

The Reality Check

July-August 2003 Edition

A publication of the Rationalists of East Tennessee

www.rationalists.org

Shunning Christians

By Daryl L.L. Houston

from AtheistParents.org

An acquaintance recently noted with great general contempt for religion that he refused to associate with Christians on the basis of the sordid history of their particular brand of religion. I have many friends and loved ones who are, or who claim to be, Christians. My acquaintance's vehement proclamation that he would have nothing to do with Christians was therefore hard for me to take without dedicating some further thought to the matter.

Let's reflect first on the history of Christianity. Some words from Bertrand Russell make for a good starting point:

My own view on religion is that of Lucretius. I regard it as a disease born of fear and as a source of untold misery to the human race. I cannot, however, deny that it has made some contributions to civilization. It helped in early days to fix the calendar, and it caused Egyptian priests to chronicle eclipses with such care that in time they became able to predict them. These two services I am prepared to acknowledge, but I do not know of any others.

I provide this quotation primarily for the purpose of introducing some humor into what could become a rather grisly essay. Russell goes on to suggest that one of Christianity's worst features -- its very worst, in fact -- is its attitude toward sex. By withholding education about sex and particularly about measures that would prevent disease and unwanted pregnancy, Christianity has imposed a great deal of suffering on the world.

But surely this example of broad social detriment as a result of Christianity isn't enough for my acquaintance to have taken his extreme stance. I think he had in mind some of the more blatantly, directly cruel episodes that

form the traditions of Christianity. For example:

- *God killed everybody but Noah and his family. He also killed the animals, who presumably were without sin.
- *God killed everybody in Sodom and Gomorrah rather than dealing with them mercifully and lovingly and showing them the error of their ways.
- *God told Abraham to kill Isaac. It was only a test, but surely a merciful god could have come up with something less bloody and heart-wrenching for Abraham.
- *God killed the firstborn of Egypt.
- *God commanded that anybody who broke the sabbath should be put to death.
- *God commanded that homosexuals should be put to death.
- *God cursed those who didn't do what he wanted with, among many other things, an adulterous wife, bereavement of their children, madness, blindness, hemorrhoids, itching, consumption, and the ill fate of having their flesh torn at by birds and beasts.

These are just a few of the things at random from the first five books of the Bible that the Christian god himself has done to those with whom he had a difference of opinion. But even these things I don't believe my acquaintance found so objectionable, being the trappings of a rather stale and unoriginal mythology. Or if he found them objectionable, I don't believe they're his primary reason for having such a poor regard for Christians. And at any rate, most Christians, when confronted with such a laundry list, will cry that it's the New Testament that informs their lives and actions. We'll see momentarily that this defense may not be so defensible, but for the time being, let's grant it and consider some of the

Continued on page 2

atrocities done in the name of the Christian tradition anno domini.

- *In 1122, Christian crusaders sacked Jerusalem, slaughtering everybody they could and then went into the nearby church and thanked god for his mercy.
- *Charlemagne executed in one morning 4500 people who refused to be baptized.
- *Constantine killed 3000 people whose view of Christian dogma differed from his.
- *Let's not forget Queen Isabella's Spanish Inquisition.
- *In the 12th and 13th centuries, tens of thousands were killed by Christians as witches. There was also much dogma-driven infighting among Christians during this period.
- *The Catholics and Protestants in Ireland even today can't get along.

Again, I list just a few random of many more modern atrocities that are a direct result of Christian dogma. I don't suggest, of course, that only Christians or only the religious are guilty of these cruelties. I merely point out that these atrocities have been committed reportedly by the Judeo-Christian god or in the name of him or of Jesus Christ. It's important to note that these aren't ill deeds that happen to have been committed by Christians -- they're ill deeds performed in the name of the Christian god. Never once have I heard of someone committing murder in the name of atheism.

Understandably, these murderous tales are not the stories most Christians today cling to. They prefer with good reason to try to live according to the example of Jesus, who doesn't seem to have caused much direct harm to others. And it was under this assumption that I initially thought my acquaintance's statement was unfair. After all, he was judging a broad category of mainly decent people based on their loose adherence to the more virtuous principles of a belief system that happened to have a torrid history. Surely, I thought, he could acknowledge that while they have kooky beliefs, many of the individuals who adhere to Christianity are pretty nice folk certainly worth giving a shot. His response was to suggest that their continued adherence to such a belief system in spite of its tradition of inhumanity and immorality was indeed grounds for dismissal.

