

SecularNation

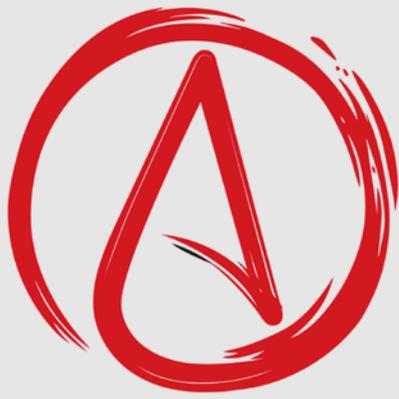
Serving our Shared Communities for More than 25 Years



Atheist Alliance of America Delivers

Who We Are and What We Do

PLUS: articles by board members John Loftus | Derek Colanduno | New Logo



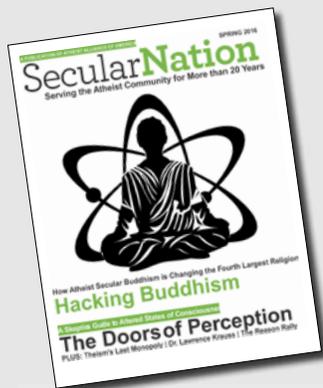
ATHEIST ALLIANCE OF AMERICA

Our Vision

Our vision is to transform society into one that supports and promotes an atheistic worldview based on of reason, empiricism and naturalism, a society which respects the wellbeing of all living things, the environment and the separation of church and state. We give our members, associates and affiliates the skills and tools needed to develop and provide educational, advocacy, and community-building programs located throughout the nation.

Our values are informed by reason, compassion, purpose, empiricism, science, knowledge, progress, equality, and freedom.

Atheist Alliance of America unveils its new logo!!!



ATHEIST ALLIANCE OF AMERICA is a national 501(c)(3) not-for-profit, tax deductible educational organization. We are a democratically run organization led by a Board of Directors.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT
On the national level, and through our local affiliates across the U.S., we encourage and assist in civic and charitable activities at the local level. Please visit our website to find a local affiliate of AAA. If you can't find a local group, contact us for help in starting one.

OUR VISION
AAoA's vision is to transform society into one that values reason, rationality, honesty, clarity, and kindness.

OUR MISSION
To develop and provide educational, advocacy, and community-building programs for the atheist community that assist towards fulfilling our vision.

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Digital Content

Check www.AtheistAllianceAmerica.org (and click on the Podcast link) for more great interviews!

To see the online version of this magazine become a member and visit: www.AtheistAllianceAmerica.org

Submission Guidelines

Please send all submissions to editors@atheistallianceamerica.org for consideration. In the subject line, indicate the type of submission, and try to stay within our preferred sizes:

Letter: 100 to 400 words.
Article: 750-1500 words.
Fiction: 100-1500 words.
Poem: up to 300 words.

Please include a 2-3 sentence biography and contact information with your submission.
Photograph: Images must be 300 ppi at the desired print size.

All submissions are subject to editing for length, content, and style. If the editing substantially changes the work, it is at staff discretion to notify the author.

By submitting to us you agree that we have the right to publish your submission in any issue of Secular Nation and in any anthologies or similar collections of Secular Nation material, in print and electronic formats.

Secular Nation provides contributors with a copy of the paper and pdf version of the issue in which the submission appears, provided your address is supplied. Submissions are unpaid unless otherwise pre-arranged.
We look forward to reading what you write!

Atheist Alliance of America Delivers

By Mark W. Gura

Atheist Alliance of America (AAoA) recently underwent the most significant changes since its inception nearly a quarter century ago. For those who are unaware, AAoA had historically been run by an affiliation of separate atheist organizations, which, as one might imagine, presented extra responsibilities for the affiliates and challenges for AAoA when it came to making substantive decisions in a timely manner. In early 2016, Mark W. Gura and the Board successfully petitioned the Affiliate Council to relinquish their decision-making authority so that AAoA could control its own future in a democratic fashion. This marked an enormous turning point for our organization, and we are deeply appreciative of the kindness our affiliates and collaborators have extended to us over the years, and for the gracious manner in which they supported our request for autonomy.

Atheist Alliance of America (AAoA) recently underwent the most significant changes since its inception nearly a quarter century ago—and these changes help us deliver new products and services to our members, affiliates and to our community.

Historically, AAoA was run by an affiliation of separate atheist organizations, presenting extra responsibilities for the affiliates and challenging AAoA to make timely, substantive decisions. As such, Vice President Mark W. Gura and the board of directors successfully petitioned the Affiliate Council in early 2016 to relinquish their decision-making authority, giving AAoA control over its own future in a democratic fashion. We are deeply appreciative of the kindness our affiliates and collaborators have extended to us over the years and their support of our request for autonomy.

Making the most of this new opportunity, AAoA assembled a powerhouse team of secular activists, educators, editors, authors, producers, and artists including CW Brown as execu-

tive director; John Loftus, Derek Colanduno, Kristi Dale, Adam Tilford, Kelli Cooke, and Tina Hamilton, as board members—all while retaining Mark W. Gura as Vice President and Dustin Kemper as a board member, both of whom played key roles in providing continuity and revitalization to the organization.

The Alliance is also supported by advisers Ian Harris, Andy Thomson, Stephen Law, Candace Gorham, Bill Flavell, Buck Bowen, David Hancock, Micael Langer, John Richards and Christopher DiCarlo, Angelos Sofocleous and by key contributors Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, PhD., Zerine Firoze, and Jeremy Kasey.

From now on, Atheist Alliance of America will hold its annual convention in conjunction with Dragon*Con's Skeptrack (www.skeptics.dragoncon.org). Tickets to Dragon*Con may be purchased at www.DragonCon.con. Dragon*Con usually draws more than 75,000 participants and hosts.

Visit our convention this year during September 1-4, 2017 in Atlanta, Georgia and come celebrate our 25-year anniversary with us! Stay tuned for more updates at www.atheistallianceamerica.org or email us at information@atheistallianceamerica.org.

AAoA is as an incubator for activists and organizations:

With its extensive reach, connections,

and experience, AAoA now offers exciting new content to its members while serving as a facilitator for secular activists and community organizations at all levels to achieve their own objectives. New as well as established activists can take advantage of our national platform, our social media reach, along with our upcoming programs in street epistemology, critical thinking, and online multimedia development. We're also putting together a speaker's bureau and placement program for those who interested in incorporating traveling into their activism.

Individuals and groups alike may wish to collaborate with AAoA, seek a formal affiliation, or come directly under the AAoA banner. Benefits of membership include some of the following services.

The AAoA is an alliance of local and national organizations and we are also incubator for activists and organizations:

AAoA Individual Member Benefits

You will receive:

- A year's subscription of Secular Nation magazine and access to all archived copies.
- Any available discounts to AAA's national and regional conventions.
- You will be supporting a national network of non-theist groups and individuals.
- You will become an effective agent for change in the United States.
- You will enable AAA to provide valuable support in the creation and maintenance of nontheistic local groups and committees throughout the United States.
- You will be kept up-to-date with events and news that will impact your life as an American nontheist.

Affiliate Member Benefits (for local organizations)

Educational

- Consultation assistance for organizational issues or problems with AAoA officers/board members
- Consultation assistance regarding social media/facebook advocacy
- Membership in AAoA Facebook group / pages
- Opportunity to host workshops at AAoA's national convention at DragonCon
- Opportunity to table at AAoA's national convention at DragonCon
- Opportunity to nominate speakers to speak at our annual convention at DragonCon

Advocacy / Community Building / Group promotion

- Listing on AAoA's website
- Listing in Secular Nation magazine
- Free e-zine subscription to Secular Nation magazine
- Promotion of group's activities through AAoA's social media / Facebook pages/groups and email lists
-

- You will be supporting AAoA's national advocacy efforts
- Access to AAoA speakers, committee members, advisers, key contributors and affiliates
- Participation in affiliate meetings
- Eligibility to serve on AAoA's Board of Affiliates
- Your organization will be eligible to co-brand with the Atheist Alliance of America, or come directly under the AAoA banner
- Eligibility to become an affiliate of Atheist Alliance International
- Opportunity to participate in speaker's bureau and placement program which is still being developed

*Join AAoA
As an activist
or affiliated
member
organization*

Departments/Committees

- Eligibility to run a or participate in an AAoA department/committee
- Fundraising opportunities afforded to committees
- Eligibility to serve on Board of Committees

AAoA Members May Join or Start Committees. (Current/Starting Committees Include):

Educational/Communication Committees:

- Social Media Committee
- Website Committee
- Secular Nation Magazine Com.
- Blog Committee
- Affiliate Committee
- Fundraising Committee

- Outreach / Unification Committee
- Secular Mindfulness - Buddhism / Critical Thinking / Street Epistemology Committee
- Seminar/Book Tour Committee
- TV/Film Committee
- Publishing / Agent Services Committee / PR Committee
- Secular Nation Podcast Committee
- Secular Mindfulness Podcast Committee.

Science Committees:
Science of Faith Committee

Social Justice Committees:

- Ex-Muslims Committee
- LGBTQIA Committee
- Nonbelievers of Color Committee

Humanitarian Committees
Jobs Programs Committee

Atheists Helping the Homeless:

- Charlotte
- Chattanooga
- Los Angeles



Become an AAoA member by following this link atheistallianceamerica.org/membership or sign up on page 39.

From the VP: Join Us at Dragon*Con



Have you seen Michael?
The producers of the upcoming
documentary “Godless – The
Truth Beyond Belief” are trying
to identify and locate Michael,
the kid from the infamous
[youtube video](#) “Pissed catholic
Mother” to find out what hap-
pened to him and his family
since the video was published
(and then removed) a few years
ago.

If you have any information,
please contact us using the
film’s website [www.godless-](http://www.godless-doc.com)
[doc.com](http://www.godless-doc.com)

I am extremely pleased as to the progress that the Atheist Alliance of America (AAoA) has made this year, but the last six months have been pivotal. Because AAoA had not previously developed internal revenue streams, it was dependent on its donors.

While this is accepted in the nonprofit world, after Reason Rally 2016 we resolved to create what has now evolved into our Board of Advisers, Affiliates, and Committees. It’s especially exciting that the Board of Committees will be composed of artists, authors, rappers, scientists, movie industry folks, and other talented personalities who will turn their skills, talents, and time into deliverables that will serve the secular, skeptical, atheist, scientific, and Humanist communities.

We are pleased to unveil our new program line-up. At first, these programs started as ideas, and some doubted we could achieve our goals. I am pleased that with the dedicated team we continue to assemble, the Atheist Alliance of America is poised to help people all over the world.

Please join us at our national convention, which will be held at DragonCon this year, and this will also mark our 25th anniversary. See you there!

Mark W. Gura
Vice President



Meet the Team at Atheist Alliance of America

Board of Directors

Mark W. Gura - Vice President

Mark W. Gura is the Vice President of the Atheist Alliance of America



and co-presenter of the Richard Dawkins Award, which was recently given to Dr. Lawrence Krauss at "Reason Rally 2016" in Washington, DC. Mark is also the host of the "Blind Faith Vaccine" TV show, and the author of the book, *Atheist Meditation: Atheist Spirituality*. Throughout his life, Gura has lived in and explored more than 80 countries. He has over 20 years' experience in practicing mindfulness meditation/Vipassana. He is also the Executive Director of the Association of Mindfulness Meditation and Secular Buddhism.

