain how evolution occurs, discovered by many scientists over the last century.

**Evolution is caused by blind chance.** In all aspects of evolution (cosmic, chemical and organic) natural laws and principles can explain what has occurred. These influences act as a controlling force that guides evolution to predictable outcomes. Cosmic evolution is governed by the laws of physics, not chance. Gravity and nuclear reactions cause the birth and death of stars and planets (we have witnessed these events with telescopes). Chemical evolution abides by the laws of molecular reactions which can produce complicated organic molecules naturally (we have witnessed this in the laboratory). Organic evolution is directed by biological principles such as natural selection and genetics, which again we have observed in the laboratory. The odds are, at the moment of conception, over 70,000,000,000,000 (70 million million) to one that your genes will not come together in the combination now in your body. However, you are here and it was all controlled by the principles of genetics. Natural forces and laws govern and direct evolution, not “blind chance.”

**Complex organisms, such as ourselves, must have been designed by a more complex, intelligent creator.** This argument has been shown to be logically and scientifically false for at least a hundred years, yet it is still used by anti-evolutionists in their religious crusade. Logically for their argument to be true, two criteria must be adhered to:

One: everything as complex as a living organism must have been designed. No exceptions, or else we could be here not by design but by the natural process of evolution.

Two: everything as complex as a living organism must have a designer even more complex than it is. If this was not true, then we could have been designed by a less complex primate who, in turn, was designed by a less complex mammal, and on and on to a primordial cell. This is a teleologic view of evolution.

Since the two conditions above must be true or the design argument fails miserably then who designed our more-complex-than-we-are designer? And who, in turn, designed him? These two conditions require an infinite number of designers, each one more complex than the one he designed.

Scientifically, there is another choice instead of a designer or blind chance; evolution, which is guided by the laws and forces of nature. We have documented cases of changes produced by natural selection, which acts as a “designing force” to make organisms better suited to their environment. However, it is not as perfect as an omnipotent designer would be.

There are thousands of examples of poor design in nature. Many organisms use modified organs that barely suit their need; many organisms have vestigial parts that do not help them but could actually harm (wisdom teeth and appendix in us, hind limbs in whales and snakes, and much more). If this is the work of a designer, then it was a terrible job. We, with artificial selection (breeding) and genetic changes, are improving on some of the poor designs of nature.

**Creationism is another scientific explanation.** This is definitely not true. Creationism is a religious belief based on the Bible. Evolution is a scientific explanation based on observation, experimentation and objective evaluation. None of the vast store of scientific data we have supports a literal interpretation of the Book of Genesis. The small amount of “scientific” evidence propagated by “scientific creationists” has been investigated by the scientific community using the scientific method (just like evolution has been for over 150 years). Most of these claims were abandoned by scientists over two centuries ago because the data and experiments did not support them. The newest claims were found to be distortions and misrepresentations of firmly established data. Creationism is a religious belief and, as such, everyone is free to believe it or not; but as a scientific explanation, it has no support whatsoever in fact.

**Creationism should be given equal time in the science class because so many people believe in it.** Many people believe in astrology; should it be given equal time in an astronomy class? Or how about alchemy in a chemistry class? Numerology in a mathematics class? Atlantis and ancient astronauts in a history class? Flat-earth in a geography class? If some people believe that  $6 \times 9 = 42$ , should we give the students two multiplication tables and let them choose which one they will use? The science classroom is not where religious beliefs should be presented as fact for the student to accept or reject as he/she wants. Instead, the classroom is where the current knowledge in the field is presented to the students to increase their understanding of that subject.

**Evolution should not be taught because it is unimportant.** Evolution is to biology as atoms are to chemistry. It is the unifying concept that connects genetics, anatomy, medical science, taxonomy and many others into a comprehensible framework. It is THE central idea of biology that ties together all its subparts. Evolutionary biology explains the distribution of life on this planet, tissue rejection in transplants, and how our body works. In other fields cosmic evolution is the center of astronomy (it tells us how the universe and stars function) and earth evolution is the basic concept of geology (it tells us how the earth came to be as it is today).

What would chemistry be like without atoms to explain how and why chemicals react as they do; or

physics without the concept of energy being able to convert into different forms to explain how a steam engine works? What if a teacher felt that atoms or energy were unimportant and ignored them in his/her chemistry or physics class? Without the why and how explained by evolution, much of science becomes a meaningless collection of facts with no logical association or understanding.

**Evolution should not be taught because it is contrary to some people's religious beliefs.** First of all our government is religiously neutral according to our Constitution. Therefore, religion cannot be a factor in determining the curriculum. Secondly, the teacher has the obligation to present to the students all the knowledge of the subject being taught based on their level of understanding. Any science teacher who fails to present evolution properly to the students betrays the trust placed in them by the public and acts in an unprofessional manner.

**Evolution should not be taught because it promotes the religion of secular humanism.** Evolution is a science and that is all it is. People are free to form whatever philosophies or religions they want based on whatever source they want. Some people have formed their belief system around old books variously translated through the years. Primitive people use a god or gods to explain ordinary occurrences in nature because that is the only way they can comprehend the world around them. Scientists of all religions accept evolution because it is the best scientific explanation we have not because of some religious reason. As a religiously-neutral science, it should be taught as such in the classroom.

**Evolution is anti-God.** Impossible, for science just like mathematics is neutral towards any religious belief. Science and religion are two separate philosophies dealing with different realms. Religion deals with the supernatural and cannot be supported by experimentation—it must be accepted by faith alone. Science deals with the natural universe and its discoveries can be confirmed or disproved by experimentation—scientific ideas are accepted by the scientific community based on evidence. Evolution, as any science, can never say anything about the “Ultimate Cause” of the universe and our existence; these can only be answered by religion. Since these two philosophies deal with different realms, there is no basic conflict between them.

