

C R E A T I V E C O N T R O V E R S Y

In keeping with the policy of the *Humanist* to accommodate the diverse cultural, social, political, and philosophical viewpoints of its readers, this occasional feature allows for the expression of alternative, dissenting, or opposing views on issues of importance to Humanists and the Humanist movement.

Overcoming Antagonistic Atheism to Recast the Image of Humanism

by Jeff Nall

THE CURRENT COLLECTIVE membership of American Atheists, the American Humanist Association, and the Freedom from Religion Foundation is less than 25,000 members. That number includes people like me who are members of more than one of these organizations.

In 2003 the total annual revenue generated by American Atheists, the American Humanist Association, the Institute for Humanist Studies, and the Freedom from Religion Foundation was less than \$3 million. Compare that figure with the \$8 million brought in by the Traditional Family Values Coalition that same year, the more than \$15 million Jerry Falwell Ministries earned, or the more than \$100 million brought in by Focus on the Family.

So what's my point? Humanists need more than good ideas and great intellect to compete with the behemoth of the religious right for the interest and attention of the American public. With the exception of money, what the Humanist movement needs more than anything is a positive, uplifting message and the highest quality of public relations as can be afforded. The last thing the movement needs is more bad publicity, which it unfortunately never ceases to elicit.

Who is to blame for Humanism's image problem? The media? The religious right? Yes, but they're only half the answer. The other half is that too many atheists see the

freethought and Humanist movement as a revolution, an opportunity to wage war on religion. As a result, an epidemic of antipathy has battered an otherwise inspiring veneer.

Many outsiders—both nonbelievers and believers—who might otherwise find a naturalistic, secular perspective or philosophy of life worth exploring, see the fanciful crusade of many atheists to “save” humanity from the “scourge” of religion in the same light they view religious fanatics who zealously seek converts. As scholar and atheist Dylan Evans writes: “There seems to be a widespread tendency among people of all creeds and none to think the world would be a better place if everyone agreed with them.” Evans goes on to add that, just as religious fundamentalists do, secular fundamentalists “seem to want to convert the whole world to their own point of view.”

As one leader in the freethought community (who spoke on condition of anonymity) pointed out to me, “Our biggest problem in the Humanist movement . . . is keeping atheists who just want to complain about people of faith out of our organization. . . . They join and then get upset that we aren't focused on bashing religion.” Alister McGrath, author and professor of historical theology at Oxford University, writes that “atheism spawns organizations; it does not create community . . . the community thus created seems to be based

solely on distaste for religion.”

While such observations overlook the positive aspects of Humanism and the affirmative work of such organizations as the American Humanist Association, McGrath nonetheless diagnoses the movement’s most serious internal malady, identifying the contagion that has spread throughout the larger freethought community and must be inoculated from within.

ANTAGONISTIC ATHEISM

Perpetuating the caricature of the misanthropic atheist, several writers not only spew vitriol in the face of believers but also actively advocate the use of ridicule and slander in dealing with them. In the preface of his book *Atheism: A Reader*, S. T. Joshi writes: “Even ridicule of religion is an entirely valid enterprise.” Complementing this notion, Eddie Tabash, in an article on the American Atheists website, writes that the future of Humanism relies on its members’ ability to bash the beliefs of others: “Establishing the social acceptability of ridiculing the absurdities of religious claims is an integral part of gaining acceptance for secular humanism.”

Dr. Timothy Shortell provides another example. Not long after becoming chair of Brooklyn College’s Department of Sociology, Shortell fueled the ire of religionists toward non-believers by writing an online article entitled “Religion and Morality: A Contradiction Explained.”

I first learned of the article through a report by the Christian news service Agape Press, which reported that the atheist professor had therein described religious people as “moral retards” and had said, “Christians claim theirs is a faith based on love, but they’ll just as soon kill you.”

