

Y9 – Your Challenges & Constraints

Dear: From my perspective, you're challenged with making a potentially very-difficult, value-laden decision, with many uncertainties and complications. Specifically: should you continue to "believe" in the tenets of your religious indoctrination or not? In this chapter, I want to comment on additional reasons why the decision might be especially challenging for you, alert you to some potential complications associated with your decision, and suggest some constraints that you might want to adopt.

As I tried to show you in **X15**, Schopenhauer (1788–1860) clearly saw both the problem and the solution:

There is no absurdity so palpable but that it may be firmly planted in the human head if you only begin to inculcate it before the age of five, by constantly repeating it with an air of great solemnity... No idea should ever be established in a child's mind otherwise than by what the child can see for itself, or at any rate it should be verified by the same means... No child under the age of fifteen should receive instruction in subjects which may possibly be the vehicle of serious error, such as philosophy, religion, or any other branch of knowledge where it is necessary to take large views; because wrong notions imbibed early can seldom be rooted out, and of all the intellectual faculties, judgment is the last to arrive at maturity... The faculty of judgment, which cannot come into play without mature experience, should be left to itself; and care should be taken not to anticipate its action by inculcating prejudice, which will paralyze it forever...

Unfortunately, however, Schopenhauer's solution is no longer available to you, because ever since you were a baby, your parents chose to indoctrinate you in their religion. Whether such mental abuse "will paralyze [you] forever" remains to be seen.

One potential difficulty in breaking free from your indoctrination was summarized well by the astronomer Carl Sagan (1934–1996) in his book *The Fine Art of Baloney Detection*.

One of the saddest lessons of history is this: If we've been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle. We're no longer interested in finding out the truth. The bamboozle has captured us. It is simply too painful to acknowledge – even to ourselves – that we've been so credulous. (So the old bamboozles tend to persist as the new bamboozles rise.)

Sagan's analysis, however, seems to assume that religious people have maintained sufficient mental clarity to entertain (but then suppress) the possibility that they've been "bamboozled". In contrast, in the following long quotation from a 1999 article (apparently derived from a speech) entitled "Why is Religiosity So Hard to Cure?" Frank R. Zindler suggests that the problem may be much more complicated and serious – and if Zindler is correct, then the task of overcoming religious indoctrination can be much more challenging.¹

As we are gathered here today in pursuit of reason and the rational understanding of our world, our world once again is in the throes of a most un-reasonable activity – war. For as far back as we have records, our kind has resorted to large-scale violence with such alarming regularity that one might think that warfare is a species-specific characteristic of *Homo sapiens*. As is the case with practically every war our kind has fought in the past, the Balkan War with which we presently are concerned is deeply entangled in religious disputes. While not too many wars of the past have involved the three-way *odium theologicum* seen in the present war – with Sunni Muslims, Orthodox Catholics, and Roman Catholics mutually anathematizing and killing each other – it is no exaggeration to say that the vast majority of the wars of the past were justified and validated by religion, if not outright provoked by it. It is nearly impossible to wage war without the approval of the pet gods of the belligerents.

If religion is so central to the successful waging of war – it hardly seems to be a debatable point – it would seem obvious that if we were to eliminate religion we would remove the emotional and 'moral' impetus for war. While it would be unrealistic to suppose that that would eliminate war altogether, it would certainly make war much harder to initiate and maintain. Peace would become the norm of human existence, not the exception. Without the talismanic *Gott mit uns* on our belt buckles, we would have to think twice before marching off to fight the benighted infidels. (Actually, the twice is not the important part here: that we would have to think at all is the novelty.)

Shortly after I had become an Atheist, at the ripe old age of eighteen, I discovered the religious roots of war and I thought I could do something about it. I would become the successor to Mahatma Gandhi. I would succeed in bringing peace to the world – by eradicating religion. Without a doubt, I would win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Toward that noble/Nobel end, I set out to prepare myself. I studied everything that seemed relevant to the task of slaying the dragon of superstition. I studied dead

¹ This article was originally published in *The American Atheist*, Vol. 37, No. 3, Summer, 1999; it's available at <http://www.americanatheist.org/smr99/T2/zindler.html> and contains the following information about the author: "Formerly a professor of biology and geology, **Frank R. Zindler** is now a science writer. He is a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the New York Academy of Science, The Society of Biblical Literature, and the American Schools of Oriental Research. He is the editor of *American Atheist*."

languages in which scriptures had been written, and I studied all the science from astronomy to zoology alphabetically and from particle physics to psychology conceptually. I was out to get the goods on religion. I would learn to detect every lie, deceit, and fraud perpetrated by religion. I would learn how the world's scriptures had been concocted. I would identify the flaws in religious logic (or whatever that passes for it), and I would master all the 'proofs' of the existence of gods and refute them. I sought to demolish the logical and evidentiary foundations of religion. Certainly, after accomplishing that, religion should crumble and disappear.

After several years I completed most of my course of study and went out to save the world by converting everyone to Atheism. While I did have considerable success and made a good many converts, I ran into problems. I found scientists who accepted evolution and most of the rest of science, but were deeply impressed by the 'evidence' for biblical prophecy. I found biblical scholars who harbored no illusions about the Bible being 'inspired', but were impressed by arguments of certain creationists and felt a god was needed to create rainbows, roses, and motherly love.

To some extent, such problems were successfully overcome by the obvious procedures: teaching some basic evolutionary biology to Bible scholars and explaining the evolutionary history of the scriptures and the completely human dimensions of 'prophecy' to scientists. Yet many people remained unconvinced by my best efforts. There was nothing I could explain or demonstrate that would make them abandon their religious illusions or delusions.

Why don't they give up?

Why doesn't everyone give up religion when you present all the logic and evidence – utterly conclusive evidence – against it? Why do many people remain unconvinced after all your argumentational ICBMs have exploded every citadel of myth?

One might naturally suppose that low intelligence is the main cause of religiosity. After all, thinking is so much harder than believing – hence the great preponderance of believers over thinkers in all ages and cultures. But what can one say when members of that small *coterie* we identify as thinkers are also believers? Low intelligence is not necessarily the problem.

Consider a recent experience I had on the Internet. One morning I received an extremely insulting e-mail message from a creationist who had read something that I had written about creationism on the American Atheists Web-page. A months-long exchange of messages ensued in which we argued creation versus evolution at every level of evidence imaginable. To the end, the man remained steadfast in his belief that the universe is only several thousand years old and that I was a professional deceiver.

It turned out that my anonymous antagonist holds a Ph.D. in biochemistry from Boston University and is engaged in very sophisticated biochemical research of great relevance to cancer studies and other areas of medicine. Why could such an

obviously intelligent person not be made to see something so obvious as the great antiquity of the earth? There was a clue.

Early on in our dispute, the creationist had made the claim that there were no errors or contradictions in the Bible. Immediately, I shot back with two passages that were so obviously contradictory that I thought there could be no further argument:

II Kings 24:8 And Jehoiachin was eighteen years old when he began to reign, and he reigned in Jerusalem three months.

II Chron 36:9 Jehoiachin was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned three months and ten days in Jerusalem.

Imagine my consternation when I received an invective-filled reply that denied outright my contention that Kings and Chronicles could not both be true. To make my consternation even greater was the fact that he did not deign to try to explain away “the appearance of contradiction” (as most Bible apologists would express it) in the two passages. There was no contradiction between those passages! Period. Clearly, he was not able to see what was so obvious to me. Clear also was the fact that there was a perceptual problem involved.

Was he mentally ill? To be sure, religious ideation and behavior of any sort can be considered forms of mental illness. But if there is no impediment created in attending to one’s daily needs or body functions, and if... religious thinking doesn’t interfere with one’s ability to earn a living – if the distortion of religious mentation doesn’t spill over into the practical domain of life – it seems a bit too much to write off occasional fits of religious delusion as mental illness. As far as I have been able to determine, my antagonist gets along just fine in the laboratory workplace and knows when it is appropriate to wear a bathing suit.

Certainly his condition was not so serious as that of the people who tell me, “I know God is real because He speaks to me.” And even most of the people who affirm such nonsense are not mentally ill in any serious sense of the term. Under questioning, most of them will admit they aren’t really hearing voices. Rather, thoughts that spring up unbidden in their minds seem so unlike their ordinary mental fare that they think the thoughts come from outside themselves. In both the creationist and the persons who can’t recognize their own thoughts when they think them, we face the problem of subjective experiences and distorted perceptions so compelling that they are able to overcome all external sensory evidence that might oppose them.

Why should the human brain so easily slip into such disordered function? How could natural selection allow such widespread deficiency to survive – indeed, thrive – in a species? We must try to learn the answer.

Religion as a species-specific behavior

Long ago, Charles Darwin wrote a book called *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, in which he explored the evolutionary roots of psychology. Laughing, crying, smiling, and many other human behaviors were seen to be found in all races and cultures. Moreover, the roots of these behaviors could be traced in apes and other “lower animals.” Like the human body, human behavior was seen to have evolved from a prehuman condition. Behavioral traits, like anatomical ones, could be species-specific and could be used to define a biological species. This being the case, it seems obvious that these behaviors must be genetically conditioned: the behaviors result from the “wiring” and physiological functioning of the brain, and these in turn result from the expression – to the extent the environment permits it – of the instructional messages inhering in the human genome.