**Evolutionists are atheists.** Many scientists and science teachers are devoutly Christian or Jewish. Some of the great founders of evolutionary biology were strong theists. A few of us are atheists. This is because we are able to separate the two realms of our lives—the spiritual and the material. Since evolution does not deny the existence of a Supreme Being, one is free to hold whatever beliefs there are in one. Saying that “evolutionists are atheists” is just like saying “apple-lovers are orange-haters.” One can like (or dislike) both apples and oranges.

**Scientists believe in evolution as their religion since they do not believe in God.** The religious beliefs of scientists are as varied as it is in any group of professional people. Unfortunately our secondary school textbooks and various media sources like to use the phrase “Scientists believe. . .” when-

ever they present evolution as if the scientists hold a unique religious belief. This is especially harmful when facts are presented, because it gives the student or layperson the idea that the facts are not supported by evidence and can be accepted as questionable. What would happen if a teacher were to say "Mathematicians believe that  $5 \times 6 = 30$ " or "Historians believe that we fought a civil war in the 1860's?" Instead of saying "Scientists believe in evolution" one should say "Scientists accept evolution based on the overwhelming objective evidence in its favor."

**Evolution is 'The Big Lie' that Satan tempted Eve with in the Garden of Eden.** This may not sound like a scientific statement, but it is repeated frequently by the 'scientific creationists.' In fact one such group the Institute for Creation Research, publishes a book entitled *The Lie: Evolution* with a large poster showing a serpent holding an apple marked EVOLUTION. These people state that scientists lie while they spread "The Truth." So then what is "The Truth?"

Creationists are the masters of prevarication. In their presentations they frequently make false statements about science and scientists; anyone familiar with biology or geology can spot them. Then why do they do it?

One reason could be that they are ignorant about science and, therefore, make many mistakes. However, they say that they are experts on evolution and have some degree in engineering or theology to prove it. A practicing scientist knows these statements are false and ridiculous; many of us have exposed them as such. Then why are they still frequently repeated?

The other possibility is that these anti evolutionists know the statements are false, yet repeat them anyway. Many of the "scientific creationist" debaters make statements they can not prove; in fact, many scientists have proved their claims as false and they have admitted their error. Yet in their next debate or presentation, they repeat these falsehoods unabatedly.

I can show anyone the scientific evidence to support what I said above. This is more than what 'scientific creationists' can do. In this country anybody can hold whatever religious beliefs they want to; however, when they say that these beliefs are scientific and should be taught in public schools, they must produce evidence to support what they say. I have always found it amazing how many falsehoods and distortions are said by those spreading "The Truth."

There are many more misunderstandings about evolution which a quality science education will expose. Until such teaching becomes the standard, we scientists and educators need to reveal these myths for what they are—an attempt to mislead the public and discredit the scientists and teachers who have devoted their lives to increasing our knowledge of the universe solely for the purpose of converting students and the public to a specific religious belief system.

*The Misconceptions of Evolution was the basis for Traxler's lecture before the Missouri Association for Creationism meeting in April, 1991.*

Ransom R. Traxler is Director of St. Louis Association for the Teaching of Evolution (SLATE).



## The Omnipotent Designer

By Daniel K. Speer

Hope springs eternal as evidenced from the unending stream of sincere letters to America's mass media proclaiming that Christianity is the answer to all the world's problems. This in spite of nearly two thousand years of Christian history on earth that leaves an awful lot to be desired, if not downright despised.

As the old cliché runs: Christianity has never been tried. Of course it hasn't . . . Men (and now women) were not designed to practice Christianity. When you think of God the omnipotent designer, you must never forget that God was sorry he made human after he designed man and then observed the (bad) product. Why in heaven's name didn't God's omni-science tell him that this was the wrong way to design humans (assuming that you want them to be moral, a fact almost all theists would accept).

Perhaps, the brilliant German philosopher and existentialist Friedrich Nietzsche had a more perceptive view of God the omnipotent designer when he wrote the following in his last and most controversial work, *The Antichrist*: The old God, wholly "spirit," wholly the high-priest, wholly perfect, is promenading his garden: he is bored and trying to kill time. Against boredom even gods struggle in vain. What does he do? He creates man—man is entertaining . . . But then he notices that man is also bored.—So God created women. In that act he brought boredom to an end—and also many other things!

After having ruminated on Nietzsche's quoted chain of events, I can only conclude from a design point of view that woman was a gorgeous accident at the end of a chain of experimental events.

The essence of Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity is that it sets God and his creation, man, apart from and opposed to nature, and this is disastrous and suicidal, not to mention illogical and nihilistic. Some examples in the New Testament: 1) Love thine enemies (suicidal?); 2) Turn the other cheek (nihilistic?); 3) Love your neighbor as yourself (illogical?); and, 4) Lust not (disastrous glandular design?).

The holes that theologians dig and from which they are then unable to extricate themselves are endless. Theology is supposedly the study and knowledge of God. A cursory survey of leading theologians throughout history, along with all their various contradictory speculations, can be summed up in two words—some knowledge!



# Buddha – The Secular Humanist

By Jyoti Shankar

There is an appalling ignorance of Buddha's contribution to Secular Humanist Thought. Buddha was born in India, in the state of Bihar, in a town called Gaya, on 15th May, – 624. He was a prince and had a wife and a son when he left his palace to seek answer to question, "If there is God why do people inevitably face Disease, Old age, and Death?"

We do not know if Brahminism was a widespread political depressant at this period as a number of caricaturists would like us to believe. What Buddha did was what everyone else could do if he or she had enough guts. Like the Beatles he sought the Gurus, smoked dope etc. as they prescribed and was disenchanted, realizing that organizing a Church more like the Peace Core Volunteers was the best thing he could do to serve people in fighting disease, poverty. His Church was called the Sangha and the first organization for public service which treated women as equal to men. When Buddhism became ritualistic and religious there were still Women Priests or monks in the Church. Needless to say that Peter and Paul took this model of Sangha when they founded the Organized Christian Church 600 years after the death of Buddha. There was commerce both by land and the sea between the mediterranean cities and those of India enough to prevent any body of knowledge being called East or West.