CW Brown - Executive Director



CW Brown is the CEO and founder of the Philo-

sophical Atheism online community. He resides in Vermont and has been an atheist, humanist, and freethinking activist for almost four years. Previously, he was a Christian for 17 years and, from his many valuable personal experiences, he brings about these episodes with others in a manner that is helpful in their journey towards reason. He holds an A.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies from Liberty University. He very strongly believes in putting human rights above those of age-old mythologies. He enjoys playing music (piano and guitar), reading and writing (music and articles), and building a consistently reformed mind by conforming to the phrase "Question Before You Believe."

John Loftus

John Loftus earned MA, MDiv, and ThM degrees in philosophy of religion, the last of which was under William Lane Craig. John also studied in a PhD program at Marquette University. He is the "Debunking Christianity" blog owner and author of *Why I*



Became An Atheist, The Outsider Test for Faith, How to Defend the Christian Faith:

Advice from an Atheist, Unapologetic, and co-wrote God or Godless with Randal Rauser. He's also the editor of The Christian Delusion, The End of Christianity, Christianity is Not Great and Christianity in the Light of Science.

Derek Colanduno

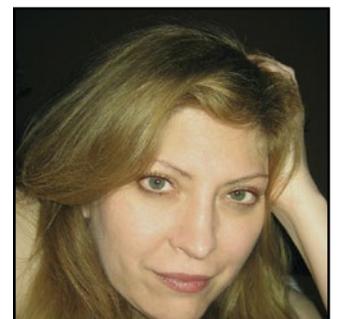


Derek is one of the hosts of Skepticity; The official radio show and

podcast of Skeptic Magazine and the Skeptics Society, a top-rated audio talk show dedicated to the promotion of critical thinking and science. He is also the Director of Skeptrack, a programming track devoted to skepticism at Dragon Con (the world's largest culture convention), which is held in Atlanta, Georgia every Labor Day weekend.

Kelli Cooke

Kelli Cooke is director of the 2010 documentary, *Godless*.



She is credited with shooting the official videos for several atheist/freethought conventions. Based near Atlanta, Kelli is a leader in her local humanist community. She is in a prime location for the newly developing film industry in the region and has connected with key professionals to help on this project, laying the groundwork for projects to come. Cooke has a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology and a Masters of Science in futures.

She has been in the music and film production business for 12 years, including directing, scriptwriting, editing, storyboard ideas, direct camera shots, and video editing. Cooke is a well-trained actor and has had lead and supporting actress roles in many projects, including voiceovers. *Godless* is her directorial debut. She has won multiple film awards at Houston Worldfest and International Freethought Film Festival. She is currently President of the IFFF and Director of Development for Freethought Film Labs.

Kristi Dale

Kristi Dale is a writer and editor, with a Masters in Comparative World Religions. She's interested in how and why religions

have impacted human history—and why they continue to do so, despite significant advances in scientific knowledge.



Tina Hamilton

Tina Hamilton is an atheist and secular Buddhist – she has studied multiple religions throughout her lifetime – starting with various Christian denominations and then spanned outside of Christianity – some of the other religions she studied were Judaism, Paganism, Druidism, Shamanism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Daoism. Throughout her time in studying these religions she realized that she was a skeptic of supernatural, gods, and religious dogma. Twelve years ago, she realized she was an atheist, but values some of the core aspects in Buddhism, and that being meditation and mindfulness.

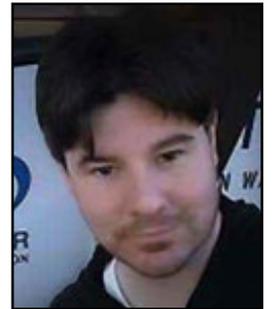


Tina has a Bachelor's degree in both Nursing, and Psychology, and is now working on her Masters degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling at Oregon State University - Cascades, Bend, Oregon. After completion, she plans to provide secular counseling in the areas of stress management, grief counseling, and addictions. Currently, she is involved in several Atheist social media projects, including Atheist Alliance of America, Association of Mindfulness Meditation and Secular Buddhism. She is also a team member in a support group project for new atheists that Anthony Magnabosco organized. Tina has great interest in learning and apply-

ing Street Epistemology, and is a strong advocate for critical thinking and science, as well as Separation of Church and State. She is active in her local political organization, and a member of the Human Dignity Advocates.

Dustin Kemper - Secretary

Dustin Kemper is a long standing board member for Atheist Alliance of America and current Secretary. He is the former President of the Myrtle Beach Humanists and Freethinkers group in South Carolina. Dustin is an avid science enthusiast and lecturer, photographer and animal conservation advocate. He is a lover of the beach and ocean and has been involved for many years in environmental conservation projects.



Adam Tilford

Adam has been an outspoken advocate for secularism for about four years, and he wrote the piece that Mark Gura read before giving Dr. Lawrence Krauss the prestigious Richard Dawkins award at Reason Rally 2016. Adam has spent most of his life in Kentucky; serves as an admin on the AAoA Facebook



page; and is a woodworker, carpenter, musician, and science junkie, among other things.

Advisers

Buck Bowen

Buck Bowen is a freethinking emcee with a lyrical appetite for skeptical inquiry and critical thinking. He believes in mental fitness through music and that if you think better, you live better.

His music has been described as a Sunday-School-in-reverse.



Although

it doesn't glorify drugs, violence, or objectify women, it's controversial because it challenges one's most cherished beliefs. "Could the teachings of Jesus be improved?" "Are the Ten Commandments all they've been cracked up to be?" And, "What exactly is the soul?" are just a few of many questions his music addresses.

An entertainer at heart who aims to inform and inspire, Buck hits the stage equipped with catchy choruses, vibrant storytelling, and a splash of dry wit.

He has shared the stage with author and philosophy instructor Peter Boghossian as well as released the first ever rap song and music video for the Openly Secular Campaign.

Dr. Christopher DiCarlo

Dr. Christopher DiCarlo is a philosopher, educator, and author. He is an internationally recognized expert on critical thinking and ethical reasoning. He teaches in the Faculties of Human Biology and Philosophy at the University of Toronto. He is also a lifetime member of Humanist Canada and an Expert Advisor for the Centre for Inquiry Canada.

He has been invited to speak at numerous national and international conferences and has written many scholarly papers ranging from



bioethics to cognitive evolution. His latest book, *How to Become a Really Good Pain in the Ass: A Critical Thinker's Guide to Asking the Right Questions*, was released worldwide in 2011 and is an international bestseller. He is a past Visiting Research Scholar at Harvard University in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences: Department of Anthropology and at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. His latest book, *Six Steps to Better Thinking: How to Disagree and Get Along*, will be released in 2017.

Dr. DiCarlo is the Principal of Critical Thinking Solutions, an educational consulting business for individuals, corporations, and nonprofits. He is also the developer of the first pilot

project in Canada to introduce Universal Critical Thinking skills into the Ontario Public High School curriculum.

Bill Flavell

Even as a small child, Bill preferred to ask questions before believing

things people told him and, although raised a Christian, by the age of 13 he



concluded there were no good reasons to believe in God. Bill pursued a career in IT, marketing and management consultancy and thought little about atheism until the 9/11 atrocity showed how religion could become lethal. This spurred him to engage in online debates with Christians and Muslims and to become active on Facebook, debating, creating memes and writing articles. His online presence resulted in speaking invitations from atheist groups in several countries including; India, The Philippines, Ghana, Nigeria, Zambia, Namibia, Kenya and South Africa. This work has developed to the point where Bill acts as a mentor to emergent atheist groups by advising on everything from organisational matters to debating techniques, PR and media training. Bill teaches and promotes Street Epistemology as a way to help people to examine, and revise, their beliefs in a friendly and non-confrontational way.

Candace Gorham

Candace received her Bachelor's degree in Secondary English Education from North Carolina Central University. She received her Master's degree in mental health counseling from Wake Forest University. Candace's religious background is varied, including Jehovah's Witnesses and Methodist. At 18, she joined a very charismatic ministry during which time she was ordained as an evangelist, prophetess, and elderess. Becoming involved in and leading extremist activities such as



casting out demons, fasting for weeks at a time and faith

healing, Candace was a believer's believer. She worked hard to be the minister, wife, and mother that she believed god had planned her to be. When real world problems were overwhelming her, she tried even harder to win god's approval and blessing. Suffering with major depression to the point of being suicidal and facing severe financial hardships, Candace thought that she must have been doing something wrong. She dove into studying the Bible more than ever before. She became disillusioned with the contradictions and blatant errancy she found. Mounting questions regarding the similarities between Jesus and other god legends before him, the nature of god, and concepts of hell and evil were just a few of the

issues that caused her to eventually decide that she could no longer believe in a deity. From a place of empathy and compassion, Candace decided to start the Ebony Exodus Project which aims to highlight the harmful effects of religion on all believers, but especially for black women. In addition to ongoing work as a counselor, Candace is a member of The Clergy Project and the Secular Therapist Project.

David Hancock

David is an artist in the UK who practices Street Epistemology. He has worked on the Atheos app with Peter Boghossian and Anthony Magnabosco for over a year with a very bright and good mix between creativity and pragmatism. .



Ian Harris

Ian Harris is a comedian, director, mixed martial arts trainer, voice over artist and above all an unremitting champion of science, skepticism and critical thinking! A national touring act for 20 years, Ian's comedy is a fascinating and funny mix of spot-on impressions and clever,



cutting-edge comedy, that has landed him appearances on Jimmy Kimmel Live!, Comedy Central, as well as two hour TV specials! His first "Critical & Thinking" (2014), AXS TV called "A truly masterful hour of wit, humor and derisive jabbing." His second "ExtraOrdinary" is due out in 2017. A top headliner for over 20 years, Ian was named #25 on Entertainment Journal's Top 100 Comedians list, was a semi-finalist in Comedy Central's "Laugh Riots Competition" and dubbed "Top Character Comedian in Town" by Backstage West. He has also been heard on Playboy Radio and regularly on SiriusXM Raw Dog. Ian is also one of the top Voice Over artists in Hollywood, having provided voice talent to clients such as McDonald's, FOX, Disney XD, DirecTV, Bravo, Fuel, the FOX series "Bones" and narrated the music driven show "Mad Genius" on Fuse TV. You may have also seen Ian perform at many of the atheist and skeptic related "Cons" such as, AAA National Convention, Dragon-Con, AHA National Conference, CSICON, CFI National Summit, and the 2016 Reason Rally. His keen grasp of science, evidenced by his satirical, skeptical take on everything from religion to global warming-deniers and beyond, has also earned him comparisons to favorite thinking-man's comics like Lenny Bruce, Bill Maher and George Carlin. With a unique point of view and an impressive array of comedic talents, Ian delivers a thought provoking style of stand-up all his own.

Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, PhD

Knowing intimately that the borderlands are a place of learning and growth, Robyn draws on their identity and heritage as a queer Latinx in everything that they do. From doubt to divine and everywhere in between,



their call as an activist-theologian demands the

vision to disrupt hegemony and colonialist structures of multi-layered oppressions. As an anti-oppression, anti-racist, non-binary Trans*gressive Latinx, Robyn takes seriously their call as an activist theologian and ethicist to bridge together theories and practices that result in communities responding to pressing social concerns. Robyn sees this work as a life-orienting vocation, deeply committed to translating theory to practice, and embedded in re-imagining our moral horizon to one which privileges a politics of radical difference.

Dr. Henderson-Espinoza is Visiting Assistant Professor of Ethics at the Pacific School of Religion, Graduate Theological Union, in Berkeley, CA; Public Theologian in Residence at Faith Matters Network, Nashville, TN.

