



BULLETIN of THE NORTH TEXAS CHURCH OF FREETHOUGHT

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WHAT IS RELIGION FOR?

It is widely accepted that the origins of religion lie in humanity's attempts to make sense of the world. This clearly began as storytelling. The word "myth" comes from the Greek for story, but it is a word that modern believers deny has any connection to their own religious doctrines. And yet the dominant supernaturalist religion in America is often claimed to be based on "the greatest story ever told."

What must the state of mind of our distant ancestors have been like when they began telling their stories? Myth makes no distinction between what we recognize today as the natural and the supernatural. For example, the seasons happened because the goddess that made plants grow lost her motivation during the half of the year that her beloved daughter was in the underworld, which is, not coincidentally, the place where it was believed people went when they died. Other stories were cautionary tales, such as that of Icarus flying too close to the sun. Such tales shared the fanciful flavor of all myth. Often those of one culture resembled those of another. This was not because they described a common reality as it may have seemed. It was because their common source was the humanity of the storytellers.

Thales of Miletus (624-546 BCE) was the first to tell a very different kind of story. A Renaissance Man millennia before the Renaissance, Thales left no writings that we know of. But Aristotle wrote that Thales held that "all things are full of gods." This was apparently then the best way of expressing the materialistic idea that everything behaves according to its intrinsic nature and not because of supernatural beings acting on them. Thales was the first to apply deductive principles to geometry, deriving four corollaries of what is today known as Thales Theorem. He was also the first to predict

a solar eclipse, one which happened on May 28th of 585 BCE. Isaac Asimov called this event "the birth of science." Meanwhile, the original mythic storytelling continued and became organized into the major religions of the world.

While religion probably got its start in explanatory storytelling, once something appears, regardless of the impetus for its appearance and its original function, it becomes available for other uses. One's mouth is "for" eating but it is obviously put to many other uses. As for religion, even in ancient times it was apparent that it was a tool of social control. As Seneca put it:

"Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful."

Religion is "useful" in many ways to rulers. Among other things:

- ▶ It may discourage misbehavior. Even today believers often say that without their deity and the threat of hell they would run rampant and rob, rape and murder. Even the great freethinker Voltaire (1794-1778) is said to have told his mistress: "don't tell the servants there is no God or they'll steal the silver."
 - ▶ It lends additional authority to rulers. The doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings did this for many centuries.
 - ▶ It enlists additional zealous support for regimes that combine state and church. "For God and Country!" is a more effective slogan than patriotism alone.
 - ▶ It can serve as the basis for or amplify tribalistic "us versus them" policies of oppression, conquest, colonization and genocide as well as separatist movements and other political struggles.
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► It discourages dissent by explaining, justifying and encouraging acceptance of the status quo. “Blessed are” the poor, the downtrodden, the meek, and those who seek righteousness, for they shall be rewarded in the next life or by “karma” when they are reincarnated in better circumstances.

Karl Marx especially recognized this last. For in his day opium was not so much decried as an addictive substance indulged in for entertainment. Rather, it was greatly prized as one of the few effective medications available to relieve pain. Thus, his “opiate of the people” comment, in context, was this:

“Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.”

In other words, religion is useful to the rulers to discourage, if not prevent, the masses from rising up and effecting what Marx saw as the “historical inevitability” of the utopia of communism.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is considered to be the first existentialist philosopher. A Christian, he had much to say about religion and its relation to one's internal experience. And it may be that mythic storytelling has always been directed at relieving existential angst, even if the term was not known until recently. This certainly resonates with modern sensibilities about the meaning and purpose of one's life, the choices relating to how one is situated in the world, choices that are both inescapable and urgent, and also the inevitability of personal extinction in death. It may be what many people mean when they say they are “not religious, but spiritual.”

DID YOU KNOW?

That “the rapture” that so many Christians believe in was invented by English-Irish Anglican clergyman John Nelson Darby about 1830?

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 !!!

vice, 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-first Sundays of the month, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant “The Vineyard” - inside the hotel - in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM.

Game Night: 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 Le Havre, Carcassonne, and other fun games!

Have Another Idea? Email or call! Read bulletins & presentations and post on the FORUM at www.churchoffreethought.org LIKE US at www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/ and sign up for our Twitter feed at twitter.com/ntcof !

PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:

**“CHRISTMAS:
SOMETHING IS MYTHING!”**

> Sunday, December 3, 2017 <

COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH

(Take the Freeport Parkway exit, then frontage road east just past Best Western; service starts 10:30 but come early for coffee/snacks - you can bring some! - and conversation)

**THANK YOU !!
FOR YOUR GENEROUS
DONATION OF TIME & FINANCIAL
SUPPORT to the NTCOF !!
It is needed, appreciated
and Tax-Deductible !**

**The North Texas Church of Freethought
The Fellowship of Unbelievers**

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