I am not defending Buddhism but I found the necessity of exonerating Buddha from being dubbed as a Hindu reformer who led untouchables against Brahmin domination, which is not only untrue but missing his main contribution to oriental atheistic materialistic secular humanist thinking which existed side by side with the Greek philosophers of which the West takes notice of after Bertrand Russell but ignores the continuation of the enlightenment throughout the rest of the oriental history of thought in spite of several unsuccessful Middle-Eastern Judeo-Christian attempts to Dark Age the Orient.

Most of the original writings survived through scribing students who kept these palm-leaf volumes as private property and the orient survived from the Dark-Age because there was no library to be burned by the Crusaders. I know how these things happen because we had several such inherited ancestral property of palm leaf volumes in our house, until we decided that Secular Democracies can be trusted and handed them over to the Public Museum.

As I have stated elsewhere I found zero books on Freethought in the American Consulate Library

while all the books on the Buddhist Literature were available in the British Council Library in Madras in the sixties when I took these notes. In this country I found one book which does not hide the fact that Hinayana Buddhism is atheistic is *W.L. Reese's Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*. (p. 72.) I also have to refer the truth seekers to the research done by Rhys Davis, Dr. Keith, Dr. J.G. Jennings, Dr. Oliver Jayatilake, Dr. Ambedhkar, Dr. Jadhava, who have taken more trouble to find the original palm-leaf literature in Pali language and translate rather than relying on the fables from Indian Story tellers.

The next para has a quote from "What Men Believe" by F.G. Herod taken from my notes based on the several locally available sources on the subject which I will omit for the sake of not cluttering the line of thought with the exhibition of my scholarliness. I do not claim to be an authority on this subject because dead history can be transformed by political power whichever way it chooses.

Herod: "He had many adventures. First he lived with two celebrated brahmin teachers and became as famous as they . . . 'It led . . . nor to peace nor to spiritual knowledge.' So with five friends he turned to yoga. In the jungle he practised fasting and meditation, until one day he as a result of starvation he fell down unconscious. When he came to himself he realized how stupid it was to abuse his body this way. To the disgust of his friends he sat down to a good meal. They left him and again he wandered alone." (p. 31).

"Under the pipal tree he had two possible courses before him. He could devote the remainder of his life to seeking Nirvana for himself, or he could spend it teaching his fellow men . . . He chose the unselfish course and devoted his life to his fellow mankind" (p. 39).

What happened at the pipal tree was really the knowledge that dawned on the Buddha that no one can survive without food or water for long. He decided not to pursue the Yogic course of fasting and meditation till he would somehow reconcile an Omnipotent Creator with the world's Law of Three Inevitable Forms of Misery (Disease Old Age and Death), but to use his economic and political power to organize the Sangha to train volunteers who could at least help people in their fight against disease, by establishing such camps around the country.

This was on December 8th, 589 according to Mahayana Buddhists. He died at the age of 80 sometime in 544. The Buddhists all over the world, and the Indian



Government, celebrated his 2500th Death Anniversary in 1956, as they did his 2600th Birth Day in 1976.

If you look at Indian History and that of the east all kings become Buddhists because this was the new and easier way of helping their subjects live better lives, some kind of a primitive department of Public Health and Welfare. Thus Emperor Ashoka (rule 268–232) got converted to Buddhism, his Rule became the Golden Age of Ancient Indian History. The Ashoka Symbol in the Indian Flag was Ashoka's carving in Stone of Buddha's Secular law of Justice and Equality for all humans. He so strongly believed that Buddhism would serve for peace between nations that he sent Buddhist monks to Syria, Egypt, Kyrene and Macedonia to the west and Srilanka and the Far East where the pali literature survived to tell us about this man and his works. Subsequently Chinese historians came to India to learn Indian languages so they can translate Buddha's teachings in Chinese, thus carrying the Buddhism to the far east.

For details of the history of the spread of Buddhism please refer to *The Buddha's Teachings*, published by the Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, Tokyo. Although this is Mahayana Buddhist version, it is neat.

But Buddha's active life and live contacts made him a legend and the center of the largest religion today. Unfortunately the atheistic teachings are to be found with the less popular branch of Hinayana Buddhism than with the highly ritualistic Mahayana Buddhism. Thus if Buddhists of the popular Buddhism are surprised and tried to interpret my quotes of Buddha differently they will not be able to explain many of the recorded historical facts of the pre Christian era.

To quote Herod: "This was an extraordinary change. The reliance upon one's self which Gautama taught had become reliance on supernatural powers. In his teaching there is no place for priests, temples and gods. Though born as a Hindu he swept them all aside as useless. Yet within a few centuries of his death they began to reappear in his name. Magnificent stupas, or monuments were built to venerate his remains, and he began to assume the likeness of god. Today Buddhist temples, priests, and deities are strewn across Asia in bewildering number and variety. Magic and myth have made Buddhism for millions a religion of superstitions little different in value from popular Hinduism. As Buddhism developed its scriptures multiplied too . . . Incredible myth began to surround the life-story of Buddha." (p. 40).

"One remarkable fact is that there is hardly any Buddhism left in India. After King Ashoka's death, Hinduism gradually revived and its priests naturally opposed Buddhism. Then in the 6th century the white Huns invaded India and savagely destroyed hundreds of monasteries and murdered thousands of monks. As the Buddhism of India was pacifist, we can readily understand that by the 15th century it had virtually disappeared."

Whether Buddhists and atheists like it or not Buddha was an atheist, and philosophically a materialist. The following are my free translation of Buddha's teaching as preserved by his Hinayana disciples:

## Fundamental Principles of Buddha's Scepticism

Do not Believe just because it is spoken of and rumoured by many. Do not Believe because it is written in the Scriptures. Do not believe because it is traditional. Do not believe because your Guru told you so. But using your own senses and your reasoning come to a rational view of the truth and adopt the ones that will promote general welfare.

—*Anguttara Nikaya 1:189.*

## Buddha's Atheism

If God was the origin of everything, if he was the controlling power of everything in this world, then Man is just His puppet. It also means that only God is responsible for all the misery in this world. Therefore it becomes impossible for me to worship a God.

