

# My Atheism

## a personal development

Starting with having to go to the local Lutheran Church when very young, it seemed frightening to me. The solemn environment, with pious organ hymns, weird robed characters of established self-importance in charge, in that fanciful yet funerary building designed to make you feel small before this alleged God character who has the power to spy into your mind, was a helluva lot less fulfilling personally than staying home with Laurel and Hardy episodes on the TV! (I had been tallying them up for a few years. With a goal to see them all.) My parents tried to get me going to Sunday school, but I believe they tried out of some kind of civil duty, not of their pure love which I think sided more with pop culture and secular humanities; movies, art, music, literature, theater, dining, etc.) So they didn't give in much, letting me have my way, though grumbling about it to a degree, because it was expected in the culture.

I also refused to be *Confirmed*. I've always been proud of evading this. Talk about control, just in that name alone is quite telling.

### **Lutheran clergy, wholesome personalities**

They seemed trustworthy, especially Pastor Bonn who the family really liked. I now compare him somewhat with that famous motivational coach Tony Robbins, exuding a type of calm confidence that people will believe in. I'm not saying I think or would know that they're phony, just trying to explain their winning personality styles. Anyway, he was super friendly. I was in the cub scouts very briefly, (8-9 years old, 1972?) enough for the two outings I can remember. Pastor Bonn was the scout leader (this was through Diamond Lake Lutheran church, nearby home). One outing was on a lake island, a really nice getaway, good kids to hang with, until I fell off the dock into the water! Helped out by everyone, I was okay. This was great, *I'm in*. The next outing was a picnic in Fort Snelling

park, another perfect day. I dimly remember a hike around the forested bluffs with a few other fellow cub scouts. Then later at a picnic table with Pastor Bonn, somehow the topic of the peace sign came up, being seen everywhere at the time. I so distinctly remember him preaching against it, saying it's an *antichrist symbol* depicting the Holy cross of Jesus inverted with the arms broken. A desecration to avoid! So what did I do getting home? I used a marker to blot them out on my box of items I had proudly drawn. I was young, gullible and believed the pastor. I later discovered that it is a symbol for laying arms down in a peaceful gesture, originally designed for the campaign for nuclear disarmament in Britain, later adopted by the hippies in America during the infamous Vietnam War.

*Sheesh!* That guy is deluded and deluding.

I'm not saying he was a bad guy, but an example of the delusional certainty that religious mindsets harbor when reacting to something other that preaches something parallel but not from their own dogma. I seemed to have smelled this tendency before I could possibly define it.

### **The Alaska Experiences**

I could rant and rave against those months for a diatribe filled book, but will show constraint and summarize.

There's nothing more pushy than staying with a right wing conservative born again evangelical podunk countryside control freak fascist theocrat sister-in-law... and my oldest brother\* who went along with that, and trying to get me sworn to Jesus, it backfired and turned me towards *anti-religion* rather than won me over. She was physically and emotionally abusive to quite weird extents. Details? Several, but sparing them for now. I don't want to slaughter personal reputations, and I believe that religion is at the root of the problem she has. They were victims that adhered to its principles and illusions, but I resisted and rebelled! *Satan's work?*

[\* Meanwhile, my eldest brother is too smart to have stayed in that mindset, and eventually left the crazy now fortunately ex-sister-in-law and religion with it! *Hurray!*We

can talk! Gary has a scientific and philosophically advanced mind, and knowing how to thoroughly think things through. an excellent guy!]

***"Rock and roll is the Devils tool for your destruction!"***

Quoting televangelists of the early eighties, and that ex sister-in-law. I was never convinced, and had a lot of fun mocking this with friends!

### **Frank Zappa**

A fantastic influence for free thinking, individualistic, cutting away bs, with a sharp wit, virtuosity, extraordinary musical output, with satire and eyebrows for all. *Ahem!*

Frank seemed to speak for us unconventional types who developed an allergic reaction to authority — especially religious. I was among those who found Zappa to be a major hero of exceptional musicianship first and foremost, and iconoclasm. [is that a word? sounds like it could be a title to one of his pieces ;] The lyrics with satirical messages were often absurdly humorous and occasionally serious. A few that really struck a chord were *Heavenly Bank Account* and *Dumb All Over* from 1981, taking the piss out of religious hypocrisy and divisiveness.