If religiosity be a species-specific character for *Homo sapiens* as a whole (and not just a secondary sex characteristic of the human female, as G. B. Shaw once quipped), there must be an anatomical and physiological basis for it in the human brain.

Evidence for a neural basis for religion has been available for a long time. We have known for a long time that entheogenic drugs can cause people to have religious experiences, sacred hallucinations, and other “awesome” sensations. The peyote cactus (which contains mescaline) is used by Native Americans in their religious rites to induce a sacred psychosis, and the fungal drugs psilocybin and amanitin may have been used as entheogens in the ancient Near East. The atheist Dead-Sea-Scrolls scholar, John Allegro, once wrote a book called *The Sacred Mushroom And The Cross*. In that book, he traced the Near Eastern experience with the poisonous, hallucinogenic mushroom *Amanita muscaria* back to ancient Sumer and made a reasonable case for the argument that resonances of “magic mushroom” experiences could even be detected in the New Testament.

The implications of this are obvious. If molecules of certain drugs are able to make us have religious experiences, there has to be circuitry in our brains that is being activated or inhibited by those molecules – and that circuitry is at least indirectly a product of genetics.

Further support for a neural basis for religion comes from the fact that there are atheogenic as well as entheogenic drugs. In at least some psychoses characterized by extreme religious delusions, antipsychotic drugs can dispel the religious delirium. Can anyone doubt that, in exorcising the gods from such patients, the drugs are acting on particular neuronal receptors and affecting neuronal firing? Is it too much to hope that someday that a drug cure will be available for religious addiction? Won't it be a great world when a doctor can say, “Take two Thorazines and call me in a month if you still feel the urge to tithe.”

We must remember too that temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE) is often accompanied by hyper-religiosity, and it is likely that St. Paul – arguably the creator of Christianity – suffered from epilepsy of some kind. Dr. Vilayanur Ramachandran, director of the

Center for Brain and Cognition at the University of California, has studied TLE patients and has found that their Galvanic Skin Responses are disproportionately aroused by presentation of religious words. The word Jesus will make their palms sweat as much as those of normal people do when presented by sexual terms. Once again it appears that brain processes (and pathological ones at that!) are the cause of religious experience. For good measure, the argument would seem to be settled by recent experiments that demonstrate that “religious experiences,” “numinous perceptions,” and the like can be triggered by electrical stimulation of certain parts of the brain.

Before trying to discern what the “normal” function of the brain’s “god circuitry” might be, we must note one final clue. Religious experiences since ancient times often have been associated with trance induced by hypnotic phenomena such as dancing, chanting, and other factors that increase suggestibility.

If, as now seems indisputable, there are parts of the brain that mediate religious experiences and are the cause of our delusions of divine communion, we must ask why they exist. What is their normal function? Why would a hard-nosed process such as natural selection have produced such structures? I believe that the answers to these questions are to be found in the solution to a larger puzzle: why, if religion is veridically false, would natural selection have allowed it not only to survive but thrive?

The evolutionary background

In order to discover the “normal” functioning of the “god module” of the brain, we will have to investigate the evolutionary dimensions of three intimately interrelated phenomena: religion, hypnosis, and music.

While the particular details of religion are transmitted verbally by culture – our substitute for instinct – I submit that the religiosity of *Homo sapiens* can be considered to some extent instinctual. That there could be such a thing as a religious instinct becomes plausible, I think, when we consider the implications of the fact that we evolved as a social species, not a solitary species. We evolved as social animals – herd animals. We evolved as wolves, not foxes.

In the evolution of big-brained social species there must arise a conflict between the desire for autonomy – self gratification – and the group need for integration and subservience. In many social species, autonomy and separation from the group produces anxiety. A lost sheep is not a happy animal, and many Christians separated from their congregations, priests, and pastors experience profound Angst. (This is why excommunication and shunning can be so devastating to certain people.) It appears to be one of the functions of religion that it allows people to “escape from freedom,” as the psychiatrist Erich Fromm once put it. When we do what our priests tell us to do, we avoid the anxiety that comes from having to make our own decisions – anxiety that arises from painful knowledge of our own inadequacies and proneness to make mistakes. Religion serves as a vehicle for discharging anxiety by connecting

isolated individuals to the group and making them feel as though somehow the power of the entire group flows through them. In doing so, I shall argue, religion employs the neuronal circuitry evolved in prehuman social animals for non-verbal communication within the group.

Group Selection

In the evolution of social species, natural selection can act at the group level as well as at the individual level. This means in practice that groups can compete with each other and entire gene pools can be selected (preserved) or extincted, depending upon the overall “fitness” of the groups in competition. Extermination of the genetic opposition is the object of this evolutionary process. Genocide has a long history – or perhaps we should say prehistory. The sociological concepts of in-group and out-group are useful for understanding the dynamics of this sort of social evolution.

For a particular in-group to prevail over the various out-groups with which it competes for resources, high-level intragroup cooperation and coordination are required. There is need for cohesion of the individuals comprising the group so it can behave as an integrated superorganism. For maximal effectiveness in warfare it is necessary that an entire group of soldiers be able to act and function as though it were a single well-coordinated individual.

Fundamental to successful cooperation and coordination is communication. But how is communication effected before the origin of language? How, for example, do wildebeest know when it is time to stampede? Unless the entire herd stampedes in unison, the herd will be vulnerable – and a “stampede of one” would almost certainly be fatal to the individual charging into a pride of lions. What is it that brings about the necessary ego dissolution and fusion of each individual with the “spirit of the herd”?

Hypnosis

While chemical signaling such as release of pheromones, physical signals such as raising the tail or other displays, and auditory signals such as snorts, bellows, cries, and the like may be employed to enlist cooperation, for success they all require that the recipient animals be “suggestible” – i.e., able to internalize the signal received, make it their own “state of mind,” and pass it on. Communication at this level is largely the transfer of emotions throughout the members of a group. Emotions must be as contagious as yawning and scratching of itches.

It is generally accepted that suggestion and suggestibility are at the root of hypnosis. Hypnosis and hypnotizability, I would argue, are relics of the communication system that functioned in the preverbal human herd. I know of nothing that can equal hypnosis in the ease with which it can change affect – whether the change involve laughing, crying, exhilaration, or insensitivity to pain. In all these changes in affect, perceptions are of necessity altered. Sour lemons are perceived as sweet oranges, lighted cigarettes are perceived as lotion applicators, and the smoke of incense is perceived as angel spirits hovering in the air.

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Hypnosis also is able to induce religious experiences ranging from the simple feeling of oneness with the universe to fulminating hallucinations of heavenly voices issuing commandments. Add to this the fact that trance (in the form of chanting and fasting-conditioned prayer and meditation, the altered consciousness of people who think a faith-healer has cured them, etc.) is an important component of many religions, and we have a clue as to why religion evolved. Religion evolved as a means of inducing and channeling hypnosis – originally to increase group cohesion and to weld weak individuals into mighty superorganisms ready to go out and exterminate the genetic competition. Religion originated as an effective catalyst of effective warfare by being a conduit for the flow of bellicose suggestions. Because hypnosis can function at a preverbal level it can evade the radar of the rational mind. It can produce warriors that know no fear despite the most fearful of circumstances. It can create the bright illusion of a better world on another plane – an illusion so powerful that warriors will not hesitate to fight for it no matter how frightful the real world.

There should be no perception of paradox in the fact that religion and war go together so frequently. The facilitation of war was the *raison d'être* for religion in the first place!

To get back to the subject of this talk, let us ask once again why religiosity is so hard to cure. Why are religious perceptions so hard to change? A clue can be found in the intimate association of hypnosis with religion and the tenacity with which hypnosis-implanted perceptions can be maintained despite external evidence. Religious perceptions are, I believe, hypnotically implanted.

Just how pertinaciously hypnotic beliefs may be held can be seen in an experiment I carried out many years ago when I was actively pursuing research in the area of experimental hypnosis. In one of my experiments I hypnotized a man who happened to be wearing leather dress-boots. He was a very good subject, and so I decided to explore the puzzle of post-hypnotic suggestions. I gave him the post-hypnotic suggestion that several minutes after awakening he would “discover” that he had put his boots on the wrong feet. I awakened him and we talked for a few minutes. Suddenly, he looked in startlement at his feet, as though he were feeling discomfort if not outright pain. With alacrity, he pulled off his boots and then put them back on: the right boot on the left foot, the left boot on the right foot.