Reading this, I decided to investigate the article, expecting to find that Shortell had been misquoted or his comments had been taken out of context. But I was wrong. The article was, to my mind, a tirade of irrational generalizations brimming with fodder for religious fundamentalists. One quotation will suffice. Shortell writes:

On a personal level, religiosity is merely annoying—like bad taste. This immaturity represents a significant social problem, however, because religious adherents fail to recognize their limitations. So, in the name of their faith, these moral retards are running around pointing fingers and doing real harm to others. One only has to read the newspaper to see the results of their handiwork. They discriminate, exclude and belittle. They make a virtue of closed-mindedness and virulent ignorance. They are an ugly, violent lot.

As anyone knowledgeable about history can show, such

assertions dismiss the important contributions of deeply religious social justice leaders like the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and former U.S. President Jimmy Carter. While one is certainly free to criticize specific zealots like Pat Robertson, organizations like Focus on the Family, or movements like the religious right, broad and inexact condemnation of *all* Christians or believers is irrational at best and intolerant at worst. But some atheists are now arguing that believers are incapable of rationality and that we should no longer exalt the principle of tolerance. In his essay, “An Atheist Manifesto,” author and philosopher Sam Harris argues that “the incompatibility of reason and faith has been a self-evident feature of human cognition and public discourse for centuries.” Harris goes on to declare “interfaith dialogue” and “mutual tolerance” futile. The only way to banish religious warfare, he writes, is to eradicate “the dogma of faith.”

Renowned atheist biologist and 1996 Humanist of the Year Richard Dawkins recently went so far as to denounce a progressive Christian, the Right Reverend Richard Harries, forty-first Bishop of Oxford, for betraying reason. Harries appeared in a film by Dawkins in which Harries outlined his opposition to creationism. After their conversation, Dawkins accuses him of betraying reason “just because I was religious,” wrote Harries later. Responding to Dawkins’ criticism, Harries penned a column, “Science does not challenge my faith—it strengthens it,” in the April 16, 2006, *Observer*. In it he points out the irony that those like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris actually advance the agenda of Christian fundamentalists:

Indeed, the leader of the American creationists has apparently written to Dawkins to say that they daily thank God for him. The reason is simple. Dawkins argues that evolution inevitably implies atheism. That’s what we believe, say the creationists in effect, therefore evolution shouldn’t be taught in schools or, if it is, only with creationism taught as well. Creationism and atheistic fundamentalism prop one another up. Each would collapse without the other.

Looking back to December 2005 we can find a good example of how antagonistic atheism helps to prop up Christian fundamentalism. As most will recall, the religious right

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charged that secularists had declared war on Christmas. Pundits on the right were particularly upset with the decision of political leaders in Boston, Massachusetts, to name the city's annual Christmas tree a "holiday" tree. They also objected to retailers' use of slogans like "Happy Holidays" rather than "Merry Christmas." Most Americans rightly dismissed such rhetoric as silly. But Beyond Belief Media, the group responsible for the film *The God Who Wasn't There*, made the victimization fantasy a reality by actually declaring "war on Christmas." In a December 5 press release, BBM's president, Brian Flemming, stated: "Christian conservatives complain nonstop about the 'War on Christmas,' but there really isn't any such war." He went on to explain that his group chose to wage a real war on Christmas in order "to demonstrate what it would look like if Jesus' birthday were truly attacked."

Flemming's comments were in direct contradiction to those of Joseph Conn of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, who rebuked the religious right's propaganda. "There is no war on Christmas," Conn said. "This is in large part a publicity stunt and a fundraising maneuver by Jerry Falwell." The Reverend Barry Lynn also observed that "Jerry Falwell has found that this war on Christmas is a very good, healthy, fundraising mechanism." But at the start of December, during the war on Christmas controversy, a group of college students at the University of Texas at San Antonio made headlines with their "smut for smut" event, in which they gave away pornography in exchange for religious literature.

While these kinds of cute spectacles succeed in garnering media exposure, they never fail to play into the religious right's hands by casting atheists in a misanthropic light. The portrait of atheist organizations as hate groups and atheists as people tirelessly plotting to ruin religion, or just plain antagonize believers, simply feeds the paranoia of the 64 percent of Americans (as determined by the Anti-Defamation League in October 2005) who believe religion is under attack. Despite the fact that the so-called threat to religion is a mostly nonexistent ruse, it's hard to ignore the likelihood that the antireligious rhetoric of many atheist pundits fuels the religious right's persecution propaganda and helps fill its coffers.

