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Fundamentalist Atheists -Unbelief with an Attitude

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Even as the secular left mounts a public relations effort in order to regain momentum in the culture war, Free Inquiry steadfastly presents the most extreme form of secular humanism in an undiluted dosage.

Just inside the front cover, readers will find "The Affirmations of Humanism: A Statement of Principles." This series of principles, written by Free Inquiry editor-in-chief Paul Kurtz, reads like a manifesto for secularism. In any event, the affirmations leave no doubt about the group's core beliefs. "We deplore efforts to denigrate human intelligence, to seek to explain the world in supernatural terms, and to look outside nature for salvation," the statement declares. Since the supernatural is banned from the discussion, and morality is a matter of mere pragmatism, the group faces obvious difficulties in discussing moral principles. "We believe in the common moral decencies," the statement insists, listing those matters of decency as "altruism, integrity, honesty, truthfulness, [and] responsibility." How are these principles determined? "Humanist ethics is amenable to critical, rational guidance. There are normative standards that we discover together. Moral principles are tested by their consequences." As might be expected, this is a very subjective test.

When it comes to "normative standards," the secular humanists feel quite free to pick and choose. "We respect the right to privacy," the statement declares. "Mature adults should be allowed to fulfill their aspirations, to express their sexual preferences, to exercise reproductive freedom, to have access to comprehensive and informed health-care, and to die with dignity." In other words, you can take sexual ethics, monogamy, heterosexuality, the sanctity of human life, and virtually anything having to do with an individual's chosen lifestyle off the list of "normative standards."

In a major article and in his editorial statement, Kurtz, also founder of Prometheus Press, a firm devoted to publishing secular humanist literature, argues: "Religious conservatives insist that America is 'one nation under God,' which is often interpreted to mean 'a Christian nation.' They hold that religion and patriotism go hand in hand and that America has a divine destiny. The Republican Party has virtually been captured by this Evangelical Protestant minority, which seeks to redefine America in terms of its own religious outlook."

Of course, Kurtz prefers a more secular rendering of the American dream. He argues that the United States Constitution "was written by deists and freethinkers as much as by believers." Thus, it is a secular document that establishes the basic social contract for the nation.

As he sees it, the history of the nation is an account of "the constant remaking of who and what we are by the countless immigrants who have enriched our culture." This process has produced the "civic virtues of democracy," which Kurtz insists are "basically humanistic."

What are these virtues? At the top of his list, Kurtz puts “Tolerance for diversity and for the adoption of alternative lifestyles in the pursuit of happiness.” The idea of the Founding Fathers sitting around the table in Independence Hall discussing the “adoption of alternative lifestyles” as a matter of national policy and aspiration is ludicrous. Of course, that doesn’t phase the secular humanists.

In his regular op-ed column, Richard Dawkins, Oxford University’s infamous defender of evolutionary theory and declared enemy of theistic belief, considers the possibility of “atheists for Jesus.” According to Dawkins, “Of course Jesus was a theist, but that is the least interesting thing about him. He was a theist because, in his time, everybody was. Atheism was not an option, even for so radical a thinker as Jesus.” Dawkins appears to argue that if the incarnation had taken place in the 21st century, Jesus could well have declared himself an atheist. Like so many others, the secular humanists want to claim Jesus as an agent of moral enlightenment while rejecting him as the incarnate Son of God and Savior of the world.

Dawkins aims his attack at religion and religious belief in general. “Religious beliefs are irrational,” he insists. “Religious beliefs are dumb and dumber: superdumb. Religion drives otherwise sensible people into celibate monasteries or crashing into New York skyscrapers. Religion motivates people to whip their own backs, to set fire to themselves or their daughters, to denounce their own grandmothers as witches, or, in less extreme cases simply to stand or kneel, week after week, through ceremonies of stupefying boredom.” Evidently, that passes for intelligent argument at Oxford University.

Dawkins does find room to congratulate Richard Holloway, the former Episcopal bishop of Edinburgh, but it is for renouncing Christianity. According to Dawkins, Holloway now identifies himself as a post-Christian or a “recovering Christian,” having “outgrown the supernaturalism that most Christians still identify with their religion.” Holloway does still retain “a reverence for the poetry of religious myth,” Dawkins concedes, “which is enough to keep him going to church.”

So, the difference between Dawkins and Holloway is that one is an atheist who doesn’t go to church and the other is an atheist who does. Evidently, Holloway’s reverence for “a poetic myth” keeps the former bishop at services celebrating a gospel in which he no longer believes and in the name of a God he now denies.