For ten or fifteen minutes he talked with me, completely unaware of his absurd condition. Only when he got up to walk – and nearly broke his neck trying to walk on the carpet – did he suddenly realize that his boots were on the wrong feet. This experiment was neatly analogous to a case of tent-meeting hypnosis I once witnessed. In that case, a woman with severe arthritis was hypnotized by a faith-healer to believe her arthritis had been cured. Although she had come into the tent with crutches, after receiving the divine zap she commenced to run around the tent full tilt – joints snapping, cracking, and complaining, but no pain was felt by the poor creature being exploited by the preachers presiding over the show. Unlike the fellow in boots,

however, it is doubtful that the woman ever did realize that she had not really been cured at all – even though she had to be carried home from the meeting. I would bet that the next morning she thought that Satan had brought back her disease.

The tenacity with which hypnosis-implanted perceptions are held despite the evidence of the physical senses gives us some understanding of why religious perceptions are so hard to change. Religious mentation, like post-hypnotic suggestion, navigates below the radar of reality. It is to a large degree preverbal, and thus immune to that quintessentially verbal process we call logic.

Putting It All Together

As we have already noted, in dealing with religious experiences we are faced with the problem of subjective experiences so compelling they are able to overcome all external sensory experience. Both electrical stimulation experiments and personal reports often indicate that during religious experiences there is a break-down of the ego and the boundaries of the self, creating a sense of at-one-ness. The subject feels at one with the cosmos, one with the human race. Subjects report the sense of receiving ineffable wisdom or knowledge, knowledge that cannot be expressed in words.

While it is possible that speech-processing parts of the brain are involved in religious experiences, I suspect that the core brain functions involved are those associated with non-verbal communication – the brain elements that allow herd animals to communicate and perceive the intentions of the herd. Emotions are contagious, and the neuronal circuitry underlying that fact is probably involved in religious experiences as well.

As I have already suggested, the evolutionary function of religion has been to increase in-group cohesion in order to enhance competition with out-groups: Israelites vs. Jebusites vs. Hivites, or Catholic Croatians vs. Orthodox Serbs vs. Muslim Bosnians. It provides a means for reduction of anxiety caused by autonomy, by allowing dissolution of self and absorption into the collective mind – the collection of preverbal and verbal messages active in the environment in which the religious activity is being carried out.

This primary function of religion is most effective when effected hypnotically. By providing a focused means for induction of trance, religion facilitates the imposition of the will of a group (or its leaders!) upon its individual members. It does this by means of hypnotic preaching, rhythmic singing, dancing, clapping, monotonous chanting, or drumming – and gives us a clue to the evolutionary “purpose” of music. Almost certainly, rhythm antedates melody. We began as drumming ruffed grouse and evolved into warblers only late in the story. Why? Because persistent rhythms are useful in inducing trance. Brain electrical rhythms change as states of consciousness change, and there may be a connection here with the use of music to induce altered states of consciousness. This would appear to explain the use of drumming and dancing among many Amerindians before they went out to war.

Music was the portal through which the warriors entered a world that knew no fear, a world without anxiety. Thus, music evolved as a means of inducing hypnotic trance.

Hypnotic susceptibility, although older than the human species itself, was elaborated by natural selection as a means of increasing intragroup cohesion and as a means of producing highly ordered, efficient competitive behavior at the intergroup level. As cultural transmission of learned behavior replaced genetic transmission of instinctive behavior, religion emerged as the system deciding the ends for which hypnosis would be applied. The actual mythical content of the individual religions probably did not make much difference. Zeus and Yahweh and Baal are all imaginary, and there is no obvious reason to recommend one over another. However, the structure of the cultural organizations behind the various deities was of great importance. It is obvious that the wizards who pulled the strings in the temple of Yahweh had a much more effective way of running the land of Oz than did those who hid behind the curtains in the temples of Zeus and Baal!

One Last Time – Why is religiosity so hard to cure?

Analogous to hypnosis, religion distorts perceptions, rendering them resistant to correction. Often, strong emotions must be evoked before the spell can be broken: it is like using ice-water to awaken a hypnotized person. The neural circuitry of religion is intimately intertwined with that which distinguishes us as herd animals, as a social species. Surgical attempts to remove the harmful, religious components of this circuitry are quite naturally resisted – as though they were attempts to deprive people of their group identity. Loss of religion produces more autonomy, but this again can increase anxiety levels. Illusions that reduce anxiety will not be given up easily. Notwithstanding all I have said here today, fear remains the soil in which the roots of religion feed. Unless better means are made available for reducing fear, religion will continue to feed upon our neuroplasm...

So, Zindler suggests that the reason why people become entrapped by religions is not that they've been (using Sagan's term) "bamboozled" but because they've been hypnotized.

Now, Dear, of course it's appropriate to be skeptical of the above analysis by Zindler. As with all good hypotheses, at first they're "just" someone's interpretation of some data set. The data may not be reliable, there might be other data sets that conflict with the analyzed data, and undoubtedly other interpretations are available. Further, until hypotheses yield predictions and these predictions are tested experimentally, then at best such hypotheses are just "interesting". And even if a hypothesis yields prediction that are confirmed experimentally, leading to suggestion of a general principle, then that general principle may be appropriate "in general", not for particular cases (especially in the fields of psychology and sociology, in which the subjects are so complicated as people). Consequently, I would certainly be

reluctant to claim that Zindler's hypothesis is an adequate description of your condition. That's one more thing for you to decide.

Nonetheless, I'm attracted to Zindler's hypothesis. Otherwise, if hypnosis isn't invoked to explain how people avoid fear by binding themselves to others who are similarly fearful, it's hard to understand how they can accept such "clearly invented balderdash". For example, otherwise how could anyone accept Moses' crazy claim that some burning bush told him: "I am that I am"? Otherwise, how could people accept Paul's crazy claim that Jesus died to atone for their "original sin"? Otherwise, how could anyone accept Muhammad's crazy claim that some angel in a cave conveyed Allah's messages to him? And otherwise, how could anyone accept Joseph Smith's crazy claim that some angel told him where to find some "golden plates"?

Further, the deeper you dig, the more otherwise incomprehensible such behavior becomes. For example: How, otherwise, would "modern" religious Jews accept that all 613 (?) of the Old Testament's Commandments (e.g., about how to beat your slave to death and how to sell your daughter into slavery) are direct communications from the creator of the universe? How, otherwise, would "modern" Christians accept the bizarre idea that Jesus was the son of God (when historical records clearly show that this claim was simply Emperor Constantine's political decision)? How, otherwise, would "modern" Muslims accept Muhammad's horrible ideas about hell and his pathetic ideas about paradise? How, otherwise, could "modern" Mormons accept so much clearly invented balderdash, e.g., that the Americas were first populated by "the lost tribes of Israel" (when DNA data clearly show otherwise), that the Book of Abraham is what Joseph Smith claimed (when data clearly show otherwise), and so on?

In particular, given your experiences with the LDS Church, I want to dig deeper into some of this "Mormon madness", especially as it pertains to young people. Thus, Mormon girls are continuously primed (almost to the point of bursting) that their prime purpose is to marry a good Mormon man, to honor and obey him, and to have as many babies as possible, thereby providing bodies for God's "spirit children". In this worldview, God's wife is busy popping out batches and batches of "spirit babies", roughly $(7 \times 10^9 \text{ babies}) / (70 \text{ years of life person}) = 100 \text{ million babies born each and every year to Mother God!}$ In turn, these "spirit babies" (according to this bizarre worldview) need bodies in which to reside on Earth – then to be tested, to see if they'll be "good Mormons", eventually able to become gods

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themselves, ruling their own worlds, with the new “godly wives” popping out a new batches of “spirit babies”. Talk about a population explosion!

But what data support such speculations? Is the prime purpose of female rabbits similarly to provide bodies for “spirit bunnies”? Is there any chance that sexual reproduction is just a method that DNA molecules “discovered” (by experience) to be the best way for the DNA molecules to survive (by producing “hosts” that could adapt to changing physical and biological circumstances)? Have Mormons not heard of Darwin’s theory of evolution? Has any Mormon considered the possibility that the real impetus of Mormon leaders promoting such a crazy worldview is to increase the number of Mormons, from each of whom they intend to get a “commission” (10% of the lifetime income of each Mormon!)? Can Mormon women not see that this worldview is promoted by a bunch of male-chauvinist pigs? Have Mormons not heard that this poor old world already has more than enough babies?!

But be that as it is, Dear, think of the poor girls indoctrinated since birth with such garbage. And then, think of the similar load of trash dumped on all Mormon males. According to the fools and con artists who run the LDS Church, one of the prime “missions” in life of all Mormon males (besides the not-too-unpleasant tasks of participating in the baby-production business, treating their wives as baby machines) is “to go on a mission”, “to save souls”, “to spread the gospel of Christ”, “to speak the glad tidings of the gospel”, “to serve as ambassadors of the Lord Jesus Christ to the world”, to “invite others to come unto Christ by helping them receive the restored gospel through faith in Jesus Christ and His Atonement, repentance, baptism, receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end”, and similar jabberwocky. And the young men do so, so they’ll be inducted into the godship profession, thence to rule their own words and (one presumes) participate with their wife (or wives) in the baby-production business.