*"You can't run a country by a book of religion,  
Not by a heap or a lump or a smidgeon  
Of foolish rules of ancient date  
Designed to make you all feel great  
While you fold, spindle and mutilate  
Those unbelievers from a neighboring state"  
- Dumb All Over, 1981*

This nails it! I was liberated. Of course the religious make him out to be some kind of evil character, with his outspoken profanities, (at least perceived as profane by conservative

standards). Rebellious musicians in general were their enemy. I thought the artists who I really appreciated the most are rebellious natured, starting with The Beatles. John Lennon was right to dis Christianity in 1966. If they were worth their salt, they wouldn't act so insecure by destroying Beatles records to prove their point. That made them look like unthinking brutes, and lost more followers than gained. [thanks John!]

### **More Zappa**

Wouldn't want to resist mention of his 1988 *song Jesus Thinks You're A Jerk* , starting out sounding like a goofy satire after televangelists, yet grows into more serious concerns that seemed to predict the right wing extremism of today. Connecting religion with the NRA, racism, abortion, the things our current SCOTUS tramples on. Yikes. Other songs that drive the points home is *Fascist Christ* by Todd Rundgren! A huge favorite artist of mine, who brings the individualist out, encouraging us to stand up for our rights and freedoms. [a good influence, I've attended nearly 50 Todd concerts over the decades.] *Dear God* by XTC is a good one! By this time I didn't need convincing, just appreciation for the liberating content. Andy Partridge says it simply, "*religion wants us dumb.*"

### **Other religions**

I did research others, especially reading up on the Bahai faith, devoutly followed by another older brother (and lovely fellow!), who introduced me to its more inclusive approaches. I liked several of the principles — especially liberal for coming out of old Persia, one of the most strict Islamic nations on earth. (Now there's an area to be relieved not to be trapped in) Like I said, I liked much of the Bahai ideals and advocated for awhile, particularly the advanced ideals of Abdul Ba'ha. I didn't warm up to his figurehead dad so much. Too much holy God talk. You know, that imaginary frightening Santa Claus, who is all knowing, even your thoughts. *T/LT/*Next superstition?

Buddhism is good as a more psychological religion, and without a creator god, just

symbolic deities. But still I find it too rigid, though fascinating with its extraordinary scrutiny of consciousness.

## **Science!**

Ahh, thought "full" scientific thinking. Certainly not a religion — that would be faith based, not about experiment, observe, question, with trial and error perpetually. This leads to empirical results, not the blind quality of faith. The religious mind is addicted to certainty, and if anything threatens that sense of security then becomes branded as evil. The scientific mind thrives on *uncertainty* as a drive to uncover the phenomena at play. Uncertainties as a curiosity booster, not a pride of ignorance. Theories may become facts, eventually after a multitude of trials. The facts may change with time and further experimentation, but those changes are celebrated rather than being considered threatening. Unlike faith, which is often defensively insecure for a reason; of putting trust in something as unprovable as a holy spirit. I find that to be implausible, I mean, unicorns seem more plausible than a creator. I can't literally disprove them either, yet stranger creatures have been found, so I'd bet my money more on unicorns vs gods, but I really don't need to.

## **Early Man**

A formative book in my upbringing. As a seven year old I found an ad in a National Geographic magazine in the house to order it from Time-Life books. I was immediately magnetized by the skull on the cover, and the idea that we had prehistoric ancestors with differing structures. Excited by this, I asked my parents if we could order them, and they gladly obliged! I was really enthusiastic about these volumes being mailed in. *Early Man* was the first, followed by *Evolution*, *The Sea*, *The Desert*, *Mammals*, and more in my new Time-Life science library. My most memorable favorites are *Early Man* and *Evolution*. The ones that challenge religious ideas the most! My parents applauded knowledge, possibly

more than faith? I know where I stand regarding this.