In addition to being strategically unpalatable, antagonistically ridiculing the beliefs of others is seen by many, including within the Humanist movement, as a form of prejudice. Jennifer Hancock, executive director for the Humanists of Florida Association, says:

[Ridicule] is offensive. It is a form of religious bigotry. When I hear someone say Catholics are stupid, they are talking about people I love and care about, who are definitely not stupid. Plus, if it happens to someone's face, exactly how are you going to have a good conversation with someone you just told was stupid. I am an atheist, but that is my

personal belief. I don't understand why people believe, and truth be told, belief doesn't make sense to me. But I know from my friends and family members that, as wacky as their belief is to me, my unbelief is just as wacky to them. So, the key is to accept that people really do believe what they say they do, and this is a matter of basic respect.

However, some atheists contend that tactics like those used by the smut for smut organizers are precisely what is needed. R. Senatore of the Broward Atheists (Florida), in responding to my *Humanist Network News* article, "Atheists Making Falwell's (X-mas) Dreams Come True," which critiques Flemming's war on Christmas and the smut action, writes that it is "time we atheists took off the gloves and brought the fight to the whackos who pray to walls and make policy for the country." Pointing to a recent incident where a Christian woman took offense to his freethinker shirt, Senatore writes:

We can no longer sit at the sidelines lest we 'insult or rile' the good people who are screwing up our world. I do not believe that we need to skulk into the corner; I believe we need to shout that we are the answer to religion and its foolhardy teachings!

Unfortunately, such attitudes will continue to thwart Humanists in their efforts to make necessary gains in terms of expanding association and membership, forming alliances, and acquiring clout in the community. If we don't look to our commonalities instead of relying on simplistic, dichotomist-style thinking, our treasured U.S. Constitution may be gone before we know it. The truth is that not all Christians feel threatened by freethinkers, and many of them—including the Christian Alliance for Progress, are working alongside Humanists to create a better, more rational world.

ANTIDOTE FOR THE ANTAGONISTIC IMAGE

The dilemma, however, remains: how do Humanists respond to fundamentalism's charges and how can a positive image of the Humanist lifescape be promoted. If not via angry, antipathetic activism, then what?

Well, a handful of innovative freethinkers have proffered an antidote for this antagonism, an antidote that isn't only more tolerant but much more effective. Earlier this year atheist Hemant Mehta organized a brilliant action which, due to the nature of its openness and good-natured spirit, unintentionally increased dialogue rather than squelching it. Mehta, now known around the nation as the "eBay atheist," decided to auction off his time, pledging to attend church for at least one hour for every ten dollars the highest bidder paid. By the time the bidding ended, forty-one

bids had been placed and eBay item number 5660982226 had sold for \$504. Winning bidder Jim Henderson, a liberal evangelical seeking to reinvent evangelism, asked Mehta to attend nine church services and write two pieces for his website www.OfftheMap.com.

As part of the deal, Mehta pledged to “go willingly and with an open mind” and to “respectfully participate in services, speak to priests, volunteer with the church if possible, do my best to learn about the religious beliefs of the churchgoers, and make conversation with anyone who is willing to talk. (Though I do reserve the right to ask the person questions about the faith.)”

Mehta’s project resulted in a flood of print and radio media attention, not to mention a rise in public interest. Numerous newspapers, including the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Village Voice*, ran headlines like “On eBay, an Atheist Puts His Own Soul on the Auction Block.” But rather than fueling outrage, most of the stories brimmed with humility and openness, and were accessible to anyone of any faith. Mehta’s provocative but respectful action cleared the brush of good-versus-evil rhetoric, leaving a space for rational dialogue.

In a recent interview, Mehta told me he finds negative attitudes and actions, such as the smut for smut campaign, counterproductive. Instead, Mehta has found better models:

The reason that the eBay thing worked so well is because I think it was a form of positive atheism. It was kind of putting a friendly face out there about it. I actually gave examples, you know when you look at Julia Sweeney’s one woman show, *Letting Go of God*, when you look at Lori Lipman Brown from the Secular Coalition for America, they’ve put a really friendly face about atheists out there—that they’re not out to attack anyone, they just want it to be respected and people to know where they’re coming from. I think that’s what I tried to model myself after, in terms of how to put this thing out there.