Micael Langer

Micael Langer is a writer, producer, and director who's been involved with advertising, television, and cinema for over a decade and half, working with Rede Globo, Brazil's largest television network, for the last few years. His previous documentary, "Simonal - No One Knows How tough it Was," did well at international festivals, and he is currently working on, "Godless - The Truth Beyond Belief," a documentary that "does not discuss the existence of God, but tries to understand the foul behaviors sometimes adopted in his name."



Stephen Law

Stephen Law is Reader in Philosophy at Heythrop College, University of London. He is the



author of many popular philosophy books, including *The Philosophy Gym*, *The Great Philosophers*, and (for children) *The Complete Philosophy Files*. He is also author of Oxford University Press *Very Short Introduction to Humanism* and has published a book on faith schools, *The War for Children's Minds*. His main research interests lie in philosophy of religion, naturalism,

philosophy of mind, essentialism, and the later philosophy of Wittgenstein.

John Richards

John Richards is a resident of the UK. A retired science teacher who now writes books, he speaks against theism and organizes skeptic events in between looking after his young



daughters. He has guested on Premier Christian Radio and at The Conway Hall, London, and has debated Christians in churches and Skeptics in the Pub in Southern England. He is the author of several books and of *Keystages 3 and 4* teaching resource. His second book is almost finished. It's a response to Christian writer Andy Bannister's *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* and is sprinkled with illustrations, some of them comical. Expect a promotional tour soon with Andy and John in gladiatorial dialogue.

Angelos Sofocleous

Angelos Sofocleous is a skeptic and agnostic atheist who studies

philosophy and psychology at the University of Durham, UK. He is the



current President of Durham Atheist, Secularist and Humanist society, in which he has been involved since 2015, and Head of Membership for Atheist, Humanist, and Secularist Students of the United Kingdom. He is a writer and journalist. He has published two short-story and poetry collections, writes for progressive news website, ConatusNews, on philosophical, religious, and human rights issues, and has had numerous articles appearing in Greek and English newspapers.

He is continuously active in promoting the values endorsed by humanism: Considering reason and rationality as the way through which one can reach truth, maintain respect for all living things, and separation of church and state, while giving value to the importance of the scientific method and principles.

Andy Thomson, MD

Anderson Thomson, Jr., M.D. (Andy) is a psychiatrist in private practice in



Charlottesville, Virginia and a staff psychiatrist both at [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) at the University of Virginia Student Health Services and the [Institute of Law, Psychiatry and Public Policy](#). His private practice is oriented toward individual psychotherapy, forensic psychiatry, and medication consultation, and his current

research interest is in the area of evolutionary psychology and using its principles to understand depression, resilience, suicide, suicide terrorism, and religious belief.

Dr. Thomson co-authored [Facing Bipolar](#): The Young Adult's Guide to Dealing with Bipolar Disorder with [Russ Federman](#) and [Why We Believe In God\(s\)](#): A Concise Guide to the Science of Faith with Clare Aukofer. Since 2008, he has had the privilege of serving as a trustee for the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science.

Key Contributors

Zerin Firoze

Zerin Firoze is the founder and President of the GCC Skeptics and Secular Humanist Club, and an outspoken ex-Muslim, atheist, feminist and human rights activist. Due to her advocacy for secular, LGBT and women's rights, she has received death threats from groups such as Ansar-Al-Islam, Jamaat-Shibir, Hefajat-e-Islami and was forced to flee Bangladesh. She now resides in the West where she continues her education.



Steve Miller

Facebook Lieutenant and Memes Extraordinaire Steve was raised as an Ultra-Orthodox Jew, in Brooklyn, NY. He left the fold and became an atheist at age 23. He passionately devotes his time to educate people

about the dangers of religion and promotes science & philosophy as a better alternative.

Karen Jungwirth

Facebook Editor and Memes Extraordinaire. Karen's passions include meme making, pro-cannabis awareness and all things Rock-n-Roll! She loves social media, Street Epistemology, and strives to make people think about their beliefs.

John Jackson

John Jackson is the Assistant Executive Director for the Atheist Alliance of America. He was a sergeant in the Marine Corps and spent the majority of his service in Okinawa, Japan and has had the chance to go to both South Korea and the Philippines twice each. He's now studying business administration at CU Denver.

Jeremy Kasey

Jeremy Kasey is currently working as a systems administrator and content developer, as well as dabbling in graphic design and social media management. Having been raised in the church, he stepped away from faith around age fifteen. In college, he majored in physics and minored in philosophy but has been on hiatus from finishing his degree.

Alex Penuelas

Alex is one of the co-founders of Atheists Helping the Homeless in Los Angeles. He is also one of the main admins for the Godless Facebook page

The Secular Buddhist Reformation



Secular Buddhism: Interview with Mark W. Gura, Part 1

by Mark W. Gura

Secular Nation: In regards to self-identifying as a Buddhist or Secular Buddhist, why do that? Why choose to follow a religion? Why choose Buddhism? Why choose any religion at all? Is Secular Buddhism a religion?



Mark Gura: While traveling all over the world to more than 80 countries,

I noticed a pattern. Later I read that others, people like Richard Dawkins, also noticed this same pattern, even before I did. Religious preferences tend to be geographic, geo-political. Very few people choose their religion, in the sense that they compare and contrast religions before choosing them. Most people continue to do what

their ancestors have done. Isn't this interesting? People seem to choose their toaster oven with more effort than they use to choose their religion—and religion will guide so many fundamental aspects of their lives. Some will even die, hate, or kill for their religion.

SN: What do you mean?

MG: It's likely that if you were born and raised in Pakistan you would be Muslim, because the majority of people in the Middle East are Muslim. If you were born and raised in India, it's likely that you would follow the Hindu religion. You would likely self-identify as a Christian or Catholic if you were born and raised in the Americas or Europe. Buddhist if you were from Southeast Asia.

The interesting thing about this is that most major religions were initially seeded by coloni-

zation, or because the leaders of nations adopted a particular religion. The Conquistadors and other Europeans converted or conquered the people in the Americas to Christianity, by force.

Europeans did the same in parts of Africa, Australia, and as far away as the Philippines. Most European regions adopted their religion in the first place because their then-king or emperor was Christian. This sort of colonization/spreading of religion from the top down or by outside forces occurred all over the world. It occurred in the Middle East and North African regions as well (mostly by Islam). Hinduism remained strong throughout the Indian Subcontinent

and Indonesia. If you look at a map that shows majority religions around the world, it's easy to see where colonization occurred. This is not to say that

Religious preferences tend to be geographic, geo-political.

religion does not spread by proselytizing and missionary efforts, but these too can be seen as geo-political efforts.

What's even more interesting about this is that once colonization occurs, rather than trying to throw off the yoke of the oppressor, people will tend to follow the religion of their oppressors.

Anyway, colonization is not my point. The point I want to make is that eventually, some people start to question their religion. When they do, they often change their religion or become non-religious. This is a recurring theme for ex-Muslims, ex-Christians, and even for Buddhists. Secular Buddhists were once Traditional Buddhists who became disenchanted with Traditional Buddhism. There are now at least 488 million Buddhists in the world. Buddhism is the fourth largest organized religion. The internet and other technological advancements are speeding changes in how people self-identify.

As an atheist activist, how people choose religion is especially interesting to me. I've been speaking with Anthony Magnabosco and Peter Boghossian, the founder of Street Epistemology (SE), and they have agreed that it is a good idea to use SE and critical thinking to help people evaluate their beliefs.

SN: Why is it that people generally become disenchanted with Traditional Buddhism?

MG: Traditional Buddhism embraces some theistic and animistic beliefs. Generally, it tends

to believe:

1. In spirits, ghosts and gods with a small "g."
2. In the superiority of men over women.
3. That monks are representatives of the Buddha.
4. In rebirth (the Buddhist version of reincarnation).
5. In devotion and faith.

We call Buddhists who disagree with Traditional Buddhism "Secular Buddhists."

SN: So what do Secular Buddhists believe?

MG: Secular Buddhists are either into Buddhist meditation, philosophy or ethics, but only utilize practices that are secular.

Secular Buddhists are atheists who do not believe in gods, gurus, or the supernatural. They tend to base their beliefs on peer-reviewed science, reason, and falsifiable beliefs.

Once colonization occurs, rather than trying to throw off the yoke of the oppressor, people will tend to follow the religion of their oppressors.

SN: Are Secular Buddhists also Secular Humanists?

MG: Traditional Buddhism has always emphasized ethics and altruism. Secular Buddhists go a few steps further. They strive to be ethical and altruistic for the sake of doing good, not because of some sort of karmic reward. Secular Buddhists utilize reason, fight for equality and social justice, and specifically reject religious dogma and supernaturalism. This is "human-

ism," by definition. But, Secular Buddhists go one step further, they also utilize either Buddhist meditation, philosophy or ethics. Therefore, they are humanists, but they are not just humanists.

Sources:

<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-buddhist/>

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/americanbuddhist/2014/01/buddhism-dominates-western-states-behind-christianity.html>

Editor's note: Please read Part 2 of our interview with Mark W. Gura in the next issue of Secular Nation.

About the Author

Mark W. Gura is Vice President of Atheist Alliance of America and co-presenter of the Richard Dawkins Award, which was

recently given to Dr. Lawrence Krauss at Reason Rally 2016 in Washington, D.C. Mark is also the host of the "Blind Faith Vaccine" TV show and the author of Atheist Meditation, Atheist Spirituality. Throughout his life, Gura has lived in and explored more than 80 countries. He has over 20 years' experience practicing mindfulness meditation/Vipassana. He is also Executive Director of the nonprofit Association of Mindfulness Meditation and Secular Buddhism (AMMSB.org).

Spotlight

AAoA is extremely proud of its remarkable team.

In this issue of *Secular Nation* magazine, we would like to take the opportunity to shine the spotlight on Adam Tilford, Dustin Kemper, Landon Taylor (aka Tombstone Da Deadman), Jenefer Hughes and Zerir Firoze.

Read on for an inside look at what makes these individuals tick.

Battling Science Deniers: It Takes All of Us. So, Use Your Voice!

by Adam Tilford

As a born-and-raised rural Kentuckian, I learned about dogma and superstition at an early age. As soon as Santa was revealed to be “not real,” I immediately asked if Jesus was also “not real.” My folks wisely told me that this was a decision I would have to make for myself. I’m extremely grateful for their wise choice of words.



If you are a science-minded freethinker in an area of ignorant, dogma-fueled science deniers, do not be discouraged.

the stars and the beauty of discovering the unknown, I naively assumed that since science is universal and affects everyone in the same way that humanity as a whole understood life in the same way I did. Boy, was I wrong!

My amazement at the blatant disregard of scientific knowledge and facts of nature later turned into disgust. I couldn’t believe the outright denial of science by those around me. It wasn’t really a decision or my

Religion did not make its way back into my thoughts again until about five years ago. As a lover of



purpose to become a “heathen outcast,” but that’s how most of the religious people here viewed me after I became outspoken for the advancement of scientific knowledge through empirical evidence and facts. My words, based on scientific knowledge, contradicted their life-long

beliefs rooted deeply in feelings with no ties to factual reality.