—*Jataka 5:238.*

If God made everything why did he not make it a better world without the profound miseries in it? If god rules this world, why is the world full of Injustice, Cheating, and Lies? What did he want to accomplish by creating such a world?

—*Jataka, 6:208.*

Your God does not seem to know his own origin and you say he knows everything.

—*Majjima Nikaya 1:326.*

No body could have found the origin of the Universe.

—*Samyutta Nikaya 2:178.*

They said that someone attained "Nirvana," euphemistically when someone was dead, to avoid the shock from an abrupt statement. It means clear sky, nakedness, nothingness, emptiness. It took the special meaning of some other state of existence with latter religious inventions and interpretations.

Buddha's advice to his students before his death: "My body is falling apart like a decaying wagon . . . realize that nothing is permanent and learn from it the emptiness of human life . . . the body was born of parents nourished by food; just as inevitable are sickness and death," shows that he was a philosophical materialist of his times.

Prof. Rhys Davids in *Dialogues of the Buddha* (ii. p. 46) states Buddha's Indian Materialist concept of the human body as: "Man is composed of four elements. When man dies, his earthly element returns to earth, the watery element returns to water, the fiery element returns into fire, the airy element returns into the air. Wise and fool alike, when the body dissolves, are cut off, perish, do not exist any longer."

Buddha emphasized on empiricism and reasoning as opposed to mysticism. He changed his name from Siddharta Gautama to Buddha to mean one who uses his intellect or reasoning. One south east asian king who was a low (Hina) Buddhist tried to prove that there was no soul in humans that he set up the following experiment to be part of his legal system. Any convicted murderer facing death penalty will be burnt alive in a sealed cremation urn. The urn with the convict will be weighed before and after the cremation. If there was a soul in the body as contented by the traditionalists, the body after death would weigh

less. But the unchanged weight proved that there was no soul.

Another common object of the legends of this period was the tree. Somehow there grew a cult around the tree under which Buddha got knowledge because of the Buddhist idea of Banyan Trees as good, healthy and cheap public schools. This will explain the warning about the tree of knowledge in the Bible as a reaction against spreading Buddhist atheism. Spread of knowledge has always been against organized religion and blind faith.

Most people are unable to distinguish between the two versions of the Buddha coupled with similar legends attributed to Christna, Maha Vira. Mr. Rhys Davids in his introduction to the Buddhist Suttas says that Buddha's teachings are "an earnest and modest sort of atheism." Rahul Sankrityayan said that Buddha was an atheist as his teachings proved. Dr. Ambedkar, who was one of the leading constitution makers of India, converted himself to Buddhism, stated that anything contrary to reason in those teachings must be rejected as not that of the Buddha but as interpolations by zealous disciples.

The problem of worshipping Buddha really came after his death as a result of his royal ancestry and the kings set up memorials to this man to be their standards. I still see masses adore royalty, even if they swear by democratic principles and freedom. To the ordinary person kings are like gods. They fear kings more than gods because of the "justice" here and now.

In my own short life I have seen how paying respect to a dead man can develop into big rituals from processions to wreaths to temple worship of statues with all religious trappings of their backgrounds. That explains the natural origin of religions. To make this man god all you need to do is just add "Thou shalt not worship any other god," as a group loyalty rule which prohibits freethought.

On August 13th, 1983, I attended the 150th celebration of Ingersoll's Birthday in Peoria and when I looked at Ingersoll's statue I said to myself: "May be the kings who made the statues for Buddha wanted to protect them from bird crap and other natural erosion that they started a new religion without knowing it." Many Christians still nourish and spread the rumour that at death bed Ingersoll asked a priest to get god's forgiveness. If this can happen to a 19th century American, it can happen to the Buddha.

Even if the Freethought Halls and Ingersoll Museums of today become temples of Americanism of the future may be it is worth building them today so long as we are able to keep an accurate account of what they did and said. Teaching empiricism to his disciples Buddha laid down simple rules of accuracy of reporting: "If you have heard so, say Thus have I heard. If you have seen only then say Thus I have seen." But in a world which does not care for accuracy he himself became a legend.

Religious extremists in India stopped a public showing of the film JESUS and forced Baptist ministers who brought the film to leave. Many villagers, however, protected the pastors as they fled, promising to arrange for another showing of the film. The group that stopped the showing has been opposing Christianity in the area for several years.

# Axe Eupraxophy

By Jane Conrad

Madison Avenue would hang its head at the term "Eupraxophy." The concept is interesting but if Joe Blow from Main Street can't spell it or pronounce it, a failure before it begins!

Let's examine the reasons why "atheism" on the surface appears to be a failure when it is really a growing unorganized force:

1. The association of the word "atheist" with Madalyn Murray O'Hair's crude and vulgar behavior. Stomping on Bibles is not the way to win friends.

2. The association with "Communism." Too few people recognize that Communism consisted of political, social, economic, as well as religious content. The economic failure has been due to over-extending military activities. The desire for power is present in all political systems whether it be the Soviet government or our own.

3. Anti-Semitism expressed towards Karl Marx. Although his parents had converted from Judaism to Christianity before he was born, the Christian world usually associated "atheism" as being an invention of Jews. Because Judaism permits free inquiry in a way that Christianity does not, there are more non-believers from a Jewish heritage than any other background.

4. There is a failure to recognize that "religion" is comprised of more than one component. While reliance and obedience to an unprovable supernatural deity is considered the prime component, there are other aspects: identity, community, concern for others, emotional support, ethical values. Almost every atheist I know is a relatively religious person concerned with the welfare and happiness of others. In essence, that is "religion" without belief in a deity.

Many years ago, I suggested that "Freedom From Religion Foundation" should more accurately be called "Freedom From God Foundation." I have yet to meet a member of that organization who, from a psychological standpoint, was not a truly religious person who had discarded belief in a "God" and accepted personal responsibility to meet the uncertainties of life.