In the words of M. Russell Ballard (one of the 12 “Apostles” of the LDS Church) in his article entitled “Duties, Rewards, and Risks” (on p. 33 of the Nov. 1989 issue of the Mormon magazine *Ensign*) such a plan was ordained in the “premortal world”, when people were still “spirit children” – but even then, they were being trained for war:

The battle to bring souls unto Christ began in the premortal world with the war in heaven. (See *Revelations 12, 7*). That same battle continues today in the conflict

between right and wrong and between the gospel and false principles. The members of the Church hold a frontline position in the contest for the souls of men. The missionaries are on the battlefield fighting with the sword of truth to carry the glorious message of the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the peoples of the earth. No war has ever been free of risk. The prophecies of the last days lead me to believe that the intensity of the battle for the souls of men will increase and the risks will become greater as we draw closer to the second coming of the Lord.

Consequently, off march God's warriors, on a mission to conquer the world, armed with the Book of Mormon, with ambitions of becoming rulers of worlds, spreading a plague of ignorance (not unlike Islamists, out to conquer the world for their clerics), while the animal trainers (hypnotists?) in Salt Lake City salivate at the prospects of pocketing 10% of the incomes of still more dupes, who "think with their hearts" and who'll never evaluate the likelihood that *Revelations* is nothing but the ravings of a lunatic.

Therefore, Dear, given that no one has ever found the slightest shred of data to support such speculations, given all the evidence that it's a monstrous con game, a hoax perpetrated by a bunch of flim-flam artists, how else can one understand why people buy into such nonsense without invoking some psychological hypothesis such as hypnosis? How else can one understand why anyone would adopt the crazy idea that, if they do as they're told, then they'll become gods? Abandoning one's ability to think is a condition of becoming a god? Really? What makes anybody think so? Or is it here where the fallacy appears: so long as you don't think, then you'll think that your thinking is valid! What is that if not a hypnotic state?

If it's so, Dear (if you've been essentially hypnotized, if hypnosis has been used to bind you to Mormonism), then I certainly don't want to underestimate the challenge of your breaking free. Yet, many others, who have been similarly indoctrinated (hypnotized?) in their religions, have managed to break free, and I would encourage you to try to learn from their experiences. In particular, I encourage you to explore some "ex-Mormon" web sites (referenced below), in part to read the "testimonies" of those who left the LDS Church and in part to learn about benefits from breaking free. Below are a few such "testimonies" that I found particularly poignant:²

² All copied from <http://home.teleport.com/%7Epackham/voices1.htm>, except for the first, which is from <http://www.exmormon.org/whylft129.htm>, and the last, from <http://www.exmormon.org/whylft56.htm>. In some, I corrected some punctuation errors.

- I grew to see that being raised in the Mormon Church trains us to interpret our ordinary feelings as coming from the Holy Ghost. The youth of the Church are encouraged to get up in sacrament meeting and bear their “testimonies”. The Church leaders would have us believe that “when we bear our testimonies, they grow stronger.” But I am convinced that the reality is that it conditions people to reinforce their belief by stating it vocally – a psychological phenomenon.
- Only a person who takes risks is free. I have heard it said that the best things in life don’t come easy. I have to just keep believing that the best in life is still ahead, and that there is much to look forward to in our future without the Church... Leaving the Church, and standing up for our beliefs (or non-beliefs) is certainly the hardest thing that I have ever done. But the peace of mind, and integrity of soul that I have found is ever worth it.
- In the Church, everything was a Sign, but I couldn’t always tell whether it was from God or Satan, so I would be very confused and indecisive because of it... Out of the Church, there are no Signs. There is just Life – and decisions are easy when you base them on facts.
- If bad things happen to me, and I’m “being good” – Satan’s out to get me. If bad things happen to me, and I’m “being bad” – God’s out to get me. If good things happen to me, and I’m “being good” – I’m being rewarded. If good things happen to me, and I’m “being bad” – Satan’s tempting me. It took me a VERY long time to learn that good things and bad things happen to everyone, regardless of their “thoughts, words, or deeds.” Life isn’t a grand pyramid-scheme reward system.
- I am twenty times the person I was when I “faked” belief in the Church. Like many of you, I am kinder, gentler, more accepting and loving than I was while in the Church. I see some form of beauty in every person. I no longer feel “more special” than other folks, but instead feel more a part of humanity. The list goes on and on... But I do feel anger at the pompous asses in Salt Lake City who perpetuate this madness and turn a blind eye to all our family relationships harmed by the church.
- The challenge when I left the church was to find a spiritual and religious replacement. I naturally assumed that I would convert to mainstream Christianity when I left, but that didn’t feel right for me either. Questioning Mormonism without questioning the Bible and Christianity, didn’t seem logical to me, and I quickly decided that I couldn’t believe in a God who would judge his children by their labels or religious preference. I occasionally attend a Unitarian church here in Seattle, but I attend out of desire, not obligation. I now consider myself Agnostic, and am completely comfortable in saying that I don’t know all of the answers – and I don’t believe anyone does. This reminds me of one of my favorite quotes by Andre Gide: “Trust those who are seeking the truth; beware of those who say they have found it.”

The most amazing discovery for me since leaving the church, has been realizing that my spirituality hasn’t ended. When I was a member of the church, I thought that I

had “felt the spirit” many times. You know, that feeling that you get when you’re singing the “The Spirit of God Like a Fire is Burning”, or “O My Father”? I still get that feeling quite often, but now I realize it’s based on emotion and endorphins. My sense of worship now comes from seeking beauty – something I do actively. The feeling of awe I get when I see the glow of Mt. Rainier at sunset, drive through the Redwoods, or when I listen to someone like Pat Metheny, Sade, or the soundtrack to *Les Miserables*, is beautiful to me, and is much more fulfilling than the guilt-ridden emotional rush I sought after in the church.

Many of my LDS family members were shocked and devastated when I left the church, and some of us didn’t speak for quite some time. However, we have recently made peace, and consequently, I don’t feel quite as alone as I did a few years ago. I firmly believe that my family expected my life to fall apart when I left, and when that didn’t happen, I think they were surprised. I think my family can see that I’m still basically the same person that I was before, who has a good heart and is trying to raise good and moral children. They also know that I didn’t leave the church to live a deviant lifestyle or because I couldn’t live the standards. We usually avoid conversations about the church, and simply agree to disagree on church issues. My LDS friends haven’t been quite as understanding though. The idea that I could leave the church for happiness and honesty is totally foreign to them, and I guess in a way I understand their confusion. The beauty of it is, I now have friends who love me for who I am, and not because of my church membership.

Leaving the church and finding peace and happiness is one of the greatest accomplishments of my life... so far.

At <http://www.exmormon.org/> you can find literally hundreds of additional “testimonies” of the benefits people found from dumping Mormonism.³

As for how to break free from religion indoctrination, Zindler wrote:

Analogous to hypnosis, religion distorts perceptions, rendering them resistant to correction. Often, strong emotions must be evoked before the spell can be broken: it is like using ice-water to awaken a hypnotized person.

Other people suggest that “the spell can be broken” by finding data that conflicts with religious dogma. That’s what caused your father to change. In the case of your mother, after she filed to divorce your father and I had only a little time to try to get her to “smarten up”, I tried to show her “data” that conflicted with her dogma (by asking her – even offering to pay her – to

³ Incidentally (and as I illustrated in earlier chapters, e.g., X-28), elsewhere on the internet, you can find similar “testimonies” from ex-Christians (e.g., at <http://exchristian.net/archived.php> and <http://www.users.bigpond.com/pmurray/exchristian/>) and from ex-Muslims (e.g., <http://www.secularislam.org/testimonies/index.htm>).

read this book), but her response was: “I have no interest in your book.” I then tried an “ice-water treatment”, by forcefully pointing out her errors – but it, too, was obviously to no avail.

Still other people suggest the Zen method, used in judo (from Japanese *jū* = ‘gentle’ + *dō* = ‘way’) and subsequently in karate (from Japanese *kara* = ‘empty’ + *te* = hand) and Korean taekwondo (or tae-kwon-do). In judo, you attempt to enter into your opponent’s movements and redirect them. But your grandmother and I had been doing that for 15 years (in an enormous number of ways, from huge financial support for your parents to showing your mother, by example, that morality and love have nothing to do with any giant Jabberwock in the sky – never once retaliating for offences nor reprimanding her for her mistakes). Yet, though we treated her in many ways better than if she were our own child, we made no progress redirecting her ways; in fact, it became clear to us that she continued to dig herself ever deeper into her delusions.