### **More opposition**

Encountering preaching types, in the streets and at the door, I developed a sarcasm, mocking them in as short bursts as possible, when before I would discuss the topic and thank them for the concern. Eventually I got blunt, not suffering religion gladly. I ended up dating a pretty girl in college, but she suddenly became "born again", *yech-o!* I went with her to a gathering she invited me to, and witnessed some high pitched evangelical rants. No use talking to them, too fervent.

### **Religious Art**

I have huge appreciation for the art— paintings, sculptures, cathedrals, manuscripts of religion based art history. It would be foolish to neglect the remarkable care and sophisticated attention to advanced craft and historical relevance for anyone interested in art history. I can still be moved by biblical themes depicted by Michaelangelo, Bernini, Giotto, Carravaggio, and so much more. It's in the historical context to understand, the artists had to work for the church or not at all in most cases. While I would argue that was reprehensibly controlling of the church, that was simply the way it was. Like I said, view it in its historical-contextual framework.

I remember a speaker some decades ago discussing how to know what a civilization is ruled by, upon what were the tallest buildings. For centuries cathedrals and places of worship were the tallest, showing the churches held the most power. Government buildings, then banks next had that esteem. Now we have communications in charge of the times, with the telecommunication towers being the tallest structures on Earth.

### **The Cross**

I find no comfort in a symbol that is really just a Roman torture device with a headrest.

## **Authors and speakers**

Briefly summarizing, to name but a few major influences. I credit **Carl Sagan** for getting me to see wider perspectives on the nature of scientific vs superstitious thought, and that more wonder is found with science than religious beliefs. **Stephen Hawking** is extremely encouraging to look beyond, as the heroic astrophysicist he was. **Richard Feynman** wakes us up to really enjoy thinking about physics. Of course, **Richard Dawkins** is a massive influence, outspoken with his knowledgeable, eloquent descriptions of the long process of evolution, and the beauty of atheism. I appreciate how in discussions with others, he tends to question rather than state. *The God Delusion* is an important book! **Sam Harris** is an important author speaker, with crystal clear ideals, yet to me he can sometimes come across in a style of condescending robotic perfection. **Lawrence Krauss** for excellent physics education and clear atheist thinking. **Christopher Hitchens** brings up very clear points about the flawed religious viewpoint. My telescope mentor **John Dobson** was an outspoken atheist as well. All of these influencers have good morals, brilliant minds, and are fortunately relatively popular. They certainly help me to understand and debate better against the more narrow minded qualities of religion and promote free thinking. Being an atheist is more empowering than not, in the sense of taking responsibility and really appreciating what we have while we have it. I always saw religious beliefs to be about guarantees of an afterlife, lessening the importance of being here now.

I find it to be more honest, more useful to not fall back on what I see as fantasies of wishful thinking. As I've heard said, *religion is about control*, and we don't need it. And it's really pissed me off more than helped. I will credit some for pushing me. Pushing me away, and I'm thankful I didn't become one of them as a result! I still should acknowledge the good quality people who are churchgoers. Some go for the socializing not dogma. I may not agree with many of them, but I can't say I don't like them as people. Mileage varies for different personalities.

Now living with ALS, severely disabled, I won't believe this was on purpose from a creator, (the old "gods plan" mentality) but the fact that *things break down*, some sooner than we like, but it ain't a mystic phenomena. What I find to be self-evident after careful scrutiny by hundreds upon hundreds of empirical thinkers and scientific examiners: Fairy tales are delusional. God is a fictional character. All things pass. The sun will eventually expand beyond Earth, reducing it to cinders. Life evolves incrementally; far too slow for us to perceive with our natural senses. Morals are established from human experience, more than religion. We can adapt technology to survive better. Life is tremendously valuable, even more so than beliefs in an afterlife offer. Every person has enormous potential, dreams, hopes, ambitions, memories, ideas, aspirations, histories, legacies, and more. Our lives should not be limited by outdated ideas that are not plausible.

- **Dean Gustafson, 2/2024** — who could go on further, but instead recommend reading Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Bertrand Russell, Carl Sagan, Lawrence Krauss, for delivering deeper explanations and inquiries. and Monty Python's *Life Of Brian*. ["*blessed are the cheesemakers.*"?!:]