5. Fear of loss of employment and discrimination if we publicly acknowledge our atheism. As one who has had to remove her name from the telephone book to stop threats and crank calls, whose home and automobile have been vandalized by neighbors who called themselves Christians, who was belittled by Mormons during a town meeting at which she presided as the Mayor, I am fully aware that one must have a thick skin and courage. It isn't easy.

6. The overall intelligence of the American public is probably lower than we think. Many years of religious indoctrination have resulted in the loss of intellectual capacity to question and use rational thinking. Our educational system fails to teach the reasons why

religion exists. Time has proven the truth of my thesis expressed in *Pillars of Religion: Ignorance, Indoc-trination, Inadequacy* written long ago. With the ad-vent of cable television and satellites, remote cultures are gaining access to information that was not avail-able in years past. But indoctrination into beliefs of the past does continue and people fail to examine the contradictions between their beliefs and the reality of what takes place. Emotional needs have always been met by religion and it continues to function in that manner.

7. Atheists have failed to get corporate funds to support their efforts. With money, you can get the television time necessary to enlighten the public.

Einstein, Edison, Carnegie, Burbank had affiliations with major industries of today. Perhaps that is where we should seek the money. Industry will need enlight-ened individuals and Atheists show that they have the ability to use critical thinking, the basic tool of the future.

8. Atheist and Humanist literature must be writ-ten in language ordinary churchgoers can compre-hend. Too many articles are beyond the comprehen-sion of elementary school students. Our target should be ordinary people, not upper level college graduates.

These are the problems. Can we develop a program to solve them? DREAM ON, JANE!

## Here's How They Do It

By David C. Morrow

An explanation of some problems in religion and magic occurred to me a decade or so ago when an ex-sister-in-law told me about an exorcism involving one of her older relatives.

During the 1940s or so this person, her great-aunt if memory serves, began to be troubled by certain dreams. After suffering these dreams and disturbing thoughts and seeing other supernatural signs about her, the aunt decided to consult a *curandero* of high repute who lived in Matamoros, in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, some 120 miles south of Corpus Chris-ti, Texas where she lived. She and her sister, with another relative, drove to Matamoros to consult him.

This "curer" interviewed the ladies and performed whatever particular rites were called for by his brand of magic and then, perhaps on the basis of the clever psychotherapy these concealed, announced that the dreams were caused by the aunt's deceased grand-mother. The old lady had been buried with a piece of jewelry she wanted the aunt to have. The *curandero* explained that on a certain night a week or so thence, presumably when the stars were right, the sister must return to Matamoros for a seance with him and the aunt must go to their grandmother's grave in Corpus Christi.

On the appointed night, again I imagine after the expected ceremonies, one lady met with the witch doctor in Matamoros while the other, doubtless with much fear of ghosts, not to say the cops, went to the cemetery. At midnight, while of them sat before the Mexican in his house watching him enter into a trance, the other saw him step from behind a tree some 120 miles away, hand her a piece of jewelry, and vanish again into the shrubbery.

Afterward, the aunt was no longer troubled by her dreams. How much she paid for the seances (and the jewelry) I do not know.

Hispanic culture is not without other instances of "bilocation." For example, a certain 16th century fe-male saint whose name I cannot recall was safely immured in a convent outside Madrid, Spain while

conducting missionary activities throughout what is now the United States' Southwest. Perhaps it was out of respect for her family and traditions that Francis, who was thirty and had a college degree, offered no further explanation for her great-aunt's experience.

I recalled some anthropological studies I had read, and then an instance in high school when I walked up to a person I thought was in one of my classes and began talking about some matter only to find him completely puzzled. Actually, it was his twin who was in my class. Many peoples consider the birth of twins magical or even frightening. Some Amazonians log-ically believe it proof a wife has committed adultery, but early Europeans seem to have credited twins with extraordinary powers—Romulus and Remus, for ex-ample.

The *curandero* must have been twins, and it must have taken a week to find an appropriate piece of jewelry, send one twin to Corpus Christi, and then set up the incident by long distance. That this psycho-drama actually alleviated the aunt's problem, is the real wonder.

Such things can have even more widespread effects even then amusing pranks or magic acts and their accumulation in folklore. Bilocation is the least impor-tant of these. A deceased person's twin might make him appear resurrected to those not aware of his dual nature, something that may have happened many times in ages past.

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One pernicious consequence of belief in the para-normal is economic. Millions of dollars are spent on casting horoscopes, purchasing food fads and pursu-ing dubious diets and vitamin regimens. Parapsychol-ogy also exists at the expense of serious science: Gresham's Law applies to paranormal beliefs, so that bad science, such as creationism or astral projection, drives out good science—or at least muddles it in the public mind.

# A Heated Discussion Between Satan and an Atheist

By Bernard Katz

**Atheist:** I see that you've just come back from Florida. But where's your tan? Did you forget to grill another theologian on your barbecue? Or did you get sick after eating too many Christians?

**Satan:** Oh, all of that. I also took care of a few Jews—just to keep my hand in even though I was only down there for a short time. I was going to northern Canada where it's much colder, but I was offered a free trip by a real estate operator in southern Florida. So I went down but I didn't stay too long. You see, it was hottern hell! By the way, I'm glad I bumped into you. You are, you know, my natural ally.

**Atheist:** You shouldn't say that! After all, I don't believe in you either.

**Satan:** What do you mean either?

**Atheist:** Why, you and God of course. The two of you are like Siamese twins: God who's supposed to do good, and you who's supposed to do evil. Without the one, there is no need for the other—much like the Dutch Cleanser twins.

**Satan:** So you believe that I'm merely the fig-leaf of one's imagination?

**Atheist:** Absolutely!

**Satan:** Then you believe that God also does not exist? That God either never existed or has been dead so long that for all practical purposes he may never have existed?

**Atheist:** Exactly, it's the same thing. Otherwise, God must be alive and all the rest of us are dead! We atheists hold that God is an April Fool's joke played on boobs by get-rich-quick ministers, priests, rabbis and ayatollahs. Remember those modern Elmer Gantrys: Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart. The first Adam-splitting gave us Eve, a force which man in all ages since has never gotten under control—for they reaped this biblical explosion. Now here's something for you to think over:

Nietzsche said: "God is dead."