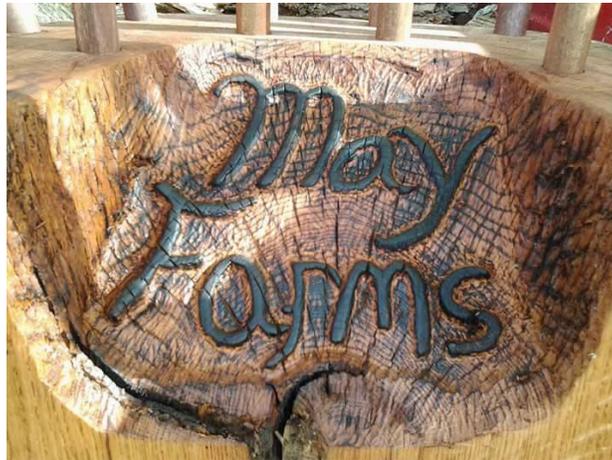
Now, here we are nearly in 2017, about to inaugurate a President and presidential team who deny science and facts. After the election, I started giving people here in Kentucky (via social media) lots of grief over electing someone so profoundly and purposefully ignorant of science. There are other atheists in my area and even more liberals, but most of them are scared of creating barriers with their conservative and religious families, so they keep quiet. Not me.

Every time I try to very simply explain basic facts of science that any middle school student should know by heart, I never ever get back any reasonable argument or anything logical. More often than not when I refute their religious stories, they say something like this: “Well, I see a lot of big words there” or “You’re taking it out of context.” Some have even been so offended by my support and advocacy of science they attempted to boycott my business. I thought the attempt was laughable, considering I have been outspoken for humanism and secularism here in rural Kentucky for many years. It seems some people



would rather you have faith that the house you build for them will not fall down, rather than actually understanding geometry and the way a load travels to the ground.

I was never worried about not getting more business here in this area. I have been going out of this county to build and fix things for a while. I don't even



try to find work around here anymore. But, here is the good part: The very day after the “super smart” religious right decided to boycott my business, the phone started ringing almost nonstop. I've secured myself work for at least a year just from their ignorant attempt to bring down my business.

If you are a science-minded freethinker in an area of ignorant, dogma-fueled science deniers, do not be discouraged. There are many others like us around who stay silent about their liberalism and/or secularism. It is not every person's nature to be an outspoken voice, but that does not mean they too are not working behind the scenes to educate and inform the world in their own way. It takes all of us. So, in whatever

way you choose to use your voice for science today, the most important part is that you use it—and continue to use it—until it's gone.

About the Author

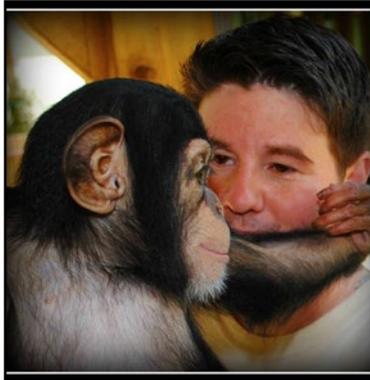
Adam has been an outspoken advocate for secularism for about four years, and he wrote the piece that Mark Gura read before giving Dr. Lawrence Krauss the prestigious Richard Dawkins award at Reason Rally 2016. Adam has spent most of his life in Kentucky; serves as an administrator on the [Atheist Alliance of America Facebook page](#); and is a woodworker, carpenter, musician, and science junkie among other things.



To Join or to Start? That Is the Question

by Dustin Kemper

The future is already here. It's just not evenly distributed. That's what I tell myself when I worry, that nobody cares about the environment. They just haven't been exposed to the information necessary to realize how to make a contribution, right? Our recent election, however, showed me how untrue my premise is. The average person knows. They have access. They see shows, movies, articles on social media, and listen to podcasts every day that tell them the world's climate is changing. They just don't believe it. Why?



That's the thing about being a primate with a hypersensitive amygdala. We are wired to look for danger, but only in the linear and local sense. We only imagine our future as a continu-



ation of the past. We are predisposed to imagine what we already know. The brain wants certainty. To make counterintuitive choices is understandably difficult, but not impossible.

For example, you're more likely to pull a soda machine down on you than to get eaten by a shark, and way more likely to get killed by a donkey or a coconut. That sounds incorrect, doesn't it? But it is true. It shouldn't be a surprise then that we regularly see an ignorant social media thread with statements such as, "If global warming is real, then why is it cold today?" or "Why is it snowing there?" We've all at one time or another been in that argument with a friend or loved one.

Many of us are trying to understand why states such as Florida and here in my home of South Carolina voted for the one presidential candidate that does not believe in climate change, while we are subject to worsening storms year after year. Why is there any argument at all when the data is so clear?

Those arguments usually revolve around giving up conveniences for the sake of the environment. That, however, is maybe not a convincing argument for someone looking at the evidence from a hierarchical

viewpoint. So what do we do? We find a different approach of debate based on creating an

In whatever way you choose to use your voice for science today, the most important part is that you use it—and continue to use it—until it's gone.

understanding of how everyone can benefit from the measures, instead of being affected by the consequences. In short, instead of "doomsday warnings" that fall on deaf ears, a message of promise should be conveyed on how we can live better collectively in a world of abundance. It is our responsibility as rationalists to help others see how understanding climate change is in their own self-interest.



You may be asking yourself other than fine-tuning my argument style, what can I as an individual do that really makes a difference? The answer is simple, join or start.



About the Author

Dustin Kemper is a long standing board member for Atheist Alliance of America and current Secretary. He is the former President of the Myrtle Beach Humanists and Freethinkers group in South Carolina. Dustin is an avid science enthusiast and lecturer, photographer and animal conservation advocate. He is a lover of the beach and ocean and has been involved for many years in environmental conservation projects.

What I mean by that is you can use social media to find volunteer projects near you. You will find more than you expect. If you live near the beach, there are beach cleanups. If you live in a city, there are always Adopt-A-Highway cleanups, and if you're near a river, there are typically river cleanup projects. If you do not find one in your area, be the person to start your own.

I myself love the beach. I have spent my accumulative years living on beaches all over the world. So naturally the impact we have on the ocean and our world's shores has always been a concern of mine.

Volunteer beach cleanups are one small way I've attempted to negate my anxiety of what seems to be an insurmountable obstacle of undoing generations of harm to the planet. It's not much, but it adds up over time, and that's the point.



Many of us are trying to understand why states such as Florida, and here in my home of South Carolina, voted for the one presidential candidate that does not believe in climate change while we are subject to worsening storms year after year.

How I Fled Islamic Persecution in Bangladesh and Came to the USA

by Zerín Firoze

A year ago, every moment of my life passed with the constant fear of rape and death. Islamic extremists could break into my house and kill me at any moment. The Bangladeshi government, police, Islamic groups, my own family, and the generally conservative Bengali Muslim population are all against atheists. I realized that I did not have any option but to flee from Bangladesh to survive.

I am an outspoken ex-Muslim atheist, feminist, and human rights activist from Bangladesh. I have tirelessly written about religious freedom, democracy, free speech, women's rights, and LGBT rights.

Today I risk my life every time I speak my mind. I have received rape and death threats from extremist groups like Jamaat-Shibir, Ansar-Al-Islam, and Hefajat-e-Islam for my writings and for supporting basic human rights.

I am a bit different from all the other atheist writers who were killed in Bangladesh. I am not a blogger. I was attacked and threatened simply for posting the truth on my personal social

media. The other atheist writers and activists who were killed in Bangladesh were all males and were far older than me. I am an outspoken female atheist, which made me even more vulnerable. Unlike most other slain atheists, like Washiqur Rahman, I have never used a pseudonym on my social media accounts. I have always been an outspoken critic of Islam and all other religions with my real name and pictures.

My location in Bangladesh was also easily traceable. I never

A year ago, every moment of my life passed with the constant fear of rape and death.

thought anybody, especially my own friends and relatives, would try to harm or kill me just for my writings on social media. Initially, I thought at least my moderate, English-speaking Muslim friends would support

me and help me to reform Islam, but I was woefully wrong. My Muslim friends deleted me from social media and have cut all ties with me. Some of my English-speaking Muslim friends tried to kill me unless I converted back to Islam, and the rest of my Muslim friends wanted to report my name to the police, so that the government could punish me for blasphemy and apostasy.

I could neither seek help nor report threats to the police in Bangladesh. The police would arrest me for the grave crime of exercising free speech, instead of arresting extremists who kill people. Under Section-57 of the



2006 Information and Communication Technology Act, I could end up in jail for 14 or more years with heavy fines for the crime of hurting religious sentiments of Muslims in Bangladesh. Jihadists from Ansar-Al-Islam already knew my face and name. I was also at risk of facing honor-based violence and torture by my own Muslim family. I was under attack by both political Islamic extremists and my own family.

I did not wish to live my life under constant fear of threat. I want to live my life freely, and I want to continue my education. My British, agnostic friend Sarah gave me the idea to open a GoFundMe account. GoFundMe is not available in third-

world countries, like Bangladesh. So, Sarah had to set it up from the UK with her own UK bank information. My atheist Facebook friends from the U.S. were generous with their donations. However, I could not raise more than \$1,000, as I could not openly have published my story and condition outside my trusted social media atheist friends. Later, I also realized that it is difficult to remit money in and out of Bangladesh. I am not a foreign worker, so I cannot receive money outside Bangladesh. My American friend Cary intervened and handled all my financial matters wisely, signed my college forms, and acted as my legal guardian in the U.S.

Last year during this time, I applied to U.S. colleges for Fall 2016 admission by going AGAINST my parents' wishes. Just last January, I had no idea I would get accepted by all eight U.S. colleges, including selective and competitive Stony Brook University. I had no idea how I would pay for my college.

Last January, Cary helped me apply to U.S. colleges on time and even paid the admission application fees on my behalf. Later, I repaid Cary when my parents changed their mind. Cary also signed my housing contract form for State University of New York (SUNY) and acted as my legal guarantor in

the U.S. and paid for my other expenses here and there when my own parents refused. I'm fortunate that I have a friend like Cary and that my parents changed their mind at the last moment (last year in June/July).

I was able to fight and demand my rights. I was able to shame my parents for denying, delaying, and hampering my education for so many years. One of the biggest reasons my parents let me go is because I received threats from various Islamic groups. I showed all those hateful messages to my dad. My very presence at my parents' house was risky for them.

I was able to shame my parents for denying, delaying, and hampering my education for so many years.

My parents also realized they could no longer tie me down or force me to marry. Many of my classmates were forced into marriage, and my parents wanted the same for me.

My dad's sister told my mom a typical Bengali Muslim man would never marry a rude, atheist girl like me. Lol. I came to the U.S.

My parents asked me to leave and never come back again.

with one year of funding from my parents, and my parents are still hesitant to pay for my college. I'm trying to convince my parents to help me pay for my second, third, and fourth year of college.

The U.S. colleges took four months to review my applications and accept me. I could not sleep nor eat for those months. I kept fearing for my safety and changed my location from Dhaka to Chittagong while I waited to hear about a decision on my applications. My social media accounts were deactivated for several months as I feared for my life in Bangladesh. I stopped writing on social media. Those four months were the darkest and scariest months of my life.

My British friend Sarah was ready to educate, feed, and shelter me in her house. However, the British embassy rejected my visitor's visa application due to lack of ties with my home country of Bangladesh. I could not move to the UK to be safe under Sarah's protection. The Swedish embassy also rejected my tourist visa application.

Finally in July, 2016, I got my acceptance letter and I-20 form from an accredited U.S. community college in the SUNY system.

I had worked for the last five years to save money for college.