I understood his position a little better when I came up with this roughly parallel example. Imagine you met someone

who seemed to be a perfectly moral, humane, kind person. Your initial reaction was to think well of this person and perhaps even to place a tally mark in the "friends" column. Now imagine that you found out he was a card-carrying member of the Neo KKK (I don't know that any such thing actually exists). The Neo KKK, he tells you, does have its traditions grounded in the original KKK, but it takes a kinder view of humanity and is really a benevolent organization that does community service and denounces many of the activities of its predecessor. Maybe he even tells you that while some of the more fundamental Neo KKK members still think that people of the darkest complexion are due a lynching, the bulk of the members are firmly opposed to any such discrimination and ill treatment of human beings. My acquaintance's point is that by refusing to cut all ties with an abhorrent organization, Christians or, in my example, Neo KKK members do carry around all the baggage of those organizations. By condoning participation in the organizations, we're putting our stamp of approval on the activities, good and bad, that they've been a part of.

This raises an interesting question or two. Can people who are inclined to be religious and who have a background in Christianity ever transcend that background? That is, even if they wish to utterly separate themselves from the tradition of the Old Testament and the more modern crusades, how can they do so without giving up their belief in a New Testament Christ who did primarily good works? Or, if they feel as if they've sufficiently separated themselves from the negative history of Christianity, at what point will we accept it? Does an organization name change make the difference? Or an utter renunciation of all things associated in any way with the traditions? More generally, by my acquaintance's logic, we should all be hermits, refusing to associate politely even with ourselves, as humanity is the parent organization even of Christianity, and the many atrocities committed with no attachment whatsoever to Christianity have been committed by members of humanity.

When thus expanded in scope, the example seems a little extreme, but I still take my acquaintance's point. I would have difficulty justifying a friendship with the

Neo KKK member but have not ever had difficulty justifying friendships with Christians. That I have so many Christian friends and that the religion is mainstream explains why I see a difference between the two cases, I believe. It's not something I personally can escape. Most of my current friends are heathens, but my parents and many of my coworkers are religious. The owners of most of the stores I frequent are probably religious. The people I watch on TV and who manufacture my clothes and food are probably for the most part professing Christians. There is simply no way to avoid associating or supporting these folk. What *can* we do?

I for one have modified my position on atheist evangelism. I've always thought that it was fine for me to have my beliefs and for others to have theirs and for us to live peacefully together without ever sharing a word about religion. This of course was my reaction to evangelical Christians, whose attempts to convert me were very irritating. I didn't want to come across the same way, and I didn't want atheism to come across as a cult seeking new members, as religion often does. I think a better approach may be not to invite people to see the light and become atheists or to attack religion on the basis of a lack of proof, but rather to actively point out the immorality of the history of Christianity, which is really indefensible. By doing so, we avoid shutting out our families and friends while working to chip away at the facade that has been put up in front of the monstrous tableau of historical Christian atrocities. Education of those in error is a much more positive reaction than ignorance of them.

May 17, 2003

Brief Report on Camp Quest Smoky Mountains

The first week in June six campers and five adult counselors spent a great week at Tremont on the Smokies. Activities included swimming, wading, day and night hiking, seeing synchronized fireflies, star and satellite gazing, code breaking, a mini course on acting, water balloons, balloon animal making, scrapbook making, photography, science, philosophy, chess, playing recorders, origami, campfires, s'mores, attempted singing, knitting, a poetry workshop, making stepping stones, hunting salamanders, observing water snakes, various games, skits and a general good time. There was more but that is all the space left on this page.

Evangelizing Reality, Reason and Compassion

by Carl Ledendecker

The following is a slightly revised part of a presentation made in 2001 to the RET membership.

Self righteousness;

Acceptance;

Saving souls.

These are three things that I am not asking you to condemn but rather to embrace, but to embrace with perhaps a different attitude than is usually associated with them.

First, self righteousness.

We must become more self righteous, NOT the obnoxious and arrogant self-righteousness of the fundamentalists, but a self-righteousness based on the simple realization that we offer the only approach that has the potential for sane reality-based attempts to meet the challenges of a dynamic and complex universe. This is not arrogance. This is an acceptance of the evidence accumulated over millennia of prehuman and the modern human struggle. The overwhelming evidence is that the best ideological system is one that recognizes that the universe is not run by some exalted version of the human mind. It is a system which recognizes that it cannot be static. It is one that recognizes that errors will be made and is therefore designed to be self correcting. Such a system is inherently better by all standards of honesty and accuracy. This self righteousness is one that we deserve collectively. It is one that has been earned by untold generations and one that we must communicate to all of humanity. It is a type of self righteousness that may even allow us to grow beyond ourselves, one that is both proud and humble. And it is an attitude that recognizes our collective power, our uniqueness, our temporal limits and the necessity of responsibility.