God replied: "Nietzsche is dead."

But Zeus topped them: "They're both dead!"

This is just another way of saying that man is certainly stark raving mad. He cannot make a flea, yet he makes gods by the hundreds!

**Satan:** You're making me sweat—and I'm supposed to be used to the heat! Suppose I tell you that you can find God within you?

**Atheist:** I'll accept that if you mean that God's the lower intestinal tract. If you like, I picture God as a guy who tapes a worm to a branch just to give a bird a hernia. Or as a guy who wouldn't even give a Polaroid to someone who only had nine seconds to live!

**Satan:** Tell me. Didn't God create the world in just six days?

**Atheist:** No. He screwed around for six days—and then pulled an all-nighter!

**Satan:** If you think that God doesn't exist, what about me?

**Atheist:** Hell, you may believe yourself to be a real personality. But to me, you're just another name for the scarecrow in the corn field.

You remind me of Ginsburg, who was a very religious man.

While visiting a cousin in St. Louis, he said to him:

"Our rabbi is so holy that he talks to God."

"Talks with God?" said his relative. "How do you know that?"

"He told us so himself!" replied Ginsburg.

"But maybe he lied!"

"Dummy! Would a man who talks to God lie?"

**Satan:** Then you don't worry about hell?

**Atheist:** Not at all. To you hell is God's penitentiary with you as its warden. To me, hell is just the name of a place paved with the tongues of theologians. You've been propagandizing for ages that the world is controlled by your demons. Well, that's a crock. All that happens is that everyone carries around his own manufactured demons.

**Satan:** What about witches? Aren't witches real because they've been burnt for centuries?

**Atheist:** To people who believe in such fables, a witch shall be put to death. But to me a witch is a mother-in-law who has made good.

**Satan:** Have you ever read the Bible?

**Atheist:** Many times.

**Satan:** Haven't you learned anything from it?

**Atheist:** Certainly. For instance: "The leopard shall lie down with the kid—but every morning they'll have to come up with a fresh kid." And this one: "Lead us not into temptation. Just tell us where it is—we'll find it." And this one: "You must pay for your sins. If you've already paid—please ignore this notice." My favorite Commandment is: "Thou shalt not omit adultery!" Come to think about it, if everybody obeyed the Ten Commandments, there would be no Eleven O'Clock news.

But there's one big thing I don't like about the Bible. I can't understand many of the things it talks about—and nobody else can that I've talked to. It's like when Father Dillan was called to give the last rites to a man badly hurt in a factory accident.

The priest bent over him and asked: "Do you believe in god the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy ghost?"

The man replied: "Father, here I am dyin' and you're bothering me with riddles!"

**Satan:** Don't you think that the idea that we're all brothers and sisters under God is starting to take hold? That Christians are now beginning to love the Jews?

**Atheist:** Of course. Every loving Christian believes

he should own one.

**Satan:** You atheists are giving me Excedrin headache 666. That's a beastly one, you know. If Moses . . . you know Moses, he's the guy who came down from the mountain shouting: "Don't call me Charleton!" If Moses would come down from Mt. Sinai right now, I'd tell him he would be better off carrying aspirin tablets.

With that Satan broke off and disappeared in a cloud of car exhaust.



### THEOLOGY IN THE AGE OF SCIENTIFIC REASONING

By Nancey Murphy

Is it possible that we scientists have been fooled all along? Is it possible that religion and theologians *have* been using scientific method all along, and that their results are just as factual and valid as the work of scientists? Yes says Nancey Murphy. She has doctorates in both philosophy and theology. Even though she now teaches in a fundamentalist college, can we take her seriously?

Most of the loss of credibility that theology as a legitimate scholarly process has suffered in recent centuries has been due to the work of David Hume. Hume attacked both the design argument and the idea of revelation in so powerful a way that theology had little left to stand upon. Murphy thinks, however, that all is not lost for the legitimacy of theology. She feels that the work of Pannenberg, modified somewhat, provides a way out of Hume's attack. Where Pannenberg failed, she thinks, was in his inadequate understanding of the nature of the scientific method. If this deficiency can be remedied (and Murphy thinks it can), then theology will become included in scientific methodology. This is sort of like saying that the Nazi's really *were* humanitarians, but to show that this is really so, we must first redefine the word "humanitarian" slightly.

To accept Murphy's argument, one must first decide that *at all costs* the validity of theology must be salvaged. I would just as soon let it go if it has outlived its usefulness. Murphy tries to employ *anything* that is not logically false to validate theology. One can talk, for example, about revelation being revealed through history, whatever that may mean. If it is an unfalsifiable definition of revelation, that doesn't matter to Murphy. As she outlines Pannenberg's system (p 33-34), I find it contains two major flaws: 1) history has *not* confirmed the resurrection of Jesus, and therefore, 2) that cannot be the central event of all history. That kind of knocks the wind out of Pannenberg's sails to the extent that *nothing* (including Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, nor Imre Lakatos) can save it. Murphy tries valiantly, but in the end I think she fails. Her efforts are worth reading, as they show exactly how

far she tries to go and how desperately she tries to salvage the unsalvageable. The book will stir up a small ray of hope among the theists and Christians, but someone will come along eventually to formally refute it.

Gordon Stein, Ph.D.

Cornell University Press, 1990, 215 page hardback, \$26.95. Available from Book Service AR, 2001 St. Clair Ave., St. Louis, MO 63144, for price plus \$2. handling.