I had fought with my parents. And as an elder daughter, I demanded my share of the inheritance. It took me several years to convince my parents to educate me. My parents eventually had to let me go. My parents could no longer keep me in their house as many

extremists and my other former religious friends and relatives knew I'm an atheist. My parents simply could not keep an outspoken atheist in their house due to safety-related reasons. My parents asked me to leave and never come back again. I am not even allowed to visit my parents during my semester breaks. My parents will not take me back if I go back to Bangladesh.

The U.S. embassy treated me very nicely and granted me a five-year student visa, after I passed my visa interview and met all the requirements.

I immediately packed my bags and took a plane to the U.S. as soon as I got my U.S. visa stamped on my passport. However, there are job restrictions for international students in the U.S. Moreover, a student visa is a temporary visa. I need to go back to Bangladesh before my visa expires. Now, I need a place where I can settle permanently and call it my own country. I speak English fluently, and I am well informed about U.S. politics, culture and the American way of life. I want to be a U.S. citizen. I have applied for asylum in the U.S., and I hope the U.S. government will grant me asylum.

About the Author

Zerin Firoze is an outspoken ex-Muslim atheist from Bangladesh who fights for women's rights, gay rights, and secular values. She is also a key contributor to Atheist Alliance of America. She has received numerous death threats for her work and is currently in the U.S. under a temporary student visa. She now has a [Patreon account](#) for those who would like to support her advocacy work.



Student Early Bird rates are only \$35, or only \$125 for a group of 5

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Saved by Science Saves

The Importance of Critical Thinking in the 21st Century

by Dr. Christopher DiCarlo

Critical Thinking involves the careful reflection on how and why we believe what we do. It is composed of a skill set that allows us to better analyze and consider the value of our beliefs and those of others as they are measured by universal criteria. Critical Thinking is important, because what you think often influences how you behave, which affects others whose beliefs and actions affect you.

The skills of Critical Thinking increase our ability to think more clearly about important issues. Critical Thinking empowers us with the capacities to be confident in what we believe. It focuses our thoughts to allow us to communicate more effectively.

Critical Thinking allows us to have heated discussions about important issues, disagree with one another, and still get along as civilized human beings.

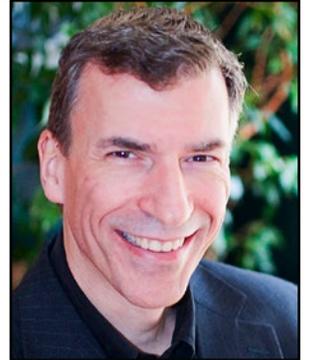
And most importantly: Critical Thinking allows us to have heated discussions about important issues, disagree with one another, and still get along as civilized human beings.

Critical Thinking involves the careful reflection on how and why we believe what we do.

Let's consider an example that might exemplify the importance of critical thinking skills. As a Canadian, I had the unique distinction of observing your recent presidential election. The importance of critical thinking skills as they could have applied to this particular election can hardly be overstated.

We witnessed a lot of things during that entire election process. One of the most startling in my mind was the ease with which people would betray their knowledge of the facts and even their understanding of the basic rules of dialogue and discourse, in favor of supporting a particular ideology. Feelings were in; reflective thinking was out.

Stephen Colbert's term—truthiness—becomes hauntingly apropos in post-election



reflection. Facts are OK, but if I believe something strongly enough (even though it's factually false), that should count just as much as facts, right? Both political leaders lied during this election; however, I believe Trump outweighed Clinton about 3-to-1 in this regard. Be that as it may, the fact still remains: the entire world witnessed the death of facts during the 2016 U.S. elections. If facts can so easily be ignored when dealing with some of the most important decisions to be made in the history of humankind, what hope is there for the rest of us poor slob in our day-to-day lives?

The entire world witnessed the death of facts during the 2016 U.S. elections.

This is why now is the time for critical thinking skills to be learned and used by the polis. Now is the time for the re-teaching of proper dialogue and discourse about important issues. Now is the time to re-learn the art of disagreement. And now is the time to decide what it means to live in a fair and just world by allowing people a maximal amount of liberty by causing the least amount of harm or suffering.

However, we will never accomplish what we all desire without the capacity for effective and equal communication. And the best chance for this to happen is through the teaching and use of Critical Thinking skills. This will not be easy. And unfortunately, it will be generational in coming. But the task has befallen all of those who champion discussion over violence, dialogue over hatred, and above all, fairness and compassion – especially to those with whom we disagree.

For more information:

GoFundMe
www.criticalthinkingsolutions.ca
www.criticalthinkingproject.com

About the Author

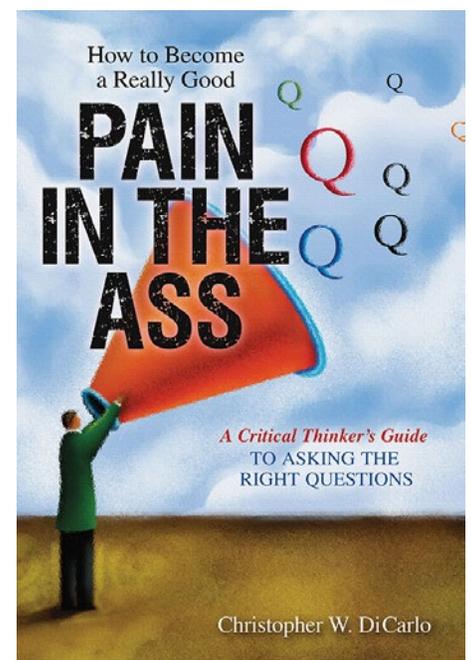
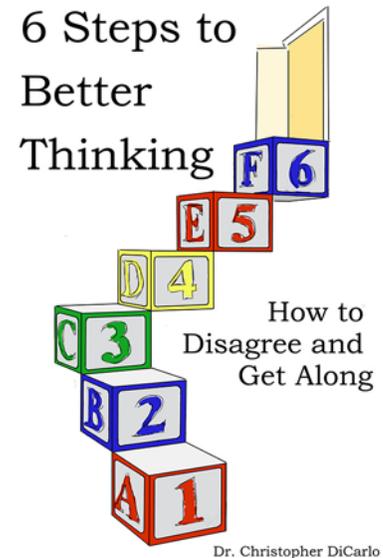
Dr. Christopher DiCarlo is a philosopher, educator, and author. He currently teaches in the Faculties of Human Biology and Philosophy at the University of Toronto. He is also a lifetime member of Humanist Canada and an Expert Advisor for the Centre for Inquiry Canada. He has been invited to speak

*at numerous national and international conferences and written many scholarly papers ranging from bioethics to cognitive evolution. His latest book entitled: **How to Become a Really Good Pain in the Ass: A Critical Thinker's Guide to Asking the Right Questions** was released worldwide by Prometheus Press in August, 2011, and is currently in its fifth printing and is an international bestseller.*

*He is a past Visiting Research Scholar at Harvard University in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences: Department of Anthropology and the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. He is currently working on his latest book tentatively entitled: **Flying Without A Pilot: A Determined Look at the Future of Ethics, Law, and the Value of Human Behavior**. In April, 2008 he was awarded TV Ontario's Big Ideas Best Lecturer in Ontario Award.*

In August, 2008, he was honoured with the Canadian Humanist of the Year Award from the Humanist Association of Canada. And in September, 2008, he was awarded the UOIT Complementary Faculty Teaching Award. Dr. DiCarlo is the Principal of Critical Thinking Solutions, an educational consulting business for individuals, corporations, and not-for-profits in both the private and public sectors. He is also the developer of the first Pilot Project in Canada to introduce Universal Critical Thinking skills into the Ontario Public High School curriculum which has begun in the Upper Grand District School Board. These skills have since been developed into The Critical Thinking Project – an Interna-

tional Education Program – and have been adopted in Schools in Guatemala, Rwanda, Uganda, and Ghana with further interest in China, Colombia, Brazil, Afghanistan, and Iran.



The Curse of the Carl Sagan Effect

by Julien Musolino

Editor's Note: This article first appeared [here](#) in the September/October 2016 issue of The Freethought Society News.

Once heard a colleague remark that even the best scientific ideas would be useless unless they are communicated. Where would we be today, he mused, if Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, or Albert Einstein had kept their discoveries to themselves? Part of what makes science so successful is a mode of communication based on a culture of openness and the free exchange of ideas. In scientific circles, the principal vehicles of dissemination are peer-reviewed publications and presentations at professional meetings. Through these venues, scientists communicate with other scientists. But should researchers also engage with the general public in an effort to popularize science? On this question, academic culture, for all its emphasis on openness and the value of knowledge, is mired in a curious kind of doublespeak.

On the one hand, academic institutions, professional societies, and funding agencies make it clear that engaging the general public is an important part of their mission, and they explicitly encourage researchers to do so. As neuroscientist Susana Martinez-Conde points out, in the United States, the National Science Foundation evaluates

grant proposals not only on the basis of intellectual merit, but also on their potential to make a broader impact on society. One such impact is the dissemination of research findings to the public. In the United Kingdom, the Royal Society encourages researchers to engage more fully with the public. In France, the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) explains that one of its top priorities is to strengthen the relations between science and society.

On the other hand, researchers who engage in public outreach find that, by and large, their efforts are not rewarded by their institutions. This does not mean that specific awards do not exist, but rather, as Martinez-Conde explains, “Most disseminators incur no net

penalty—and may even benefit slightly—yet they obtain few or no institutional rewards for their communication activities.” Compounding the problem is the lingering perception within academia that scientists who perform outreach activities are of a lesser caliber than those who keep their nose closer to the grindstone and deal exclusively in the pursuit of new knowledge.

This stereotype even has a name. It's called the “Carl Sagan Effect.” The late Carl Sagan, an astronomer and famous science popularizer, failed to receive tenure at Harvard and was later denied membership in the pres-

tigious National Academy of Sciences. The reason, according to his biographers,



is that his success as a public ambassador of science led to the perception that he was a second-rate scientist. Ironically, a later analysis of Sagan's scientific output revealed that his accomplishments were on a par with those of other members of the National Academy. In a similar vein, while many scientists agree that public outreach is important, and even part of a researcher's duty, a 2006 report by the Royal Society of London found that public engagement was believed to be carried out by those who were not “good enough” for an academic career, adding that such activities were regarded as “light” or “fluffy.”

And yet, systematic studies involving thousands of participants across more than ten different countries all point to the conclusion that the Carl Sagan Effect is a myth. In fact, exactly the opposite is true. Researchers with popular publications, compared to those without, are more active academically, work longer hours, score better on standard measures of academic excellence, and have higher academic rank. Moreover, these conclusions are consistent across countries and fields of publication. In my own experience, I have found that commu-

Should researchers engage with the general public in an effort to popularize science?

nicating with the general public has improved both my writing and my thinking.

There are a number of excellent reasons why public dissemination of science should rank high on the agenda of academic institutions. In a recent manifesto, neuroscientist and popular science writer David Eagleman explains why. One reason is that scientists rely heavily on the taxpaying public for their livelihood. It is therefore incumbent upon us, denizens of the ivory tower, to express our gratitude to our backers and explain to them in plain language what their hard-earned dollars allow us to do, what we discover, and why it matters. As Eagleman puts it, “Would you invest billions in an industry that doesn’t share its accomplishments, landmarks, open questions, and goals?”