Secondly, acceptance...

We must accept all of the opposition's stance and practices that are valid and beneficial.

We must not reject anything just because it is

continued page 4

associated with supernatural trappings. We must not fall prey to those fortress-like ideologies which claim sole ownership of those things which are inherently human and humanistic. We should not let them keep us disassociated from mutual support and expressing ethical integrity, honest caring, celebration and song. We must not let ourselves to be cornered into a cultural prison of their creation. Letting the supernaturalists define us allows them to control our agenda and our struggle.

Still, it is important to embrace common ground. By emphasizing our humanist commonality we will draw them towards us and move from being merely attacking rebels to being concerned companions in the human quest called living.

Now, besides accepting those who are straying into the confusing realm of supernaturalism, we must also accept ourselves and our differences. Remember that none of us knows for sure the best way to proceed (even if we feel very sure that we do at times). We may present amazing arguments and evidence that impress us beyond belief (so to speak) but they most definitely will not lead us inherently in the most productive or even satisfying directions. If you think you have all the perfect answers remember to ask, "Do I want to be the Pope?"

This means that there are many paths to wisdom and constructive social action that can be followed simultaneously. Now we as a group must make choices on the allocation of resources. That given, it is not the same as saying that paths not taken are necessarily poor ones to take or erroneous paths. All struggles require multiple strategies and a path not taken by us as a group may still be a very useful one. So accept that different approaches to achieving similar goals may be quite valid.

Next, accept yourself. We must accept that we all become emotional, that we all make mistakes, that we have fears and inhibitions. We all aggravate each other at times. We even do more than that on occasion. That does not mean that we are fatally flawed and cannot achieve great things. It just means that we are humans who are complex and dynamic by nature. Each of us can contribute to the betterment of humanity. Each of us has the capacity to help change the world. Don't let the dominance of the "supernatural" myth suppress you.

Don't suppress yourself. Accept your intelligence and wisdom. You each represent in your own way a great stage in human cultural development. You realize what many in the world have not yet seen. You are the future of humanity.

Which brings me to the third point - the saving of souls.

We should be saving souls. Now I am not talking about little souls that flutter off on golden wings when we die. But I am talking about the hearts and minds of people. Humanism embraces the concepts of social responsibility and compassion. There are millions of people out there who are being conned. They are being deceived. They are struggling to survive within systems that tell them to deny their minds, their knowledge, their very natures. They are taught to accept contradictory and often harmful ideas. They are taught not to be adults, but rather the children of god. They are told that they are evil by nature and that they must suck up to some magical mega boss. They are not given credit for being human and all of the good that that can generate. At a recent funeral I attended, thanks was given to God and Jesus and no one else. As far as I could see all that God and Jesus did was to provide the suffering that actual people had to deal with. Those who did all the work did not receive any praise or thanks for helping and counseling. The family, the nurses, doctors and hospice workers who came at any time in the night were not mentioned. The great achievements of humanity that allowed the deceased to live a dozen years longer than the lord apparently intended were not mentioned. We need to change that. We need to let people know who really makes life worth living. Let them know that it is individually and collectively us - the intelligence and compassion of humanity.

There are millions of people who are suffering from the consequences of ideas imposed on them by archaic cultures. There are millions of people who can help them and should. Now don't bring up an image of hell fire and damnation preachers or the saccharine sweet fundamentalists testifying to the heathen. This soul saving should be of the nature of a concerned fellow human. A fellow human who not only cares,

but cares enough to allow others to disagree. One who doesn't threaten or coerce but rather one who kindly informs and allows others to think and draw conclusions in their own way. One who realizes that changing minds is about process, not revelation. But just as a doctor shouldn't force life saving medicine on a patient there is still an obligation to inform them that cures exist. At the very least let others know that you don't agree with supernatural claims and that for you a better way exists.

I have outlined a mission of sorts. This is a mission that involves a struggle with the real supernatural forces. These forces are the ghosts of archaic ideas that still haunt humanity. I think that this is a true mission of mercy. And this should not be a secret mission. We should not be ashamed or even hesitant in this mission. Celebrate and be proud of all acts that save the souls of humanity and the world on which it depends.

Excerpts from:

H. L. GREEN, Publisher. PRICE 6 CENTS,
213 E. Indiana St., Chicago. 10 Copies for 30 cents.

Reproduced in electronic form 1999
Bank of Wisdom@LLC
P.O. Box 926 -
Louisville, KY 40201 U.S.A.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

HIS RELIGION BY ROBERT N. REEVES.