While Mehta visited various churches, atheist Robert Jensen joined one. Jensen, a journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin, said he joined St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Austin as a political act of moral solidarity. In his AlterNet article, “Why I Am a Christian (Sort Of),” Jensen wrote that his joining affirmed that he: “(1) endorsed the core principles in Christ’s teaching; (2) intended to work to deepen my understanding and practice of the universal love at the heart of those principles; and (3) pledged to be a responsible member of the church and the larger community.”

Some might think it odd and counterproductive for an atheist to seriously join a church. Had Jensen politely shed his views to join St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, I might agree. Instead, Jensen joined as an avowed atheist, sending a powerful signal to progressive and moderate Christians around the nation: Humanists and Christians have shared and continue to share a number of basic moral values—specifically a love of peace and justice. From whence each derives these values may be different, but the fundamental ethic of the neighbor, of love, is something progressives of all belief systems cherish.

Furthermore, Jensen sees his joining as an opportunity to tear down the walls of religious division. Answering the proverbial question, “Won’t expansive conceptions of faith eventually make the term Christian meaningless?” his response is an honest and encouraging “Yes.” Jensen says,

The same process could go on in other religions as well. Christianity could do its part to help usher in a period of human history in which people stopped obsessing about how to mark the boundaries of a faith group and instead committed to living those values more fully.”

Jensen also asks Christians to consider the potential nonreligious, universal message Jesus has to offer by asking:

What if the Bible is more realistically read symbolically and not literally? What if that’s the case even to the point of seeing Christ’s claim to being the son of God as simply a way of conveying fundamental moral principles? What if the resurrection is metaphor? What if God is just the name we give to the mystery that is beyond our ability to comprehend through reason?”

He believes that, with “such a conception of faith, a real ecumenical spirit and practice is possible.”

The work of atheist biology professor Michael Zimmerman, dean of the College of Letters and Sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, is perhaps the most important and successful in achieving positive results for Humanism while responding to the religious right. A long-time opponent of the teaching of creationism in public schools, in 2004 Zimmerman organized the Clergy Letter Project in which a large number of clergy signed a letter aimed at pressuring the school board of Grantsburg, Wisconsin, to rescind its alteration of the science curriculum, which had given “various models/theories”—essentially creationism—equal footing alongside evolution in public school classrooms. The following year, with the explosion of

the creation-evolution controversy in Dover, Pennsylvania, Zimmerman decided to take the project national. He said he felt compelled to get further involved in the debate after hearing fundamentalist ministers claim on television that Americans had to choose their faith over evolution. Several months later a new version of his clergy letter, which calls on school boards to uphold evolution and a credible science curriculum, had been signed by more than 10,000 clergy from a variety of denominations across the United States.

Despite his tremendously successful effort, however, Zimmerman complains that the media paid little attention. "When we hit our goal of 10,000 signatures I thought we would get a lot of coverage," he said. "No one cared. I could not generate almost any interest. . . . I was kind of blown away by that." What angered him the most was that, while his project was ignored by the media, the religious right's mini-crusade to protect the environment received ubiquitous media coverage.

At the same time we gathered those [signatures] the religious right, the evangelicals had a letter signed by, I think it was seventy-eight members of the pretty far right, coming out in favor of doing something about Global Warming. The *New York Times* had a front page story on it and it kind of pissed me off. These are seventy-eight guys and I had 10,000.