### PERMISSION TO BELIEVE: *Four Rational Approaches to God's Existence*

By Lawrence Kelemen

This is one of the finest cases of setting up a straw man and then knocking him down that I have ever encountered. Kelemen tries to argue for a belief in God on rational grounds. First he has to dispose of atheism as being irrational. He does this by *misdefining* atheism in such a way that it does become irrational (but no more irrational than a belief in God). If Kelemen had ready *any* scholarly presentation of atheism (e.g., George H. Smith's *Atheism: The Case Against God*, or Michael Martin's *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*), he would have seen that his definition is false. He has taken what I call "The Clergyman's Definition" of atheism, one that virtually no atheist holds (today or in the past), and he proceeds to knock it down. Unfortunately for him, atheism emerges unscathed because it is *not*, as Kelemen says "the state of knowing that God does not exist." No one, of course, can now know that God either does not *or* does exist. The evidence just isn't there now. What he may mean is "believe" rather than "know."

Looking at the short bibliography at the end of the book, we can see why the author is so ignorant about atheism. There are *no* books about atheism listed there. Perhaps our author should have read *something* about the subject before shooting off his mouth. In short, this book is worthless or worse. The remainder is a thinly disguised plea for Jews (and others) to believe in God, even if there are no rational "proofs" for his existence. I thought the author was going to live up to his promise to supply some rational proofs, but he doesn't. The world could do with *more* rationality, not less, so let's hope people aren't listening to Kelemen.

Gordon Stein, Ph.D.

Targum Press, Southfield, MI, 1990, 104 page paperback, \$8.95. Available from Book Service AR, 2001 St. Clair Ave., St. Louis, MO 63144, for price plus \$2. handling.

### SCIENCE IN A NANOSECOND: Illustrated Answers to 100 Basic Science Questions

By James A. Haught

This is a good concept, only slightly flawed in the carrying out process. The author presents 100 basic science questions, many of which would have occurred to a child of perhaps 8 to 12 (maybe older, since few of the adults to whom any of these questions would have been asked would have been able to correctly answer them). Here are the correct answers. So far so good. The only real problems are that some of the questions (a small percentage) are *not* ones anyone but a young astrophysicist would ask (e.g., "Einstein failed in his

quest for a 'unified field theory' covering all the four forces in the universe. Has progress been made since his death?"). The other problem is that there is virtually nothing (with the exception of a few things on DNA) on the *biological* sciences. With this unfortunate omission, the book should really be called *Physical Sciences in a Nanosecond*. With those small limitations, this is a useful book for the young scientist or otherwise alert and curious child.

Gordon Stein, Ph.D.

Prometheus Books, 1991, 110 page paperback (with illustrations on almost every page), \$12.95. Available from Book Service AR, 2001 St. Clair Ave., St. Louis, MO 63144, for price plus \$2. handling.

## **MAYBE YES, MAYBE NO: A Guide for Young Skeptics**

By Dan Barker

Get them while they are young and teach them how to think! This fine sentiment seems to be the motivation for Barker's book. Using several examples understandable to a child of perhaps five to ten, he shows what the reasoning process should be. This is not abstract philosophy, but simple real situations. I tested it out on a six-year-old, and she both understood and liked the book. Barker's may be a lone voice crying out in the wilderness for the value of teaching a child to reason as early as possible, but rationalist parents (and grandparents) would do well to give this book to children of the ages mentioned above, and see if it does any good. I think it will.

Gordon Stein, Ph.D.

Prometheus Books, 1991, 80 page paperback (with illustrations on each page), \$11.95. Available from Book Service AR, 2001 St. Clair Ave., St. Louis, MO 63144, for price plus \$2. handling.

## **THE MASK OF NOSTRADAMUS**

By James Randi

"The Amazing" Randi takes on the so-called prophet Michael Nostradamus, and strips off the reputation for accurate prediction that Nostradamus had accumulated through the centuries. Before we get into an examination of the most famous of the quatrains of Nostradamus, we get about 150 pages of background on Nostradamus, the era in which he lived, and a long discourse on astrology. Although these are interesting, and even perhaps useful in understanding some of the quatrains, they do seem like too much before getting to the heart of the matter. I would have preferred some of this material to be broken into sections and placed throughout the book. For example, the astrology section could have been made into an appendix.

Once Randi gets to his examination of the verses of Nostradamus, he begins to shine. The most famous quatrain of Nostradamus' supposedly showed that he had predicted exactly how King Henry II of France would die (a lance through his eye in a joust). Randi shows that this quatrain was not even applicable to Henry II, and also is wrong in almost every particular. Similar work is done for about 10 of the most famous quatrains. Fortunately Randi knows when to stop. Once you have shown that the most important verses are not of any predictive value, it is not necessary to

deal with the lesser verses *at all*. As Randi shows, the only verses that appear to correctly predict something were written *after* those events had already occurred. The collection of verses was issued over a period of many years, with additional verses added in each edition. Many of the verses are written in a very difficult and ambiguous Medieval French. This has allowed subsequent "editors" to change the translation, or the text itself, often on the flimsiest of pretexts, to make the verses say what they wanted them to say. By doing this, they have made it *seem* that Nostradamus was predicting the rise of Napoleon, Hitler, the French Revolution, World War I and II, etc. In actuality, he did not predict any of these. When he *did* make a specific prediction, usually about someone alive at the time he was actually writing, his predictions turned out to be completely wrong.

This is a much-needed book, and one that will make anyone who feels that Nostradamus' predictions have any value, think again. However, it is not likely to be read by those people who want to make a mystery where there is none. They will continue to believe that Nostradamus was a prophet.

Gordon Stein, Ph.D.

Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, NY, 1990, 256 page hardback, \$19.95. Available from Book Service AR, 2001 St. Clair Ave., St. Louis, MO 63144, for price plus \$2. handling.

## **ABOLITIONIST, ACTUARY, ATHEIST: Elizur Wright and the Reform Impulse**

By Lawrence B. Goodheart

Another neglected freethinker finally has a full biography of his own that does not neglect to discuss his freethought. Elizur Wright (1804–1885), whose funeral eulogy was done by his friend Robert G. Ingersoll, is best known as the Father of Life Insurance. In addition, he was an outspoken abolitionist and atheist. How he went from a ministerial student at Yale to an open atheist is clearly shown in this very well done biography. Interestingly, we can trace much of Wright's later atheism to the anticlericalism he developed while a militant abolitionist. He saw how many clergy were supporting slavery by the quotation of Bible verses.