A good portion of this issue of the magazine is devoted to attacking “the myths of Christmas.” Introducing the section, Tom Flynn explains, “Not all secular humanists share my eagerness to spurn every celebration of the season. On the contrary, most nonreligious Americans probably do engage in Christian-, Jewish- or pagan-themed revels at this time of year, however distant they may feel from the worldviews that give rise to them.” Flynn will have nothing to do with Christmas or any related holiday. “Still, the roots of the traditional ‘story of Christmas’ are also the roots of Christian concepts, doctrines, and practices with which secular humanists have deep and principled disagreements. Such central Christian convictions as that God took flesh in Jesus, that Gospel teachings have hidden meanings perceptible only to a few, or that the Christian redemption saga is in any important way unprecedented or unique have inspired great works of compassion—but also frightening incidents of intolerance and inhumanity.”

In the next article, Robert J. Gilooley surveys the miraculous and supernatural events concerning the birth, life, and ministry of Jesus and denies that any intelligent person should believe in the Virgin Birth, the incarnation, the resurrection, or the ascension of Christ. He recognizes that some will lament the loss of belief in these doctrines. Nevertheless, they must be given up as society moves toward a new day of enlightenment. Since “the age of religious miracles is past,” Christianity must go the way of the horse-drawn carriage.

Naturally, the persistence of belief in these revealed truths is a matter of perplexity to the secular humanists. Nevertheless, Gilooley suggests an explanation for Christianity’s endurance: “The miraculous powers of Christ, then, may be an outward expression of the powers we would wish for ourselves—and therefore something we want to believe in, in spite of our rational nature. Or perhaps our penchant for the miraculous is simply the need for an occasional flight of fancy, to add a little splash of color to an otherwise humdrum existence.” In other words, it’s all psychology.

David N. Campbell, identified as “Professor of Policy Studies in American Education at California University of Pennsylvania,” expresses frustration with his young students, who apparently refuse to follow their professor in his dismissal of Christianity and embrace of humanism. When Campbell tries to indoctrinate them in evolutionary theory, they resist, frustrating their professor to no end. “They are torn between being fascinated about this explanation of who and what we are and the fantasy world they have been given for twenty years of their lives,” he explains. Campbell’s

presentation of evolution just doesn't go over well at all. "They most definitely do not want to hear any of this. The existential questions they've avoided their whole young lives suddenly emerge and rob them of hope and being special—a special creation—exempt from this reality I have described, a world in which every living thing is being eaten alive or eating every other living thing it can find."

Well, why would young university students resist that charming view of life?

This particular issue of *Free Inquiry*, representing the first issue of its 25th volume, also celebrates the life and legacy of Bertrand D. Russell, the 20th century's most famous unbeliever. Russell's attacks on Christianity and religious belief are celebrated as a model for unbelievers and skeptics in the present century. A quick look at the list of "humanist laureates" published on the inside back cover lacks any name equal to Bertrand Russell in terms of notoriety and publicity, though Richard Dawkins may come close. Other "laureates" include Steven Pinker of MIT, Richard Rorty, now of Stanford University, and Betty Friedan, one of the founders of the National Organization for Women [NOW]. Interestingly, a notice announces that seven new humanist laureates have been elected by the International Academy of Humanism. These include Salman Rushdie, author of *The Satanic Verses*; James D. Watson, the co-discoverer of DNA; Peter Singer, Princeton University's infamous advocate of radical animal rights theory; Harvey Weinstein, cochairman of Miramax Films; and George Soros, the financier who poured multiple millions of dollars into an effort to defeat President George W. Bush in the 2004 election.

Finally, readers of the magazine are enticed with an invitation to join the magazine for "a once-in-a-lifetime experience," a cruise featuring Richard Dawkins and other humanist lecturers. "Cruise the Caribbean with secular humanists and skeptics!" the advertisement invites. Participants on the cruise will be able to visit Caribbean islands while pondering the great cosmic accident that brought all this into being. Wouldn't you want to spend a few days hopping Caribbean islands with a gaggle of atheist groupees?

Free Inquiry magazine is not really a mass market periodical. According to the publication's statement published in this issue, the magazine has something over 23,000 subscribers, with another 2,000 or so copies sold at newsstands. In reality, the magazine is interesting more for its oddity, lack of polish, and extremism than anything else. On the other hand, the editors and writers of *Free Inquiry* are really just being honest about what other humanists and secularists really believe. The difference between these secular humanists and their more media-savvy colleagues is public relations rather than principle. A look at *Free Inquiry* reveals what secular humanism really is—and why it must be taken seriously. Take a look at the magazine and see for yourself. I wouldn't advise signing up for the cruise.

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