But anyway, leaving particulars of my experience with your parents behind, now I want to turn to someone more important to me, namely, you! With respect to the challenging possibility that you might be able to break free from your religious indoctrination, substantial evidence supports the idea that, although most people desire to belong to groups, yet even more, they want to associate themselves with “what’s true” (or at least, avoid what’s false). That idea is one of many contained in the following article (to which I’ve added a few footnotes) by another ex-Mormon, Richard Packham.⁴

⁴ Copied from <http://home.teleport.com/~packham/skeptics.htm>, where the following “legalities” are added: “© 1999 Richard Packham. Permission granted to reproduce for non-commercial purposes, provided text is not changed and this copyright notice is included.” At this webpage, a link is available to the following information about the author:

“I am a retired college teacher (foreign languages) and retired attorney. I live with my wife Janet in Roseburg, Oregon, where we have a home outside of town with room to raise some cattle and some trees. I grew up as a Mormon and left the church many years ago. I have three grown children by my Mormon ex-wife. I have two grown sons with Janet, my present wife of almost 35 years, one of whom helps us operate the ranch. I am interested in history, religion, philosophy, amateur theater, cooking and baking, writing, and music (I play piano, guitar, and several other instruments). I dabble in photography and watercolor. I also like to cook, bake, knit, tat and do cross-word puzzles. I love garage sales and thrift shops. I rarely watch television, but we occasionally rent a movie. My friends tell me I’m a nice person. My enemies don’t talk to me.”

At <http://home.teleport.com/~packham/whyleft.htm> is his explanation for why he decided to leave the LDS Church and at <http://home.teleport.com/~packham/atheist.htm> he explains his subsequent return “to the ‘religion’ of my birth”, by which he means atheism but he could equally mean humanism.

The Ex-Mormon's Skeptical Heritage

Richard Packham

[This article is adapted from a workshop I gave at the annual gathering of Ex-Mormons on February 27, 1999. It is therefore addressed to those who have left or are in the process of leaving the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.]

Most of us here have one thing in common: we left – or are leaving – the Mormon church. In doing that, I suspect that we have something else in common: we each experienced a moment, that one particular moment, when we realized that we were going to leave, that we had to leave, that there was no longer any real choice. If you are at all like me, you remember that moment vividly, just as one remembers exactly what they were doing when they heard that Kennedy had been shot in Dallas (or, for people of my generation, when they heard that Pearl Harbor had been bombed).

And I suspect that we have one more thing in common, which is what I would like to discuss with you today: we had that terrible feeling that we were all alone. That nobody else had ever felt this way. That we were starting down a path where there were no footsteps to follow, no guidelines, no signposts. How terrifying, for people like us, who had been so well trained to follow the leader, to step only where told to step, to hold to the rod, to fear at the risk of our eternal souls that one misstep might lose us our exaltation.

The trigger, the catalyst, the straw that broke the camel's back, was undoubtedly different for each of us. But there was one. You remember: there were so many things that did not seem right, but we were so used to accepting, to obeying, to not questioning, that we were able to go on accepting, obeying, not questioning. But there was, finally, that one thing, the one thing that pushed us too far, demanded too much.

There is a side point I want to make here. It's the answer to a question that is often asked of us, usually by non-Mormons with a loved one who is about to be baptized, or new ex-Mormons whose loved ones are still caught in the church, and who are desperate to be given the key to the prison of Mormonism, to release the loved one: What can I tell him, what can I show to her, that will convince them that Mormonism is false?

And the answer, of course, is that there is no one thing, no one fact, no single outrageous doctrine or embarrassing historical event, that will cause everyone who knows about that one fact to leave the church. It is different for each person. One person may easily be able to accept polygamy, blood atonement, secret finances, and the unfulfilled prophecies of Joseph Smith. But when the bishop calls a child molester to teach Primary, that's the straw. Another may be able to accept all that, but cannot accept the fact that the church lies about its past. Another may be able to accept the lying as necessary, but finds polygamy too much.

For each person, it will be something else, something different. And what is the lesson in that, for those who are trying to get a loved one out of Mormonism? As I see it, the prison door has a special lock for each prisoner. We are armed with an entire key ring of keys. One of those keys will fit the lock and release the prisoner. We must patiently try each key until we find a fit. The key is there, somewhere, and we must not give up, but try each one.⁵

Are we ex-Mormons so unusual? The Mormons say that we are. They taunt us (from their jail-cell windows) and boast that there are ten million of them. (They seem to be unaware that there are twenty times as many atheists in the world, and a hundred times as many people who are completely non-religious, according to the World Almanac.) Do I have the audacity to suggest that those ten million Mormons are all deceived? That I am smarter than they? That this great church, which has grown so phenomenally over the last 170 years, is a fraud?

By leaving it, I label myself as a doubter, a skeptic, an infidel, a traitor, a rebel, a heretic, an apostate, a covenant-breaker, and thus a servant and follower of evil.⁶

Those are powerful labels, and we were all trained to cringe at the mere utterance of them. And now, think back: when those words were applied to you, especially by people whom you trusted, believed, loved and respected, did you hesitate? Did you, even for a moment, think, What on earth am I doing? What if they're right? Have I gone mad? Have I just sacrificed eternal happiness by my stupidity, just as they say? Am I wrong to doubt, to question, to be critical?

Today I would like to help us become aware of our very rich and proud heritage: the heritage of the skeptic, the doubter, the heretic.

I am now going to describe to you some people who also had similar feelings to those you may have had when you decided to leave Mormonism. These are all people who started out accepting the "conventional wisdom" as promulgated by the "authorities," but who were then labeled, as we are labeled by the Mormon church, as apostates, heretics, rebels, enemies, traitors, and servants of evil.

Perhaps what made you leave Mormonism was that questions are not allowed. If so, then you share the heritage of Socrates.

⁵ Dear: That assumes that you "love" the person enough to try to free them, that you think it's wise to do so, that you think you can be successful, that you can afford the time to try, that sufficient time is available that you can afford to be patient, etc. For reasons I'll mention later in this chapter, I'd recommend that, in general, you don't try (except under special circumstances) or at least don't try very hard. That is, constrain yourself – until you're older!

⁶ Well, Dear, I expect that an editor would have advised Packham to rephrase that sentence, perhaps as: "By leaving it, I acknowledge their labels that I'm a doubter, skeptic, and heretic, and I understand their labels that I'm a traitor, rebel, heretic, apostate, covenant-breaker, and thus a servant and follower of evil."

Socrates was essentially a pious man, a good citizen and former soldier who made a meager living teaching. He had no doctrine. He simply taught his pupils to ask questions. He did not claim to have the answers to the questions, but he maintained that only by questioning, by reasoning, could one hope to find the truth and discover error. This idea got him in trouble with the authorities, who accused him of atheism and of corrupting the youth. For teaching people to question, he was executed at Athens in 399 BC. His methods of teaching and reasoning form the basis of modern philosophy and education.

If you objected to the lack of spirituality in Mormonism, then you are an heir of Jesus of Nazareth, who was very devoted to his religious heritage, but he saw that it was not the observance of each little prohibition, each ritual requirement of religion, that was important, but rather our inner attitude, our love for our fellow human beings. Since this idea tended to downplay the importance of religious ordinances on which the authorities depended for their control, he was accused of blasphemy, and was executed about 30 AD at Jerusalem.⁷

Did you object to the personal constraints of the church, preventing you from developing your individuality? Then you share something with the Buddha. Although outwardly very successful and a member of an important family, he realized that the conventional wisdom and his worldly position was not satisfying his spiritual needs. He realized that he had to seek his own path, even though it might mean giving up his comfortable position and even his family, which he did, reluctantly. He spent many years in contemplation and study, but finally felt that he had achieved his goal. He began to share with others what he had discovered, and died peacefully twenty-five hundred years ago. His followers number today over three hundred million.

In another way, you have similarities with Sigmund Freud: When he lived, conventional wisdom viewed human sexuality as something not to be discussed, as something sinful and degrading, something to be controlled and suppressed. He began to teach that sexuality was an essential part of our humanity, and that its suppression was unhealthy. He was vilified by almost all religionists for his views. Today he is recognized as the founder of our modern treatment of mental illness. He succeeded in teaching us how really to “drive out the evil spirits.”

Was the key for you the doctrinal contradictions, the scriptural errors? Your spiritual ancestor is perhaps John Wycliffe. A devout man, he was extremely critical of the religious authorities. He believed that it was wrong that those authorities kept people from reading for themselves – those authorities maintained that the religious documents in the wrong hands might be misused and destroy the common man’s faith. He believed in making those writings available to everyone. His own writings

⁷ Dear: That assumes, of course, that Jesus (“the Nazarene”) existed and wasn’t just a myth, and as I suggested in **Qx** and will try to show you more in **Yx**, that is not a very defensible assumption. But even so, even if Jesus was but a myth, Packham’s depiction of the mythical Jesus is appropriate.

were banned by the authorities. He is considered by many to be a fore-runner of the Protestant Reformation. He died in 1384.

Were you offended by the wealth amassed by the church? Then you share that feeling of outrage with Martin Luther. A devout man, who had dedicated his life to his religion, he took issue with the immense wealth which his church was acquiring from its poor members. He publicly challenged these financial practices and their other corrupt practices, which resulted ultimately in his excommunication. He is one of the major figures of the Protestant Reformation. He died in 1546 in Germany.