Another reason is to inspire and foster critical thinking. A few years ago, I taught an upper-level undergraduate seminar at my home institution, Rutgers University, and had to argue with about a third of the class that the age of the Earth is a matter of fact and not a matter of opinion. Every semester, I talk to students who do not accept that evolution is fact. One of them, a science major, once explained to me that science is about what can be measured and reproduced in a laboratory. If nobody was around to witness human evolution, he continued, we have no grounds for claiming that it actually took

place. Sadly, the perils of the endemic lack of critical thinking in our society are all too familiar to those concerned with such questions, and well-documented, too. In his book *Good Thinking*, for example, Guy P. Harrison chronicles the large-scale effects of our collective critical-thinking blind spots and their associated woes. Public dissemination of science should also be encouraged because it can inform public policy. Last year, President Barack Obama issued an executive order supporting the use of behavioral science insights to better serve the American people. The first paragraph explains,

“A growing body of evidence demonstrates that behavioral science insights—research findings from fields such as behavioral economics and psychology, about how people make decisions and act on them—can be used to design government policies to better serve the American people.” More than a century ago, the geneticist and Nobel Laureate Hermann Joseph Muller already urged his peers to engage in public outreach, stressing that it was imperative for scientists to help educate the public, for reasons not dissimilar to those expressed in Obama’s executive

It is time for academic institutions to start acting on their professed aspirations, help dispel old myths with fresh information, and begin devising ways to reward researchers who dare to make the truth heard beyond the confines of the ivory tower.

order.

Rewarding researchers who engage in efforts to popularize science is also vital to fend off the deluge of misinformation that reaches the shores of public opinion on a daily basis. In their book *Merchants of Doubt*, historians Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway chronicle the decades-long campaign run by entrenched political and corporate interests to mislead the public on issues ranging from tobacco smoke to global warming. Why didn’t scientists stand up, the authors ask. The answer is an ominous reminder of the dangers posed by the persistence of the Carl Sagan Effect. Speaking of mainstream scientists, Oreskes and Conway remark that “They consider their ‘real’ work to be the pro-

duction of knowledge, not its dissemination, and they often view these two activities as mutually exclusive. Some even sneer at colleagues who communicate to broader audiences, dismissing them as ‘popularizers.’”

These reasons represent only the tip of a much larger iceberg, but they suffice to illustrate what should be a truism, namely, science matters and a scientifically-educated

public is essential to the fulfillment of our democratic ideals. At present, there is widespread agreement that researchers ought to engage in efforts to popularize science. There are also excellent reasons, both

intellectual and practical, for supporting such practices. At the same time, two obstacles still stand in the way. The first is psychological and the second institutional. In the current academic ethos, public outreach is still stigmatized. Moreover, academia does not provide the incentive structures necessary to further encourage outreach activities. All this suggests that it is time for academic institutions to start acting on their professed aspirations, help dispel old myths with fresh information, and begin devising ways to reward researchers who dare to make the truth heard beyond the confines of the ivory tower.

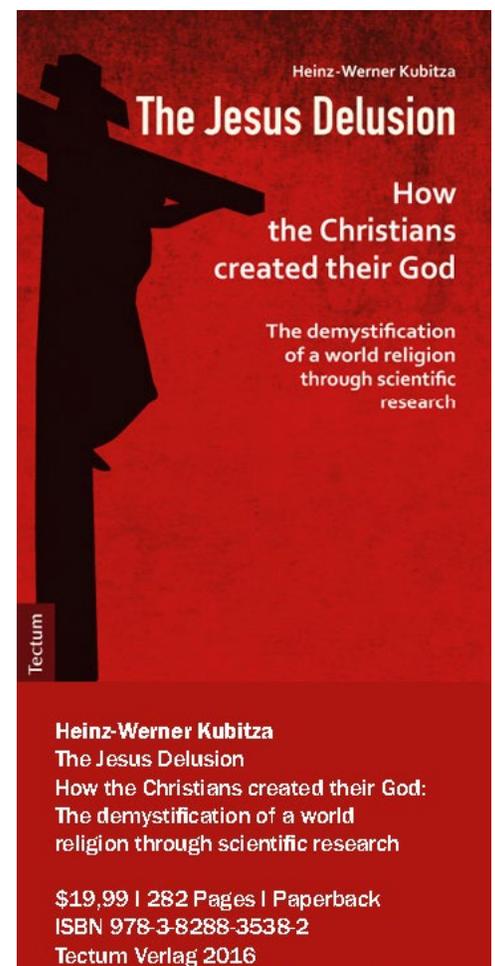
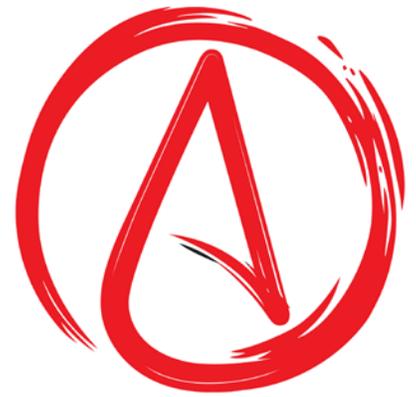
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About the Author

Julien Musolino is a Franco-American cognitive scientist, public speaker, author, and Associate Professor at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, where he holds a dual appointment in the Psychology Department and the world-renowned Center for Cognitive Science. Born and raised in France, Julien studied at the University of Geneva, in neighboring Switzerland, the University of North Wales, Bangor, in the United Kingdom, the University of Maryland, and the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of numerous scientific articles, and is regularly invited to give lectures in the United States and around the world. His research has been published in top scientific journals and has been funded by the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation.

*Julien is also known for his passionate advocacy of science, reason, skepticism, and critical thinking. Julien's public work is represented by literary agencies in New York and London. He is the author of the recent popular science book *The Soul Fallacy: What Science Shows we Gain from Letting Go of Our Soul Beliefs*, and he is an "expert blogger" for *Psychology Today*. Julien has appeared on national television, his writings have been discussed in popular magazines, and he has been a guest on radio and podcast programs in the United States and abroad. You can learn more about Julien and his work by visiting julienmusolino.com and you can follow Julien on Twitter @JulienMusolino.*



Understanding Dogmatic Belief

by Mark Reimers, M.D.

Skeptics have been mystified (and frustrated) for years about the fixed dogmas of religious believers. The last election has heightened that frustration, because many religious believers thought their God wanted them to vote for one of the most destructive (and also least pious) candidates in recent history. Inconsistencies such as these often lead us to dismiss religious believers as delusional or stupid. But they aren't; many believers function quite effectively in practical matters, and many false beliefs have been held widely in many countries and eras, even by the intelligentsia of the age. Dogmatic belief is a different kind of thing, but still dangerous.

The dogmatic believer holds a false or severely distorted belief, but is rarely moved by evidence.

Atheists and skeptics will engage better if they understand dogmatism. The dogmatic believer holds a false or severely distorted belief, but is rarely moved by evidence. Numerous social psychology experiments of the past decades have shown that when moderately smart people hold a belief, they usually stand more steadfast in their belief, rather than

Many people seem to be looking for arguments to support their belief, rather than to evaluate their truth.

be persuaded, when someone presents evidence to the contrary. These experiments are hardly surprising to those who have spent hours arguing with religious true believers, or indeed with true believers in any cause. Many people seem to be looking for arguments to support their belief, rather than to evaluate their truth.

Evidence from Neurobiology

There's not a lot of evidence about the brain processes underlying dogmatic false beliefs. Nevertheless a few researchers have studied the distribution of brain activity while people pray or think about religious or non-testable beliefs. Two publicly available studies are the [Neural Basis of Testable and Non-Testable Beliefs](#) and [The Neural Correlates of Religious and Nonreligious Belief](#) – this last led by atheist author Sam Harris.

These functional MRI studies measured oxygenated blood flow. Such studies give us some information about which regions of the brain are drawing down extra oxygen from the blood, and therefore are likely working hard; but they don't give any information about what those regions are doing. Scientists often infer indirectly what may be going on

by identifying other conditions under which these same regions are active.



Two of the most prominent regions involved in religious belief, but not much involved in statements of fact, are ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex (vmPFC) and anterior cingulate cortex (ACC). The vmPFC seems to be active in a wide variety of conditions involving close relationships, obligations, or moral violations. It is directly connected to the amygdala, which is crucial for many basic social emotions. The ACC seems to be involved in many processes that involve reward, pain or judgments of value. Therefore we may plausibly propose that religious beliefs involve social loyalties and expectations of reward or punishment.

We may plausibly propose that religious beliefs involve social loyalties and expectations of reward or punishment.

These neuroscience studies confirm the social psychology account of belief: that religious beliefs result from a kind of identity politics, rather than any kind of thinking process (much less rational thought). Identifying with others is a quick way to navigate a confusing world. People who are struggling don't have time or support in thinking and turn to identity models for guidance. Chronic stress and distraction undermine critical thinking. It is no accident that critical thinking movements have mostly arisen in prosperous societies

There has been no selective pressure during evolutionary history for people to acquire nuanced perspectives on their society or on global affairs.

and only among those whose positions are relatively secure. Critical thinking is only possible in a “safe space” where one is engaged and trusts others. Such trust has severely eroded in the U.S.

A recurrent phrase we heard from Trump supporters was, “He tells it like it is.” This phrase puzzled and vexed most reasonable people, because Trump was stretching the truth or outright lying about nearly everything important. At the same time, people who admitted that what he said wasn’t really factual, affirmed their support for him anyway. To understand why people could say these kinds of things we need to think about mythology.

Mythology persists, not because it is grounded in facts, but because it includes stories that speak to the felt condition of the hearer or believer.

Trump’s diatribes did not inform people about economic complexity, or the global economy, or automation; nor did he encourage them to think about getting training or education or modifying their lifestyles.

He did not articulate a vision for how government could help them in practical ways. Rather he spoke to their sense of being beaten and taken advantage of by alien forces beyond their control.

Belief is not fundamentally

about truth; rather it is about social bonding and organizing joint efforts. There has been some controversy (e.g. [here](#)) about whether humans are “wired” to believe true things or only useful delusions. I think this debate gets hung up on metaphysical terms that are too broad. Although there has been a strong selective advantage to having the facts right about concrete things like where animals are, natural selection has acted differently on organizing social constructions. In fact many theorists argue that there has been strong selective pressure to participate in joint imaginations of gods or ancestors, so that people fulfill obligations. There has been no selective pressure during evolutionary history for people to acquire nuanced perspectives on their society or on global affairs.

Although I’ve contrasted dogmatic belief with factual beliefs, really dogmatic belief is a continuum. Processes of social identity operate at all levels of discussion, and no social movement is entirely rational—just ask a young scientist who finds evidence that undermines the strong opinions of many senior scientists in that field. Most of us have skeptical or atheist friends who seem (at least to us) immune to reason about their favorite hobby horse.

As noted above, there’s not a lot of evidence about the brain

processes underlying dogmatic false beliefs. Given that many voters and activists hold false beliefs, it’s understandable that tax supported agencies hesitate to fund research with political implications. Therefore it’s hard to get federal funding in this country to study this important phenomenon (the same is true of psychopathy). If private citizens—whether skeptics, atheists, or humanists—would support such research, we would be better able to understand and grapple with dangerous and widespread dogmatic delusions.

About the Author

Dr. Mark Reimers studies brain function by applying statistics and computational methods to the very large data sets now being generated in neuroscience and genomics. In particular he tries to understand how brain dynamics change between different activities and states of mind. Dr. Reimers has worked at the National Institutes of Health, the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, and at the Virginia Institute for Psychiatric Genetics in Richmond. Dr. Reimers was the leader of the Richmond Humanists in Virginia from 2009-2014, and he is now a frequent speaker at humanist and popular science events in Michigan.

Belief is not fundamentally about truth; rather it is about social bonding and organizing joint efforts.