But Lincoln, whose mind was always full of any subject he took hold of, wished to put his thoughts on religion in a more logical and permanent form than mere oral discussion. In 1834, at the age of 25, he prepared a lengthy essay, which he always afterward referred to rather proudly as his "little book." In this essay Lincoln reached conclusions similar to Volney and Paine ; and demonstrated, to his own satisfaction at least, that the Bible was not God's revelation, and that Jesus Christ was not the son of God. This essay Lincoln intended to have published, but his employer, a Mr. Samuel Hill, though a skeptic himself, questioned the propriety of so young and promising a man maintaining such hostile and unpopular ideas. Hill took the manuscript that Lincoln had so carefully prepared, destroyed it and cautioned Lincoln that if he wished to succeed politically he would have to abandon his attacks on the Christians. This well-meant act of his older and somewhat more sagacious friend in no way diminished Lincoln's skeptical views. Lincoln was never known to have afterwards denied or regretted the writing of his anti- 'Christian essay. After he was elected to the Illinois Legislature and had removed to the capitol at Springfield, he continued to attract attention by the liberality of his religious views ; and often in conversation with his friends he referred to his "little book," and seemed to' take delight in stating its origin, its object, and its arguments. page 3

Lincoln was not a Christian. His was a religion of humanity, a religion of sympathy. His was the religion of Voltaire, of Paine, of Ingersoll. Lincoln's whole religion is summed up in a remark he once made to a friend : "When I do good," said Lincoln, "I feel good ; when I do bad, I feel bad, and that's my religion." page 8

We know, however, that Lincoln did not believe in a personal God ; that he did not believe in the God of the Bible-but a God such as Voltaire, Paine and Theodore Parker believed in. In 1854 his law partner, William H. Herndon, read Lincoln a speech which he intended to deliver, and asked Lincoln to criticize it. In this speech, as written, there occurred the word God, and to this word Lincoln objected, advising Herndon to erase it, as it indicated a personal God, whereas Lincoln insisted that no such personality existed. page 5

James H. Mathy, one of Lincoln's earliest and closest friends, in a letter to William H. Herndon, says: "I knew Mr. Lincoln as early as 1834-7 ; know he was an infidel. He used to talk infidelity in the clerk's office in this city (New Salem, Illinois), about the years 1837-40. Lincoln attacked the Bible on two grounds: first, from the inherent or apparent contradictions under its lids; second, from the grounds of reason. Lincoln would come into the clerk's office, where I and some young men were writing and staying, and would bring the Bible with him, read a chapter, and argue against it." Hon John T. Stuart, law partner of Lincoln's in 1837: "I knew Mr. Lincoln when. he first came here, and for years afterwards. He was an avowed and open infidel, sometimes bordering on atheism. Lincoln always denied that Jesus was the Son of God as understood and maintained by the Christian church. The Rev. Dr. Smith, who wrote a letter, tried to convert Lincoln from infidelity so late as 1858, and couldn't do it." Hon David Davis, Justice of the United States Supreme Court 1862 -77, and United States Senator 1877-83 : "He (Lincoln) had no faith, in the Christian sense of the term - had faith in laws, principles, causes, and effects-philosophically." William H. Herndon, law partner of Lincoln from 1843 up to the time of Lincoln's death, says: "As to Mr. Lincoln's religious views, he was, in short, an infidel - atheist. He did not believe that Jesus was God, nor the Son of God - was a fatalist, denied the freedom of the will. Mr. Lincoln told me a thousand times that he did not believe the Bible was the revelation of God, as the Christian world contends." John B. Alley, member of Congress from 1858 to 1864: "In his religious views Mr. Lincoln was very nearly what we would call a Freethinker. While he reflected a great deal upon religious subjects, he communicated his thoughts to a very few. He had little faith in the popular religion of the times. While Mr. Lincoln was perfectly honest and upright, and led a blameless life, he was in no sense what might be considered a religious man." page 7

Material published in The Reality Check represents the views of the individual authors. Publication does not constitute an endorsement by the Rationalists of East Tennessee or its members. Articles, letters, review or other material intended for publication should be submitted to Carl Ledendecker or Chuck Janack via e-mail (ledendecker@earthlink.net or c_janack@yahoo.com) in text or RTF format. Final decision on publication will be made by the editors. Authors will be notified of acceptance for publication before publication. Phone contact (evenings) 982-8687 (Carl) or 531-8577 (Chuck).

Reality Check
Rationalists of East Tennessee
2123 Stonybrook Road
Louisville, TN 37777