Did you feel that the stance of the church on scientific matters was incorrect? Then you are like Galileo. Through his own examination of the natural world, he realized that the conventional wisdom as handed down through religious channels was factually incorrect. His scientific studies were rejected by the religious authorities for the sole reason that they challenged traditional doctrine. He was coerced into publicly recanting his scientific work, which is today acknowledged as correct.

Was it the church's distortion of its own history that made you leave? You have several intellectual predecessors:

Thomas Paine examined the accepted religious wisdom and the holy writings on which it was based, and step by step showed its contradictions and absurdities. As a result, his efforts on behalf of political independence in the American and French revolutions were overshadowed by accusations of "atheism" (although he did believe in God), and he died an outcast of society because of his book *The Age of Reason*, in which he examined the Bible critically.

David Friedrich Strauss wrote *Das Leben Jesu* ("The Life of Jesus") in 1835. This biography shook accepted beliefs, explaining Jesus' life as a mere mortal.

Albert Schweitzer was a devout man who devoted himself to caring for the sick and poor, an acknowledged genius in many fields, he tried in his early work to find the historical truth about the origins of his religion, and in so doing cast doubt on many accepted religious legends. His book *In Search of the Historical Jesus* was a landmark book.

Did you realize that the church was not guided by God, that its leaders were mere men pretending to be divinely called? Then many are your forebears. Luther and Wycliffe have already been mentioned.

Those of us who were born and raised in the Mormon church are well aware of the rich heritage of our Mormon ancestors, who suffered persecution, crossed the plains, and endured privations for their faith. It is a great heritage, one of which we can rightly be proud, even though we no longer share their religious beliefs.

But we also have another Mormon heritage, one which we did not learn about in Sunday school or in seminary – at least, we did not learn about it accurately. It is the heritage of the Mormon apostates, those of whom Mormon “official” history takes note only to curse and vilify them. And yet, they are also a heritage of which we can be proud. Did you ever wonder who those people were, who, beginning in the Kirtland days, denounced Joseph Smith and left? Why did they leave?

David Whitmer was a devout man who had been given visions and revelations [and] who had even been promised that he would eventually succeed to leadership. [He] began to realize that Joseph Smith, whom he had followed faithfully, was not in fact divinely guided, that he was in fact deceiving his followers. For expressing these doubts he was vilified and excommunicated, with threats to his life.

William Law was a member of the First Presidency of the church, a man who had made many sacrifices for his faith, but he began to realize that Joseph Smith was corrupt, teaching falsehoods, initiating false practices, and lying to protect himself. He begged... Smith to correct these wrongs, but was himself vilified. He finally made public the wrongs he saw, which ultimately, indirectly, caused... Smith’s downfall and death. He was one of the publishers of the *Nauvoo Expositor*.

The Tanners are part of this heritage. This husband/wife pair simply began to read writings from the history of the church and realized that the history had been carefully concealed and edited. They began to make these writings easily available, and were ostracized and vilified by the church, which preferred to keep its uncomplimentary history hidden. Mrs. Tanner is a descendant of Brigham Young.

There are many others who defied their traditional Mormon heritage to follow the path of conscience: Frank Cannon, son of George Q. Cannon of the First Presidency. He represented Utah in the U. S. Congress. Kimball Young, grandson of Brigham Young, became a noted sociologist and authored *Isn't One Wife Enough?*, a study of Mormon polygamy. Fawn M. Brodie, niece of David O. McKay, and author of the still definitive biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*. Steve Benson, grandson of Ezra Taft Benson, and political cartoonist for the Arizona Republic. Samuel Taylor, grandson of John Taylor, and author of numerous historical works on Mormonism, including *Nightfall at Nauvoo*.

These people are only a few, chosen at random, from among those skeptics, doubters, critics, who have brought light to the world through their honesty.

I do not necessarily agree personally with everything that each of these skeptics believed or taught, but I agree wholeheartedly with their attitude and their courage in challenging the accepted wisdom of the majority and of the established authorities.

If you study the intellectual history of our human race, the history of science, of philosophy, of religion, one fact becomes glaringly obvious: our intellectual heritage has been built by the doubters, the critics, the questioners, the rebels. No

advancement in our long journey out of primitive darkness was ever made by someone who accepted without question the conventional wisdom of his time.

To whom, then, does the future belong? To those who blindly “follow the brethren”? No. You apostates are the people who are marching proudly in the forefront of humanity’s progress, and you should not let anyone make you feel ashamed that you have added your name to the most illustrious and glorious list of human beings: the doubters and the skeptics.

Immediately, I should try to provide justifications for the footnote dealing with the suggested self-imposed constraints that I added to the above article by Packham. He wrote that, to free a loved one from Mormonism, “We must patiently try each key until we find a fit.” As I wrote in the footnote:

That assumes that you “love” the person enough to try to free them, that you think it’s wise to do so, that you think you can be successful, that you can afford the time to try, that sufficient time is available that you can afford to be patient, etc. For reasons I’ll mention later in this chapter, I’d recommend that, in general, you don’t try (except under special circumstances) or at least don’t try very hard. That is, constrain yourself – until you’re older!

Certainly I sympathize with the sentiment of trying to help others break free from their religious bondage (or stated in a more “politically correct” manner, to help them realize that religious leaders have made grievous errors in their identifications and assignments of the purposes of humans), but again, I recommend that you constrain yourself.

In an earlier chapter (Y4), I already listed some self-imposed constraints that I think are appropriate for everyone:

*Constrain inappropriate imaginations with reality,
 Constrain all beliefs by evaluating probabilities of their validities,
 Constrain excessive desires with awareness of desires already satisfied,
 Constrain undesirable emotions with experiences and assessments,
 Constrain dangerous experiences with reasoned care,
 Constrain all acts by evaluating potential consequences,
 (Constrain even honesty with tact, love with limits, and kindness with keenness),
 Constrain outdated instincts with reason,
 Constrain reason with logic and carefully obtained data,
 Constrain data with replication and skepticism,
 Constrain skepticism with common sense,
 Constrain common sense with scientific results,
 Constrain science and its applications with values,
 Constrain values with objectives,*

*Constrain objectives with premisses and fundamental principles, and
Constrain premisses and fundamental principles by applying the scientific method.
In a word: Evaluate!*

And although you may be thinking “Enough constraints, already!”, yet as I’ve tried to show you in earlier chapters, I recommend many more (e.g., “plan ahead”, “look at the limits”, “be careful with words”, “if in doubt, let the system go free”, and so on). In the remainder of this chapter, I want to comment on (and show you) some ramifications of still another constraint that I strongly recommend you impose on yourself. Stated as a premiss, it’s:

It’s wise to evaluate what arguments you want to participate in, what skirmishes you want to start, what battles you want to fight, and what wars you want to wage.

If your immediate reaction to that suggested constraint is something similar to, “Well, of course!”, then good. But even if so (even if you’re no longer the grandchild who would argue about anything!), it might be useful if I try to show you some of its justifications, applications, and ramifications. For what follows, my plan is to provide illustrations just for the case of religious topics, even though I recommend that you apply the constraint more widely.

For what follows, I’ll assume that you’ve managed to overcome your indoctrination in theism and chosen some form of humanism. I make that assumption in part because I hope it’s valid but also because, otherwise, I don’t see the point in my writing any more: if I haven’t given you sufficient, compelling evidence to demonstrate that all religions are both silly and undesirable speculations (“bad science and even worse policy”), then I doubt that there’s any additional evidence that I can present that will convince you. Besides, if you’re not already convinced, then already you’ve probably given up reading this book!

Also for what follows, I’ll organize the topics in the order: *arguments* (e.g., with acquaintances or in public), *skirmishes* (e.g., talking to friends about humanism), *battles* (e.g., trying to get family members or friends to adopt humanism), and *wars* (e.g., joining in the ongoing war against theism). Described differently, my plan is to comment on potentials for your progressively increased involvement in proselytizing for scientific humanism, and my main message will be: based on my experiences, I recommend that you constrain yourself – until you’re “older”! That is, Dear,

* Go to other chapters via

although I hope that someday you'll be able to contribute to erasing the scourge of theism from humanity (e.g., maybe by participating in methods that I suggested in the **X**-chapters), yet for many reasons (some suggested in the **X**-chapters and some to be outlined below), I encourage you to constrain yourself until you've developed more confidence in your philosophy and more competence in science, and thereby, until you're more secure, both emotionally and financially.

1. Arguments

In the case of arguments with acquaintances about theism vs. humanism, I recommend that you “keep your cool”: regardless of any provocation, try to reduce any potential argument to a discussion, and in the discussion, avoid any accusations; simply state your own opinions. Thus, rather than say something similar to “I don't know how any one can be so stupid as to believe in miracles,” say something similar to “I've always had difficulty with the concept of ‘belief’ in something for which no evidence is available, and I have special difficulty with ‘belief’ in any ‘miracle’, since by definition, a ‘miracle’ has no evident cause.” The potential gain of such a nonconfrontational approach is to learn more about how other people think and argue, so that, in the event that you some day decide to enter into more heated and important discussions (in skirmishes, battles, and wars), you'll have honed some needed skills.