Leaving Religion

Church Scandals: Why Christians Get Angry for All the Wrong Reasons

by Candace R. M. Gorham,
MA, LPC

It has long been a tradition of religions of all varieties to deflect attention from the failings inherent in the religion itself to the failings of the individual person whenever a spiritual leader does something immoral or illegal. Instead of exploring what, if anything, is in the doctrine, text, or history of their particular faith that might lead the person to believe that his or her actions were acceptable, followers rally quickly to ensure the integrity of their organizations. The range of grievances filed against men and women of god range from simple mistakes to felonious crimes and followers of those religious and spiritual leaders typically respond in one of two ways:

1. They quickly forgive the sinner—if they believe the person is guilty at all—and continue to stay under his or her leadership. They become fierce defenders who aggressively protect their own and, in the process, neglect to consider the potential influence of the religion itself on the leader’s behavior. “He was just

a man. She was just a woman. No one is perfect. We all make mistakes. Hate the sin, but love the sinner.”

2. When the mistake is especially despicable, such as when it rises to the level of criminal, followers quickly defend their religious belief and typically insist that outsiders not view that leader as a representative authority in their religious tradition. “He wasn’t a real Christian if he did that. She was being influenced by the devil. We’re not all like that. That’s not even in the text.”

It has long been a tradition of religions of all varieties to deflect attention from the failings inherent in the religion itself.

When considering current scandals to which followers responded in one of those two ways, any socially aware adult could likely recall several. Revelations about the Catholic Church’s child and sexual abuses is one of the most well-known scandals, and responses of the first variety were frighteningly common.

On January 6, 2002, the award-winning newspaper, Boston Globe, published a piece that is typically credited as being the catalyst for heightened social awareness of and outrage at the

Catholic Church. [According to one article](#), “Church records have revealed stories of many other repeat abusers, including priests who traded drugs for sex with minors, fathered children, and physically assaulted their victims.... In many cases, accused priests were sent for brief periods of psychological evaluation, then returned to parishes—where they abused again.”

According to [BishopAccountability.org](#), an organization dedicated to documenting what they call the “abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church,” the overall statistics, as reported by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops themselves regarding such allegations and proven abuses, are disturbing, to say the least:

- Data through June 2015 reveal that 6,528 priests have been accused of abuses that occurred between 1950 and 2015.
- As of May 2016, the U.S. bishops report receiving allegations from 17,651 victims.



- Of allegations of incidents that occurred between 1950-2002, fully 80% of the allegations were substantiated.

Over the decade and a half following the Boston Globe's initial publications, Catholic Church affiliation fluctuated, enjoying spells of growth such as the [7.5% increase in membership](#) from 2007 to 2008. However, over the long run, [Pew Research Center](#) found that there has been an overall 3.1% decrease in Catholic affiliation in the United States between 2007-2014.

While this may seem like good news to those who find these behaviors beyond reprehensible—"Yay! The Catholic Church doesn't have as many people to abuse!" — I can't help but marvel that the decline isn't greater. The explanation lies in the hearts and minds of Catholic men and women who continue to support their churches, despite overwhelming evidence that their beloved organization isn't just full of horrible characters; the entire institution is rotten to the core, as evidenced by revelations that the Vatican itself had direct knowledge of abuses, even to the point of participating in the cover-up! "Oh! The priests are fallible men who deserve forgiveness, too," they say. "He made his confession, and we must forgive him as Jesus has already done." This child-like ear-plugging and

eye-covering resulted—and continues to result—in scores of children being repeatedly abused by pathological deviants who are free to rape and terrorize with impunity with each Bishop-approved relocation to new parishes.

What the Catholic Church fails to do, decade after decade, century after century, is reevaluate the doctrines and traditions that create the problem and ultimately provide cover for such rampant, reprehensible behavior. Biblical devaluation of children. Mandatory celibacy. A strict hierarchy of moral authority that makes questioning popes and bishops tantamount

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to questioning god himself. Moving priests to other parishes instead of addressing the issue when allegations are made.

These are just a few issues that the Catholic Church needs to grapple with on a structural level if it is ever going to halt the spread of this poison. The priests and nuns who com-

mit these atrocities need to be held accountable and parishioners need to insist that Catholic Church leadership be purged. Or better still, Catholics need to admit that their belief system and the myths and texts on which it is founded are shameful relics that ultimately prevent them from being the best versions of themselves.

Another major scandal rocked

the Black megachurch world when, in September 2010, Bishop Eddie Long faced [allegations of sexual misconduct](#) from four teenaged boys in his church. (This number eventually grew to a total of five accusers.) Long is the senior pastor of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, one of the largest predominantly Black megachurches in the country, boasting upwards of 25,000 members, and is a veritable multimillion-dollar cash cow. Financial scandals included.

Handsome, charismatic, and successful, Long appealed not only to his tens of thousands of members, but to millions more worldwide who watched him on TV, purchased his books and merchandise, and attended his conferences. In the immediate aftermath of the multiple accusations of using his spiritual authority to coerce the teenaged boys into engaging in sexual acts with him, including a bizarre account of a [private ceremony](#) that sounds a lot like a wedding, Long's congregants were [fiercely loyal](#). While there were [pockets of people](#) who decided they no longer wanted to call Long "Pastor," there were literally thousands more in his church and millions worldwide who comforted him, no doubt assuaging pounds of self-hatred and hidden guilt.

Many of his members didn't seem to struggle quite as much. "No one knows his heart, but god." "We've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of god. Who am I to judge?" "He's a man of god! He would never do such a thing! He taught against homosexuality all the time!"

As the culprits endure the resulting well-deserved punishments, the rest of Christianity needs to comb through the Bible for the explicit and implicit messages that might lead to such unacceptable behaviors from spiritual and religious leaders.

Those who believed the accusations were quick to forgive, and many more simply refused to believe what was plainly before their eyes.

As with the Catholic Church, Protestants of all variety—mainline, Charismatic, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and more—need to take a hard look at the doctrines and dogma they peddle and evaluate how they make their lives harder. Strict submission to leaders, especially in non-mainline churches. The sin of same-sex love. Belief in demonic influences. These are examples of Christian teachings that are nothing more than



bacteria-laden petri dishes from which crop up all manner of unethical behaviors. While we are right to expect leaders to own up to their sins, we also need to demand nothing less than that they face the full measure of social, civil, and legal conse-

quences of their actions. And as the culprits endure the resulting well-deserved punishments, the rest of Christianity needs to comb through the Bible for the explicit and implicit messages that might lead to such unacceptable behaviors from spiritual and religious leaders.

Let's turn to the second type of response that frequently reverberates through Christian churches and traditions when there's a scandal. The second type of response is that which comes from those who recognize that the leader's actions are wrong, immoral, unethical, or illegal. Not only do they recognize it, they are vocal about their disdain and go to great lengths to distance themselves from the person. Instead of accepting the reality that there are teachings and instructions in the Bible that frequently give their flawed leaders the permission to do what they're doing, responses of this second type are the result of meticulous cherry-picking and dexterous mental gymnastics.

Take [Westboro Baptist Church](#), for example. Fred Phelps, their leader and fomentor of the most disgusting kind, is hated probably more by Christians than non-Christians and non-believers. In fact, I hesitate to include the link to their website, because the bigotry and hatred on the site is so overwhelming and emotionally disturbing. (If you click, consider yourself warned.) Their organization is

rather obsessed with same-sex love and spends much of its time waving obscene signs, protesting and disrupting everything from gay pride parades ("God hates fags!" "Thank god for AIDS!") to military funerals ("Thank god for dead troops!" "God blew up the troops!") to Melissa Etheridge concerts ("Thank god for breast cancer.") Westboro Baptist Church explicitly teaches that the Bible reveals much more about god's hatred than about his love. Phelps has even published a [94-page e-book](#) that proves the truth of his message with 701 biblical scriptures on god's hatred.

Westboro Baptist Church is so un-Christian that even atheists would say they don't behave as the Bible says Christians should behave. However, it is at that very point that we must pause and question ourselves, more specifically, Christians must pause and ask themselves: Is there any biblical precedence to support Phelps' stances? What does the Bible say about god's love versus his hatred? Which scriptures teach that homosexuality is sin? Are there examples in the Bible of god using physical illnesses as a way to punish people for their sins?

"You can't even get out of the first book without the wrath and judgments of God consuming most of the book. So, it is throughout the Bible. Open it anywhere and you will see the wrath and judgment of God in

every book and in nearly every chapter of the Bible.” (p. 5)

“As a matter of uncontroverted fact, the phrase “God loves everyone” never appears in the Bible. You can search from Genesis to Revelation—in all 66 books, 1,189 chapters, 31,173 verses and 774,746 words—and you will never find this phrase. Period. In other words, the most famous Christian notion of God that is repeated without measure or limit in this evil and adulterous generation is never found in the Bible.” (p. 2-3)

Christians who so easily disown the extreme fringes of Christian teachings must challenge themselves to explore a person’s teachings before dismissing them, because, often times, the “fringe” theology they teach is a matter of literal interpretation of the Bible. At least Phelps is rather convinced of the righteousness of his cause: “This writing provides the details that support the sayings of the prophets of Westboro Baptist Church, in the Last of the Last Days, to wit, God Hates Fags and God Hates America.” (p. 93)

A less abhorrent, yet still contentious, Christian message is the rise of the “prosperity gospel.” Simply put, the prosperity gospel is the message that god intends for his believers to be rich, exceedingly so! The gospel instructs that believers must consistently pay tithes (10% of

one’s gross income) and give frequent financial offerings to churches and religious organizations. It is based on the “laws”

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of sowing and reaping. If one is to get rich (reap rewards), one must first give (sow money). The gift is almost always in the form of money. This gospel further teaches that your “harvest” will always be in proportion to your “seed.” The more you give,

the more you get.

In truth, the real benefactors of the prosperity gospel are the ministers who teach it, the ones who tell their followers that god is instructing them to give large sums of money to their ministry. These ministers are, as to be expected, wildly wealthy and don’t mind flaunting that wealth. They teach that their success is a result of following god’s will, and it is their responsibility to live a lavish lifestyle and serve as an example of god’s ability and desire to make others wealthy, too. Exhibit A: [Creflo Dollar](#), the senior pastor of World Changers Church just outside of Atlanta.

[Creflo Dollar’s ministry](#) is headquartered in a 8,500-seat facility known as “The Dome” and is reportedly home to some 30,000 members. The ministry also has affiliated churches through the United States and, according to the website, on six continents. He, like so many prosperity gospel preachers,

has become entangled in financial scandals on more than one occasion. For example, in 2007, the U.S. Senate Committee on Finance opened a “review” of six “media-based ministries,” one of which was Dollar’s. [According to the reports](#), Dollar was completely uncooperative and refused to respond to any of the committee’s requests for information.

The report reveals that Dollar has at times owned four private jets, currently owns two homes valued in the millions of dollars each, and oversees satellite churches in six states and the District of Columbia that make six-figure payments to the main church each month. In a more recent scandal in March 2015, Dollar started a campaign to raise over \$60 million (!) for the purchase of a new luxury jet. Following much negative attention in the press, Dollar took the campaign off his site and declared he was no longer seeking public donations to purchase the jet. This just goes to show

This just goes to show the excess and glut that prosperity gospel ministers get used to and, when challenged, cower behind lawyers.

the excess and glut that prosperity gospel ministers get used to and, when challenged, cower behind lawyers and play the victim

of evil-doers trying to stop their blessings.

