



IS FREETHOUGHT JUST ANOTHER RELIGION?

At our June 2015 service we heard a very interesting presentation from a Freethinker who left a ministry of missionary work overseas after “deconverting” from a deeply fundamentalist strain of biblical Christianity. Another of our members happened to mention this to a believer coworker who helpfully - or mischievously, if not ungraciously - suggested that the NTCOF should be addressed by someone who had been an ardent atheist and then converted to Christianity. Not that he knew of anyone in particular but he suggested a book by “a former atheist English professor” who became a Catholic. [1]

Do churches generally do this? Do Catholic churches invite former Catholics to explain why they became Buddhists or Unitarians? Do mosques host speakers who have left Islam? It seems doubtful, though perhaps they should. Yet it is typical of all religious groups to welcome and celebrate those who accept their doctrines after leaving some other affiliation. It is a way of championing “our” way of seeing things which is so far superior to that of the “lost” and “unenlightened” and those “living in darkness.” It is a way of bolstering the beliefs of the faithful - and strengthening their faith in those beliefs - to have new converts proclaim how wonderful they are.

Is this all we do when we share our stories - those of us who have them - of leaving belief behind? Is it just another exercise in “us versus them” behavior? Adherents of traditional religions based on supernaturalism seem to want to see it this way. In a previous bulletin the claim that “it takes more faith to be an atheist” was considered in this light. And for believers it may be a reasonably effective way to cope with the obvious and growing religious pluralism of modern times and especially with the rising tide of religious skepticism. Killing the “heretics” and “infidels” is no longer an option, at least not in civilized countries. Supposing that all religious opinions are basically of the same character is a good starting point to begin to develop a rationale for why one of them is better.

But, again, is this all we do? Not quite. There is an important and a distinguishing difference. For traditional religions depend critically on supernaturalism and revealed knowledge. They claim to offer an understanding of metaphysics, of the way things “really are” in a shared reality that cannot be known by objective means. And this picture, or rather a kind

of grand cosmic narrative, aims to appeal to the human ego and its needs and desires.

This is seen not only in the book mentioned but in the writings that influenced that book’s author and many others, of perhaps the most well-known convert to Christianity, that of the 20th Century British author C.S. Lewis. Lewis is usually referred to as a former atheist, but his wikipedia entry states that he had come to view the religion he was raised in, the Church of Ireland (an Anglican offshoot), “as a chore and duty,” and that around the time he is said to have become an atheist he developed an interest in the occult. A sympathetic reading of his works indicates that his theism developed out of his love for fantasy and for a poetic view of life and, perhaps, an inability to accept or perhaps even to grasp any other. Certainly, the reasons Lewis advances in support of his theology are familiar and typical however earnestly and engagingly he puts them.

The late Christopher Hitchens’ brother Peter, who also became a Christian, seems to have been motivated by similar though more practical considerations. In his book The Rage Against God, which is in part a response to his brother’s God Is Not Great, Peter argues that God is necessary for morality and therefore for a just and humane political order. His thinking was influenced by his study of the Soviet regime and his work as a journalist in Moscow during its fall in 1991. Peter Hitchens’ rests his conservative opinions on his theism and is quoted in his wikipedia entry: “I’m not saying you can’t be a conservative without being a theist - it seems much more difficult, I’m not certain I can work out why you would want to be.” Thus, like Lewis, he seems to use God as a means to justify the sort of world he prefers to live in. It brings to mind Voltaire’s comment: “Don’t tell the servants there is no God or they’ll steal the silver.” As well as Seneca’s: “Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful.”

Leah Libresco, a “prominent atheist blogger,” announced her conversion to Catholicism in 2012. She gave as her reason: “I had one thing that I was most certain of, which is that morality is something we have a duty to. And it is external from us. And when push came to shove, that is the belief I wouldn’t let go of. And that is something I can’t prove.”[2] So again, we see facts made subordinate

(from page 1) to desires.

Freethinkers take a different approach. It is that described by the 19th Century British naturalist Thomas Henry Huxley - who coined the term "agnostic" - who put it this way:

"an ingenious man could speculate without end ... and find analogies for all his dreams. Nor does it help me to tell me that the aspirations of mankind—that my own highest aspirations even - lead me towards [theological] ... doctrine[s]. I doubt the fact, to begin with, but if it be so even, what is this but in grand words asking me to believe a thing because I like it. Science has taught to me the opposite lesson. She warns me to be careful how I adopt a view which jumps with my preconceptions, and to require stronger evidence for such belief than for one to which I was previously hostile. My business is to teach my aspirations to conform themselves to fact, not to try and make facts harmonise with my aspirations." [3]

Happily, morality, human aspirations and even dreams are not incompatible with facts. This has been explored in the writings of many thinkers and moral philosophers of the last 2500 years. It is dramatically shown by a multitude of the fruits of technology. Where many atheists go wrong is in supposing that felt experience cannot be a part of it, even in the hardest of the sciences. Objectively, of course, the wholly subjective world - and even our perceptions of what we call the "objective" world - is "just" neurons and synapses and the molecules in motion of which they are composed. But this neither negates the emotional content of felt experience nor points to a supernatural realm beyond it. Indeed, it is more wondrous that the amazing human condition in its infinite abundance and diversity exists in us than the idea that any part of it is "out there" in some way.

Freethought is not even about the nonexistence of the supernatural as much as it is about what sense we make of what we do experience, both objectively (science) and subjectively (religion). This is what distinguishes Freethought as not just another "belief system."

[1] Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms by Holly Ordway (2014) Ordway asks "If there is no real meaning to our lives, what is the point of living?" But she misuses the word "real" here, supposing that it must mean "external to oneself," which would make it no real meaning at all.

[2] <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/06/22/prominent-atheist-blogger-converts-to-catholicism>

[3] Life and Letters of Thomas Huxley, by His Son, Leonard Huxley, Volume 1, available online at http://www.churchoffreethought.org/Huxley_Kingsley_Letter.php

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 at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest. It happens most non-1st Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM.

Game Night: This is 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!

Freethought Book Club: Coming August 29th! Details to be announced! BOOK: The Bonobo and the Atheist by Frans De Waal.

Communitas Dinner Groups: To Be Announced! Have Another Idea? Email or call us about it!

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
 "RACISM"**

**WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?
 > Sunday, September 6, 2015 <
 COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH
 (about 1/2 mile west of the Sheraton on 114
 - take the Freeport Parkway exit, then the frontage road east just past Best Western)**

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

The North Texas Church of Freethought
 The Fellowship of Unbelievers

Pastor (It's a Job Description, NOT a title!)	Tim Gorski
Operations Coordinator	Will Smith
Welcome Coordinator	Mark Barnick
Videographer:	John Gauthier
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**mailing address: 1001 N Waldrop Dr #815
 Arlington, TX 76012
 (214) 702-2050**

**Website: www.churchoffreethought.org
 Email: info@churchoffreethought.org**