Another safe way to participate in public matters dealing with theism vs. humanism, at least in a democracy, is through voting, joining humanist groups that you trust will keep your membership confidential, and agreeing to participate in confidential public-opinion polls. With respect to polls, data suggest that many people are afraid to “come out of the closet”, letting the poll-taker know that they are humanists; if you're sure that some poll is confidential, it would help if you would identify yourself as a humanist, thereby showing other humanists that there are more of us than people realize. For a similar reason I would encourage you to join any of many available humanist organizations –provided you trust that they will keep your membership confidential. And as for voting, I would encourage you to vote against any candidate who makes a show of religious beliefs, since there usually are two reasons for doing so: either because the candidate is so brainwashed or foolish as to “believe” in religious nonsense (Do you really want someone involved in setting public policy who doesn't rely on data?) or the candidate is just “playing to the masses” (Do you want someone

* Go to other chapters *via*

involved in setting public policy who deviously uses others for personal advancement?).

As for other participations in public affairs, take care. When speaking or writing, generally steer clear of religious topics. For example, your signed “letter to the editor” criticizing religion or a religious leader could be dangerous. As a general rule, try to argue “for” and not “against”, e.g., for the separation of Church & State (many religious people agree with the value in such separation), for restrictions on public prayer (essentially no matter the prayer, it will be offensive to some), for inclusiveness, for tolerance and respect, etc. That is, Dear, I would urge you to argue for desired goals, in a manner that’s “politically safe” for you.

2. Skirmishes

Moving beyond arguments to skirmishes, I would again urge you to take care: don’t forget that you can get badly hurt even in skirmishes. Be aware, for example, that it’s essentially useless (or, in fact, worse than useless) for you to run for any public office, even for a position on your local school board, because voters think that they deserve to know the character of the person for whom they’re voting – and for most voters, that means learning about your “religious leanings” (or lack thereof). As I showed you in an earlier chapter, polling results show that Americans are more likely to vote for gays than for atheists and that 51% of voters would refuse to vote for anyone who isn’t religious.

Yet, when you’re talking with friends (theists or humanists) about religion, I would encourage you to openly and honestly state your opinions – but express them as your opinions, not criticizing your friend. If your “friend” doesn’t want you to honestly describe your own opinions, then such a person is not worth having as a friend. As “Dr. Seuss” said: “Be who you are and say what your feel, because those who mind, don’t matter, and those who matter, don’t mind.”

Further, Dear, I recommend that you avoid describing even your opinion to strongly religious people, even if you considered them to be friends, since such people can be very dangerous. Illustrative is the following news article from the 29 December 1955 issue of the Detroit Free Press.⁸

⁸ Copied from <http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20051229/CFP03/512290458>.

Killer of ‘devil’ sentenced to 25-45 years

Victim said he didn't believe in God, so his friend shot him

BY JOEL THURTELL

It was one of the five “most heinous” crimes Wayne County Circuit Judge Gregory Bill has ever seen.

Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Christina Guirguis called it the “most gruesome” crime she’s ever prosecuted.

On Dec. 20, Bill sentenced Arthur Eugene Shelton, 51, of Taylor to 25 to 45 years in prison for the Oct. 18, 2004, shotgun and revolver killing of Shelton’s friend, Larry Hooper.

“He blew the guy’s head off,” said Shelton’s attorney, Seymour Schwartz.

Following a three-day bench trial, Bill found Shelton guilty Nov. 30 of second-degree murder for killing Hooper in the living room of his Taylor home, where Hooper was staying.

At 12:44 p.m. that October day, Shelton called Taylor police and told a dispatcher that he’d just blasted a man with a revolver and a shotgun because the man said he didn’t believe in God.

The dead man was “the devil himself,” Shelton told the dispatcher.

How many times did you shoot him? the dispatcher asked Shelton.

“Hopefully, enough,” replied Shelton. “I want to make sure he’s gone.”

Shelton fired four or five revolver bullets and at least three shotgun blasts into 62-year-old Hooper’s head, Guirguis said...

Before the shooting, Hooper had told Shelton that Shelton couldn’t say anything to convince him to believe in God, according to police

Shelton left the room, took off his shirt, shaved his face and tried again to convince Hooper there is a God. But at that point, Shelton had a 12-gauge shotgun.

“How long would it take you to believe in God?” Shelton said he asked Hooper.

“Not until I hear Gabriel blow his horn,” replied Hooper.

Hooper tipped his hat and Shelton fired the shotgun at Hooper’s head.

“I did it because he is evil; he was not a believer,” Shelton said...

3. *Battles*

Moving on past arguments and skirmishes to your potential involvement in battles, Dear, I hope you can learn from my experiences that most battles aren't worth fighting. One of my reasons for recommending that you constrain yourself is derived from my own failures, no matter what I tried. For example, with your father I tried pretty much everything I could, and yet, nothing worked; he finally "saw the light" on his own. Similarly, in the case of your mother, although I didn't have time to try many approaches, I suspect that my varied efforts were worse than useless: the most recent news was that she "hates" me. In the case of my grandchildren, I tried to explain "everything" to them (by writing a book for them), and the result is...?! I therefore conclude, Dear, that unless you're much more competent than I am at getting people to change their minds, I'd recommend that you don't try to talk people out of their religion: it's extremely difficult, probably you won't be successful, and almost certainly your efforts will stimulate animosity towards you.

In turn, there seem to be many reasons why it's so difficult (if not impossible) to "get through to" religious people. I don't have the competence to diagnose their mental condition (addicted, delusional, hypnotized, whatever), but I do have some experience interacting with them, and from those experiences, some of my conclusions are these:

- Their thoughts are locked within an imaginary worldview, a worldview devoid of data, and therefore, no amount of data will demonstrate that their worldview is wrong. Furthermore, as I've written before: it's impossible to demonstrate the nonexistence of something that doesn't exist.
- They are intellectually dishonest, willing (and apparently to their minds, able) to rationalize away anything that conflicts with their "beliefs". This "moral mischief" (as Thomas Paine described it) makes them potentially treacherous, which can be dangerous for you.
- Many of them are quite competent at manipulating words – but from their mouths typically flows a river of gibberish, which drowns the possibility of intelligent discourse.

Thus, Dear, because their minds are full of such “gibberish” (parroting ideas about gods, angels, immortal souls, heaven, hell, etc. from their “holy books”), it’s useless to try to reason with such people. Their “holy books” provide them with a huge shield against reasonable discourse: they’ll prattle off stock-phrases faster than you can formulate reasonable questions and responses. Their minds are truly “made up” (with meaningless words from their “holy book”); no arguments will be able to penetrate their illusion; many will not let reality penetrate – and they’ll willingly walk to the lions or strap explosives around their waists to get closer to their God. Thereby, hopeless, hapless, suicidal humans become automatons in a “state of grace”, with a shield of gibberish protecting them from reality. As the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) wrote:

Obedience,
Bane of all genius, virtue, freedom, truth,
Makes slaves of men, and of the human frame,
A mechanized automaton.

You can see the ingredients of this horror in the Christian (and Mormon) idea of “grace”, which I consider to be a “politically correct” description of a type of insanity. Illustrated by Augustine’s experience, people seem to be driven to this insanity by a twisted sense of morality (i.e., by “guilt”), desperately seeking “forgiveness” and “redemption”. With the lilted verse from the Bible (or the Koran or the Book of Mormon), they finally see a way to break free from their twisted sense of morality: they see that all is forgiven if they just give up their “vanity” (i.e., themselves) to God. Thus, “I am evil” becomes “God forgives me”, “I am unworthy” becomes “God sees value in me”, “I don’t understand” becomes “God knows all”, “I have no purpose” becomes “God has a purpose for me”, “I have no future” becomes “God will give me eternal life”, “no one likes me” becomes “God loves me”, and so on. They desperately desire the care and protection of a loving male leader; they desperately desire to follow; they have found that leading their own lives is too great a burden; so, they yield the leadership of even their own lives to “the way” (shown by Christ or Muhammad or Joseph Smith or...). In reality, the “state of grace” is a state of walking suicide – of living death. Fundamentally, people who reach the “state of grace” defeat their bodies’ death – not by having their spirits live forever, but by killing their human spirit while their bodies still live.

Consequently, Dear, again I’d advice you not to try to convince religious people that they’re lost: generally it isn’t worth your time. Besides,

although it's sad to say, the vast majority of religious people aren't worth "saving" anyway – save for the poor children indoctrinated in religious rubbish. The only exception that you might want to make (but you be the judge of its efficacy) is that you may want to invest your time to see if you can help your grandchildren, should you find that they've been led astray. Of course it would be wonderful if you could show other children the stupidity of all religions, but in such cases you must be careful, because even for trying, you can get into major trouble with their parents.