Although the prosperity gospel seems to be picking up steam,

Rarely do we ever hear, “The Bible told her to do it. The doctrine gives him permission. They were beholden to a perceived higher law.” Hardly ever does anyone directly call out the religion itself as the real offender, the original sinner.

it isn't yet considered mainstream, and there are many Christians who despise the teaching and are quite vocal about it. They declare that God never made such promises to people or that the blessings the Bible speaks of are spiritual and not financial. They quote scriptures about the dangers of loving money and retell stories about Jesus becoming angry at the money-changers at a temple. The problem, as always, is in the interpretation.

While prosperity gospel ministers might point to [Mark 10:29-30](#) to support their claim about receiving blessings, their opponents need only go back a few verses to [Mark 10:21](#) to challenge them. The minister could point to [James 4:2](#) to declare that followers simply have to ask for what they want. The challenger could go forward only one verse to [James 4:3](#) to explain why the followers' requests go unanswered. The point being, according to my second proposed response, the majority of Christians can easily shun, criticize, and write off so-called false prophets who fall outside of the basic boundaries of traditional Christian teachings because such cherry-picking could go on ad nauseam.

When a religious scandal breaks, our society scrambles to find someone to blame. Investigators and reporters dig into the private lives and public dealings of the offender,

providing the cold, hard facts that keep the conversation focused on reality. Apologists pop up everywhere to defend holy books, prophets, and doctrine, making emotional pleas that remind of the goodness of God. And mudslingers climb out of their slimy holes and sully the entire process, stirring up anger at how horrible Man is. Regardless of which of the two responses given, the weight of the sin is placed squarely on the shoulders of the offender. “She committed the act. He made the mistake. They broke the law.” Rarely do we ever hear, “The Bible told her to do it. The doctrine gives him permission. They were beholden to a perceived higher law.” Hardly ever does anyone directly call out the religion itself as the real offender, the original sinner.

I'm not, by any means, suggesting that unethical or illegal actions by men and women of God should be excused simply because of the person's status or doctrinal-based support for their actions. Quite the contrary! Those who respond the first way, by easily forgiving the mistake, need to judge their leaders by the standards of the Bible. But those who respond the second way, by completely

disowning the transgressor, must acknowledge when there's biblical precedence for the leader's action.

In both cases, followers should always seek a deeper understanding of the mistake, sin, or crime by analyzing it with the Bible. If the Bible says it's wrong, Christians should be quick to declare it wrong. If the Bible says it's acceptable, Christians should have enough integrity to acknowledge it. One can adequately punish perpetrators of unethical and illegal acts and simultaneously challenge the religious traditions themselves. Those two acts are not mutually exclusive. Yet, apologists and mudslingers often behave as if they are.

Dear Christians, it is past time you redirect your frustration and anger to the appropriate places and with the appropriate intensity. You must seek out the true root causes of your leaders' sins. Where you say “fringe,” nonbelievers say “biblical literalism.” Where you see fanaticism, we see social conservatism. Analyze the Bible. Critique it. Acknowledge its shortcomings.

After you've shamed, disowned, punished, or convicted an unethical leader, you must redirect the deepest and hottest parts of your disappointment and anger to the sources of that leader's authority—the teachings, doctrines, and dogma of

Dear Christians, it is past time you redirect your frustration and anger to the appropriate places and with the appropriate intensity. You must seek out the true root causes of your leaders' sins.

the religion and its sacred texts. You must first come to terms with the fallibility of the Bible, and then be intellectually honest enough to walk away from any traditions based upon it. Eschew physical and sexual violence. Disavow bigotry, racism, and misogyny. Renounce any and all things that result in harm to others, intentional or not. And finally, speak up.

In our highly religious society, there will most certainly come a time when you will see or hear something that is so antithetical to your newfound superior ethical system that you simply can't keep quiet. At that time, be unafraid to call out those things that undermine the integrity of our social fabric. Although not perfect, we are more refined than a depraved religious tradition in which there is always a verse, a doctrine, or a revelation that makes all things possible and lawful in the sight of an inhumane god.

About the Author

Candace Gorham received her Bachelor's in secondary English education from North Carolina Central University and her Master's in mental health counseling from Wake Forest University. Candace's religious background is varied, including Jehovah's Witnesses and Methodist. At 18, she joined a very charismatic ministry, during which time she was ordained as an evangelist, prophetess, and elderess. Becoming involved in and leading extremist activities, such as casting out demons, fasting for weeks at a time, and faith healing, Candace was a believer's believer. She worked hard to be the

minister, wife, and mother she believed god had planned her to be. When real-world problems overwhelmed her, she tried even harder to win god's approval and blessing. Suffering with major depression to the point of being suicidal and facing severe financial hardships, Candace thought she must have been doing something wrong. She dove into studying the Bible more than ever before. She became disillusioned with the contradictions and blatant errancy she found. Mounting questions regarding the similarities between Jesus and other god legends before him, the nature of god, and concepts of hell and evil, were just a few of the issues that caused her to eventually decide she could no longer believe in a deity. From a place of empathy and compassion, Candace decided to start the Ebony Exodus Project, which aims to highlight



the harmful effects of religion on all believers, but especially for Black women. In addition to ongoing work as a counselor, Candace is a member of The Clergy Project and the Secular Therapist Project.

We are more refined than a depraved religious tradition in which there is always a verse, a doctrine, or a revelation that makes all things possible and lawful in the sight of an inhumane god.

Our New Magazine Cover!!!

Ryan Spurlock is working on creating a new front cover for our next issue. He's still working on it, so stay tuned. Here's what it might look like. Ryan's work can be seen on: cifercrossing.deviantart.com or facebook.com/ryan.j.spurlock



General Interest

On the Value of Philosophy and Definitional Apologetics

by John Loftus

Over the last decade, I have found that one bastion for Christian apologists has been philosophy, especially the philosophy of religion. The scholars have honed their definitional apologetics in such a fine-tuned manner that when engaging them in this discipline it's like trying to catch a greased pig. Or, to switch metaphors, trying to chase them down the rabbit's hole in an endless, and ultimately fruitless, quest for definitions.

What's an extraordinary claim? What constitutes evidence? What's the definition of supernatural? What's the scientific method? What's a miracle? What's a basic belief? What's a veridical religious experience? What's evil? They do this just like others have done over questions like, "What is the definition of pornography?" And then they gerrymander around the plain, simple facts of experience. I would rather deal in concrete examples like a virgin who supposedly had a baby and a man who supposedly was raised from the dead. [From *Unapologetic: Why Philosophy*

of Religion Must End, p. 28]

The reason why I prefer to deal in concrete examples is because of how Christian philosophers use definitions to obfuscate their own theology. It isn't because I'm anti-intellectual. Nor do I think definition are unimportant. I just want truth to prevail.

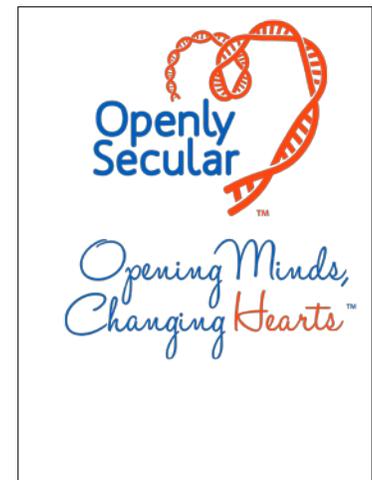
About the Author

John W. Loftus is on the Board of

It comes as no accident that the First Amendment guarantees Freedom of the Press

*Atheist Alliance of America. He earned M.A., M.Div., and Th.M. degrees in philosophy of religion, the last of which under William Lane Craig. John also studied in a Ph.D. program at Marquette University. He is the "Debunking Christianity" blog owner and author of *Why I Became An Atheist*, *The Outsider Test for Faith*, *How to Defend the Christian Faith: Advice from an Atheist*, *Unapolo-**

*getic, and co-wrote *God or Godless* with Randal Rauser. He's also the editor of *The Christian Delusion*, *The End of Christianity*, *Christianity Is Not Great*, and *Christianity in the Light of Science*.*



***This is not a partisan issue. This is not an atheist issue.
This is a palpable threat to our democracy and the way open societies close down.***

Artistic Persuasion

Saved

by Shelley Segal

As a singer-songwriter whose goal is to reflect and question the world around me, my work is deeply influenced by my worldview. My debut album from 2012, “An Atheist Album,” was written as a response to my becoming an atheist and secular activist. It discusses the harm that a religious worldview can cause, witnessed from my own experiences, while portraying the meaning and gratitude I discovered without it.

The most popular song from that album was my single, “Saved.” I wrote the song after a preacher in the street told me that I was going to hell. It is my response to a religious ideology and morality being pushed on to me.

Saved

Say that i need to be saved
Say with me the devils got his way
I want to know how when you are praying
And when you are doomsdaying
How you think you know that someone is listening to what you are saying?

Chorus:
So you think that you
Can tell us how to live our lives
Never questioning the source
from which your moral code
derives
You think that suffering is part
of some great plan that’s been
devised
I wonder, I wonder
When we’ll be rid of your lies

Say I need to hear the truth
A sales-pitch of eternal life and
eternal youth
All these blessings you are
bestowing
Upon the one you say is all-
knowing
Are they really deserved if He
is sending me where you say I
am going?

Chorus:
So you think that you
Can tell us how to live our lives
Never questioning the source
from which your moral code
derives
You think that suffering is part
of some great plan that’s been
devised
I wonder, I wonder, I wonder, I
wonder
What will it take for you
To start opening your eyes
To start questioning the
bullshit everyone around you

buys
You think
it’s any
of your
business
what
goes
on be-
tween my
thighs?

I wonder, I wonder,
When we’ll be rid of your lies



Rather than solely a critique, the verses are a direct response to specific claims that have been made to me.

Claims that I need to be saved, that there is a heaven, that there is an all-knowing diety.

In response I ask how these claims can be known for sure.

How do you know that someone is really there?

Do you believe your god is worthy of praise for sending me to hell?

In the chorus, I touch on the problem of evil and my right to personal, moral, sexual, and bodily autonomy, as well as a hope and longing for a future where we will be free of these harmful ideas.

This song has connected me to thousands of secular people around the world. It has been used on secular, atheist, free-thinking, and Humanist podcasts. It's currently the opening theme music for the call-back show, "The Atheist Experience." People have taken the time to write to me and express how meaningful it has been to have this sentiment in music. That has encouraged, moved, and motivated me.

Since releasing this song four years ago, I've had the chance to meet and sing for a lot of these people. I have performed it at both Reason Rallies and hundreds of times around the United States (across 26 states). Each time, I feel emboldened and powerful. From Arkansas to Louisiana, from Texas to Georgia, I have played this song and announced loudly and proudly that I will not be told how to live my life.

About the Author

Shelley Segal is a singer and songwriter. Hear "Saved" [here](#) and "An Atheist Album" [here](#), and visit her website [here](#). With her "mercurial voice and eclectic sound" (The Brag), spirited singer-songwriter Shelley Segal creates a space for her listeners, a space for people to engage with ideas, to question, and to reflect on the everyday—to see its layers, its depth, its meaning. "Truly an artist with international flair" (AU review), her powerful voice has taken her around Australia, Hong Kong, China, England, and eight tours of the United States. She has performed to festival crowds of over 30,000 people. An artist,

activist, and explicit storyteller, Shelley uses her music not only to express the way she sees the world, but to create the world she wants to see.



An Atheist Album

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www.ammsb.org

Atheist Alliance International: www.atheistalliance.org

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