Eventually Zimmerman thought up a second phase to his campaign. He decided to launch Evolution Sunday, a national holiday to be celebrated in churches, commemorating the birthday of Charles Darwin. As proof of progressive Christians' commitment to reason and science, more than four hundred congregations across the United States celebrated the holiday on February 12, 2006. The event succeeded in making headlines across the nation. Zimmerman, who says he's been an atheist for four decades, told me that the only way to protect quality science education in the United States is to work with rationalists within the religious community. "If we don't work with those in the re-

ligious community whose values we share, even if we don't share their faith, we will lose," he said. "I think it's just that simple." But, angered by Zimmerman's work, some atheists have accused him of betraying secular humanism and promoting religion. To these critics he responds,

I'm not promoting religion; I'm just making sure that the people who happen to be religious can have good information and can make rational choices. My job isn't to proselytize for atheism. I don't think we gain anything or I don't gain anything by doing that.

Moreover, Zimmerman says his support for freethought requires him to respect the rights of others to believe as they wish, so long as their beliefs don't infringe on his rights as a citizen.

Humanists are faced with a choice between two models best revealed by the juxtaposition of Zimmerman and Dawkins. Both biologists hold a profound understanding and respect for science. Both value their atheist viewpoint. But it seems that only one is willing to fully and civilly cooperate with believers in the interests of society, desperately in need of a unified progressive movement.

While Zimmerman recognizes Dawkins as "an incredibly bright articulate man" he believes Dawkins views his atheism as "part and parcel of his science."

It's part-and-parcel of his *beliefs*. And he's welcome to his beliefs and he's welcome to criticize anybody he wants. But he's done more damage than help in many ways because of the vituperative quality of his comments.

TO RESOLVE THE DILEMMA

In her August 10, 2005, article "Religion and the Left," *Nation* editor Katrina vanden Heuvel writes:

I believe that one of the key issues facing the left . . . is whether all of us—secular, spiritual, and religious alike—can treat one another with the humanity, honesty, respect and grace we all need and deserve. . . . Can we unite to challenge the religious right through a new politics of the religious left?

Given the United States' disastrous direction in such areas of concern as torture, inadequate health care, hate crimes, persecution of gays, military spending, poverty, rampant misogyny, and war, we must answer her with an emphatic "Yes!" It's time for Humanists to turn to the wisdom of the Enlightenment once again, recognizing the truth in the words of Voltaire:

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It would be the height of folly to pretend to bring all men to have the same thoughts in metaphysics. It would be easier to subdue the whole universe by arms than to subdue all the minds in a single city.

Or as Dylan Evans puts it:

The world contains a dazzling variety of conflicting and irreconcilable worldviews, and this is probably a permanent feature of human existence. The idea that all rational beings will eventually converge on the same point of view, even though they begin from radically different starting points, is a hopelessly naïve view that only holds good in toy worlds such as that of Bayesian epistemology.

Those who defend the crusade to "cure humanity of the pestilence of belief" speak the language of fanaticism and merely invert the argument of religious fundamentalists. Just as we would defend atheism against those who point to its misuses, such as by the former Soviet Union, Christians too argue that particularly vicious Christian rulers have violated the spirit of their faith for crooked gains. One would do well to recall that the lesson of the Enlightenment wasn't that the enemy of reason is belief in God. It's that *fanaticism*, be it religious or secular, is the bane of humankind and the true enemy of rational minds.

For freethought organizations to charge ahead with potent, positive, and new media campaigns, the challenge is to abandon the kind of atheism Evans calls "old and tired." We need to reproach the arrogant atheists for what *New Republic* writer Alan Wolfe describes as "the shrillness of their tone, their thinly disguised contempt for people they can barely understand, and their conviction (you might even call it religious) that they always have been and always will be on the right side of history." In short, we would do well to assail and distance ourselves from any form of fundamentalism, even if it's secular fundamentalism.

The sooner Humanists recognize that spiteful antics and attitudes of superiority sadly mirror the presumptive, all-knowing mentality of the religious right and undermine the efforts of organizations like the American Humanist Association, the sooner we can move to grow a vast, vibrant Humanist movement. ☐

Jeff Nall regularly contributes to the *Humanist*, *Toward Freedom*, and *IMPACT* press. His essay, "A New Vision for Freethought: Reaching Out to Friends in Faithful Places," appears in the current issue of the journal, *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism*. Copies of his recent AHA talk, "Why Humanists Should and Must Befriend the Progressive Faithful" can be purchased at www.intelliquestmedia.com.

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