



IS RATIONALISM/ATHEISM CAUSE FOR DESPAIR?

“That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins – all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.”

The eminent rationalist philosopher – and atheist – Bertrand Russell wrote these words in 1917. They are today often cited with glee by some believers to condemn atheism as a philosophy “of unyielding despair.” But this misses the whole point of the passage, which appears early in an essay entitled “A Free Man’s Worship,” which is well worth reading, available free on the internet!

It is true that the bare facts Russell lays out in deliberately dramatic fashion are depressing ones. That they are so, however, does not put them in doubt. Nevertheless, it is a natural human inclination, when presented with unwelcome facts, to at first deny them. Swiss-American psychiatrist Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross recognized this when, many years after Russell wrote, in 1969, only a year before the death of Russell in 1970, she presented her theory of five stages of grief, based on her work with terminally-ill patients. The first stage is denial, giving way to anger, bargaining – when it is hoped that there is some way to stave off the inevitable, usually through personal reform or the intercession of supernatural power – and, finally, depression and acceptance.

It seems that most human beings live, if not quite in denial, in some state of not giving much consideration to the inevitability of doom that Russell describes. This goes for atheists as well. It must be said, though, that traditional theistic beliefs – and other views such as Hinduistic “karma” – give greater excuse to the neglect of the facts of human (and universal!) mortality. Every human existence is a terminal condition so it is only a matter of when and how each of us must confront this fact. It is an unpleasant burden but, like other burdens, it may be better that we deal with it sooner rather than later. This is what Russell meant: that “the soul’s habitation” – our appreciation of and understanding of the human condition – is best erected on the foundation of the facts of human existence, which is to say, the facts as we know them and not as we may wish them to be.

That an honest and rational consideration of the human predicament leads to “unyielding despair” is, in addition, the result of our humanity as much as it is of undeniable facts. For it is the distinguishing characteristic of our kind that we construct ideals, including moral ideals, that exist nowhere in nature. As in the case of facing a terminal illness, it is the collision of our aspirations with the facts that trigger the grief process leading to depression and despair. To ignore, evade or deny the facts is therefore also, in a way, a protest against our own deepest aspirations.

And this, in essence, is what orthodox theological speculations do when they assert that what is clearly evil and objectionable is, in fact, good and praiseworthy. These take such forms as saying that we live in “a fallen world” for which sinful ancestors are to blame, or that the obvious evils we endure are necessary to prevent greater ones in this, “the best of all possible worlds,” as Leibniz put it, or that an all-powerful deity has a “Plan” or a “Mysterious Purpose” that, despite appearances, we must trust is good, or that evil is altogether illusory or even serves to teach us about the good that is worked out in cycles of reincarnation that we can only appreciate one life at a time. All of these “explanations” come at the cost of denying our own capacity for knowing good from evil, for they

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ask us to believe that evil is good or that we are incompetent to judge between them.

What is the result of accepting "unyielding despair" and making it the foundation of "the soul's habitation?" It is not to live with and in constant despair, but to accept and move beyond it. It is to have peace and clarity about what is really at stake in our lives. It is to have realistic expectations. It is to accept our responsibility both to see the world as it is and to apply our own ideals of how we think it should be or could be, and then to act on that understanding. And, where understanding is insufficient, it is to work to have more and better understanding.

In the 17th Century Cervantes had his hero Don Quixote say: "I come in a world of iron to make a world of gold," and "madness ... [is] to see life as it is, and not as it should be." Three centuries later, George Bernard Shaw, in his play Back To Methuselah, has the Serpent say to Eve in the Garden of Eden: "You see things; and you say 'Why?' But I dream things that never were; and I say 'Why not?'" As Robert F. Kennedy recognized, this is the essence of human progress.

Happily, others began this task long ago. The abandonment of efforts to appease angry deities has led to the alleviation of many illnesses and calamities. Having accepted that we cannot fly by flapping our arms, we have learned to fly around the world and even to the moon and back. Just as children cannot mature and live an authentic human existence believing in Santa Claus, or believing that their parents are infallible and will always be there for them, or even that policemen are always trustworthy and science itself has all the answers, so humanity cannot begin to discover its potential by refusing to accept the simple facts no matter how cold and cruel those facts may seem.

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
 "HAPPY BIRTHDAY
 NTCOF! (19 years!)"**
 >>> Sunday, February 2nd, 2014 <<<
**SHERATON GRAND DFW AIRPORT
 SE CORNER OF 114 AND ESTERS**

**YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS TO THE
 NTCOF ARE NEEDED, APPRECIATED,
 AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!!**

**All NTCOF events can be found through our
 website calendar , or our meetup page,
 from which you can RSVP, at:**

**- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought -
 JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!**

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion. We had been meeting at the Golden Corral Buffet and Grill in Grapevine, located just across from the Grapevine Mills Mall, at 2605 E. Grapevine Mills Circle, phone (972) 874-7900. Last month - and probably today - we met (meet) at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Get together to discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest for Freethinkers. Most Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM; see the meetup site!

Game Night: The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Have Another Idea? Email or call us about it!

**"And our liberty, too, is endangered
 if we pause for the passing moment,
 if we rest on our achievements, if
 we resist the pace of progress. For
 time and the world do not stand still.
 Change is the law of life. And those
 who look only to the past or the
 present are certain to miss the future."
 - John F. Kennedy (1917-1963)**



DFWCOR

Dallas-Fort Worth Coalition of Reason

The North Texas Church of Freethought
 The Fellowship of Unbelievers

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