Although the majority of those who read this book will probably not be especially interested in Wright's atheism, the author does devote an entire section to it. We see that the pro-slavery stance of many of the clergy was the major force driving Wright toward atheism. Wright posted Ezra Heywood's bail when he was arrested by Anthony Comstock. Wright also worked to overthrow the "Comstock Law," under which Heywood and other freethinkers, such as D.M. Bennett, were convicted and jailed. Still, I would have preferred a little bit more on Wright's atheism as a motivator for many of his actions. Rationalists will enjoy a look at Wright, who was a man of principle and action at a time when there were few willing to stand up for their beliefs.

Gordon Stein, Ph.D.

Kent State University Press Kent, Ohio 282 page hardback, \$27.50. 1990. Available from Book Service AR, 2001 St. Clair Ave., St. Louis, MO 63144, for price plus \$2. handling.

## ATHEISM IN FRANCE, 1650–1729.

### Volume 1: *The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief*

By Alan Charles Kors

This is the first volume of a projected two-volume set, with the other volume not yet published. Each volume is designed to stand independently. Kors, who has written about Baron D'Holbach's atheism previously, now tackles the whole origin of French atheist thought. The present volume is a study of how a profoundly theistic community developed an explicitly atheistic component. Kors feels that "before one can understand the heterodoxy of early-modern atheism, one must first understand the orthodox sources of disbelief," hence the present volume.

We can see here that in the early 1700s, the feeling was widespread among the "learned" that it was impossible to be an atheist with one's mind, because the evidence for the existence of God was so overwhelming. It's funny how that evidence has diminished with the passing of the years. At the same time, these Frenchmen were writing many treatises trying to demonstrate the existence of God.

In reading this book, one reads all of the "straw man" arguments against atheists and atheism that have been repeated for centuries. Most seem to go back to the mid-1600s, and to reflect an ignorance of the atheist position that is appalling. Of course, nearly all of these theologian authors had never actually met an atheist, nor read an atheist book (there were no such books).

In the early explorations, many new peoples were first encountered by Europeans. Of course, since they were not Christians, they were labelled as atheists. In reality, they were Buddhists, Confucianists, Pagans, etc. The charge of "atheism" was hurled around rather freely, and used to cover a multitude of sins. Even the ancients were labelled as atheists, or were argued over as to whether they should or should not be so called.

The reader should be warned that this is a complex book. It is full of footnotes and contains an impressive amount of scholarship. It is a real contribution to our knowledge of early European atheism.

Gordon Stein, Ph.D.

Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1990, 392 page hardback; \$35. Available from Book Service AR, 2001 St. Clair Ave., St. Louis, MO 63144, for price plus \$2. handling.

## NEW AGE ENCYCLOPEDIA

By J. Gordon Melton, Jerome Clark,  
& Aidan A. Kelly

When pressed for a definition of "New Age," even experts on the field would probably have some trouble. The compilers of the present book do not specifically define the term, but the book's title page bears the phrase "A guide to the beliefs, concepts, terms, people, and organizations that make up the new global movement toward spiritual development, health and healing, higher consciousness, and related subjects." That says it pretty well, and I can't do much better. Perhaps you now have an idea what the book is trying to cover. It contains 334 numbered entries in 586 pages. In the Introduction, the compilers mention that almost all

previous work on the New Age has been either hostile (from the fundamentalists) or dismissive (from the skeptics). Not mentioned is the large batch of totally credulous material produced by the New Agers themselves. Nevertheless, this book states that it will try to be non-judgemental. In this it largely succeeds.

The articles are mainly of a strictly factual nature. Where there is overwhelming evidence against a concept (e.g., Atlantis), the compilers so state. Some of the articles will not please the skeptic (e.g., "Skeptics and the New Age," which I would characterize as tough but fair in general). Others will not please the New Ager (e.g., "Age of Aquarius"). Although most of the information was both accurate and difficult to obtain elsewhere, there were a few errors. For example, the facts about Annie Besant's early life (p. 66) contains several errors. In spite of rare lapses like this, and some question about what exactly should or should not have been included in a book like this, I can recommend this encyclopedia as both useful and generally accurate. It fills a real gap in the literature.

Gordon Stein, Ph.D.

Gale Research, Inc. Detroit, MI, 1990, 586 page hardback, \$59.50. Available from Book Service AR, 2001 St. Clair Ave., St. Louis, MO 63144, for price plus \$2. handling.

## SYNCHRONICITY: *Science, Myth and the Trickster*

By Allan Combs and Mark Holland

Man is a natural explainer. Humans try to explain things around them, especially liking explanations on a large scale (e.g., God, Satan, the Big Bang, etc.). Some of these explanations are helpful and some are unhelpful, as well as being probably wrong. It has always struck me that the ideas of Carl Jung are a combination of these two: helpful and yet wrong. They are helpful in that they seem to give a coherence to events in the universe that otherwise seem mysterious and unrelated. They are wrong in that there probably are no relationships between these events. In the long run, then, the Jungian explanations are actually unhelpful in that they divert attention away from other explanations more likely to be true.

The present volume examines one of Jung's major ideas: that events occurring at the same time (or almost the same time) are related in causation, rather than just coincidental. There are many examples of this so-called "synchronicity" in this book. To accept the validity of a common cause for these events requires us to overthrow the normal notion of cause and effect and to replace it with a sort of mystical "Trickster." Of course, we should re-examine all of our established ideas, including cause and effect, every once in a while. At this time, I cannot see that it should be overthrown. Therefore this book is either premature or wrong-headed. I think the latter. Therefore, although the ideas it contains are interesting speculations, until we have much more evidence that they may be true, it probably does more harm than good to write about them as if they were true.

Gordon Stein, Ph.D.

Paragon House, New York, NY, 1990, 176 page paperback, \$9.95. Available from Book Service AR, 2001 St. Clair Ave., St. Louis, MO 63144, for price plus \$1.50 handling.



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