For example, suppose I found that my grandchildren had been indoctrinated, since they were babies, with a bunch of nonsense about some giant Jabberwock in the sky who is imagined to dictate all human values. Then what should I do? My "sense of values" tells me that teaching children to "believe in" (to "accept on faith") junk that isn't supported by a shred of evidence is a horrible mistake, but then, on the other hand, assisting children to see that their parents are mistaken can be quite dangerous: the children may erroneously conclude that their parents' opinions are similarly mistaken about other matters (to avoid drugs, generally to obey the laws, to try to be kind to others, and so on), and I certainly wouldn't want that to happen. Consequently, Dear, I decided to do what I'm doing now: I waited until you were "older", and then have been trying to show you both the errors in your parents' ways as well as a better way, i.e., scientific humanism.

Therefore, Dear, except for special circumstances, then until you're even older, I recommend that you constrain yourself from trying to cure people of their religion. Further, I recommend that you try to distance yourself from religious people, because unfortunately, you can't trust anyone who affirms a "belief" in God. By affirming such beliefs, people are thereby labeling themselves, first, as intellectual sloths (they won't dig to try to find "the answers" by themselves) and, second, as cowards (afraid of living with the uncertainty of not knowing). Instead, they take "someone else's word for it"; they accept as "true", ideas unsupported by evidence; they adopt policies that are based on someone else's speculations. All this, however, shouldn't be dangerous for you, provided that the policies adopted are not overtly dangerous – in contrast to the policies of the Ancient Jews (toward those who worshipped other gods), the Christians (towards the Jews, the Muslims, and the "heathens"), the Muslims (towards the Jews, Christians, pagans and "unbelievers"), and the Mormons (towards any neighbors who considered them a threat). But in fact, Dear, such people can be dangerous to you, because of what their cowardice and mental slothfulness reveal.

Thus, those who say they “believe” in God are saying that they don’t need evidence to reach a decision; they will accept what others tell them to accept (apparently provided that what’s claimed is said with sufficient “authority”, typically with plentiful “pomp and circumstance”). Such sheep can’t be trusted, Dear, because of the likelihood that they’ll behave similarly if something similar is said about you or others whom you desire to protect. If their leaders say that you’re “of the devil”, or that Jews are the killers of their savior, or that Allah wants unbelievers killed, or that black people are inferior or are the descendants of Cain, and so on, then such people will just as easily “believe” such nonsense as the nonsense that there’s a God – and then can take what they consider “appropriate action” to eliminate what they are so easily convinced is “evil”. Thereby, such stupid people – led by power-mongering religious con artists – can be extremely dangerous to you, especially if you call the people stupid and their leaders power-mongering religious con artists!

Consequently, Dear, based on my failures, my advise to you is – until you’re much older – don’t try to convince adults that belief in god (any god) is stupid. Almost certainly you won’t be successful, almost certainly your efforts won’t be appreciated, and almost certainly your efforts will be scorned. Recall Thomas Gray’s wisdom: “Where happiness is bliss, ‘tis folly to be wise.” Try to get along with such people, but otherwise, leave them alone. They have identified themselves as fools, unwilling to think for themselves and too lazy to study the vast literature that exposes the monstrous quackery behind all organized religions.

Again, Dear, I recommend the following. During the next several decades: 1) try to distance yourself from religious people, 2) try to associate with those who demand evidence before reaching conclusions, and 3) as appropriate, assist people, groups, and concepts that discourage the idea that people are just sheep (for example, support the Council on Secular Humanism, the American Civil Liberties Union, various Women’s Liberation Organizations, public and many private but secular universities, freedom of communication on the internet, etc.). And of course it’s appropriate to feel sorry for religious people – not necessarily for those who join any organized religion on their own volition (although it’s compassionate to feel sorry for fools), but for those who were brainwashed in such balderdash when they were children and who were never taught how to think for themselves.

Yet, if you're thinking of attempting to educate such people, again I would urge you to constrain yourself: they need to find the key to their freedom by themselves, as is well described in the following quotation entitled "Free Mind" from the book *Secular Nation* by Thomas Vernon:⁹

There are many people who have, from time to time, been tempted to think for themselves – who have found themselves questioning beliefs they inherited but really never examined. This is nowhere more apt to be the case than in the area of religious beliefs. Our religious beliefs came to us in a protective coating of age and respectability, like the invisible "force field" of science fiction.

It takes a degree of intellectual courage to penetrate this penumbra of sanctity and inspect a belief on its own merits. Still, many people have done so. They have found themselves asking such questions as, How do I know that this book called the Bible is the supernaturally revealed and infallible word of God? How do I know there is even such a being as God? How does anybody know there is such a thing as immorality? When people begin seriously to raise questions of this sort, they find that their "faith", that is, their accustomed belief-patterns, seem increasingly insubstantial.

To lose one's faith may seem, in prospect, like being turned out of a comfortable home and left to fend for oneself in a vast and trackless waste. Those with a persistent curiosity and adventurous spirit will never-the-less leave their cozy shelter and set out to learn for themselves what it is like "out there." Although their first steps may be taken "in fear and trembling," they begin to find that they are not alone. They discover stalwart companions. They learn, indeed that they are "compassed about" with a "cloud of witnesses." As their minds become strengthened by use, they begin to see what others have seen, that their "spiritual home" was in reality a prison; its walls were built of ignorance and fear, and reinforced by habit and custom.

No one is kept in this prison but by oneself; it is a prison where every inmate is his or her jailer. Everyone, aware of it or not, already has the key that will unlock the door: the freedom to seek the truth.

4. Wars

Turning finally to wars, one justification for my recommendation that you evaluate "what wars you want to wage" follows simply from the recommendation that you should try to plan ahead. But another justification isn't necessarily that you should engage only in those wars that you think you can win! In that regard, remember the amazing response by the science-fiction writer Isaac Asimov when he was asked why he fights religion with no hope for victory:

⁹ Copied from <http://www.godlessgeeks.com/FreeMind.htm>.

Because we must. Because we have the call. Because it is nobler to fight for rationality without winning than to give up in the face of continued defeats. Because whatever true progress humanity makes is through the rationality of the occasional individual, and because any one individual we may win for the cause may do more for humanity than a hundred thousand who hug superstition to their breasts.

As much as I agree with Asimov, as much as I support his goal to try to help humanity by promoting humanism, as much as I admire his heroic attitude, and as much as I now willingly engage in the war myself, yet, Dear, I think it's appropriate that you constrain yourself from responding to his "clarion call" – at least until you're older. My reasons include the following.

- Realize that, in this country, the religious out-number the anti-religious by approximately an order of magnitude and that it's the religious "troops" who use "guerrilla tactics", including social ostracizing, economic blackmail, and illegal threats (and acts) of violence. For example, after admitting opposition to religion, essentially no one in this country can be elected to a public office or promoted to a leadership position within any public company, and those heroic and economically independent people who publicly proclaim their opposition to religion, such as Carl Sagan (astrophysicist, deceased), Michael Newdow (medical doctor and lawyer, who under death threats, is fighting to have the words "under God" removed from the Pledge of Allegiance), as well as many "creative people" (of course including John Lennon, murdered by some religious maniac) are subjected to threats and acts of violence. Consequently, I would urge you to delay engaging in any battle against religions until you are economically secure, maybe even sufficiently secure so that you can hire a bodyguard. Otherwise, fight anonymously (e.g., write your own book!) or wait until you retire – when you should have fewer economic concerns and fewer years lost if they murder you!
- Realize, too, that, as is certainly the case with the Catholic Church, various Evangelical Christian groups, and the Mormons, and as was demonstrated in the case of "intelligent design" (backed, for example, by money from the founder of Domino's Pizza), "defenders of the faith" can "field" huge arsenals against you (financial, political, legal, economic, and even pseudo-intellectual). I would therefore recommend that you delay engaging in the war against organized religion until you gain more experience (and thereby, have more and better weapons, ammunition, and skill at using them) and that, until you're older, you do little more than

anonymously support humanist “champions”, such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Paul Krutzen, and Frank Zindler.

- Realize, also, that there are many ways to fight religious stupidity other than by direct confrontation (which, anyway, may not be particularly effective, since it apparently stimulates their “bunker mentality”, in which case they’re even less likely to start thinking for themselves). I think that Arthur Clarke’s comment is critically important:

Science can destroy religion by ignoring it as well as by disproving its tenets. No one ever demonstrated, so far as I am aware, the non-existence of Zeus or Thor – but they have few followers now.

Consequently, Dear, should you be so inclined to enlist in the war against religions, one way would be to first get your Ph.D. and then accomplish original research in some scientific discipline, before you engage in public confrontations with superstitious stupidity.

I should add that, even though religion is primitive (Neanderthal!) science, the task of debunking it doesn’t fall just to scientists – and perhaps the use of scientific arguments isn’t very effective (because, in general, the scientific knowledge of most people is meager). Thus, probably more headway has been made in the war against religion by historians and psychologists than by, for example, physicists, but then, physicists (even Galileo) have generally contributed less to “the war effort” than biologists (e.g., Darwin). And yet, Darwin chose not to “get personal”; he wrote (in *The Descent of Man*, p. 645):

I am a strong advocate for free thought on all subjects, yet it appears to me (whether rightly or wrongly) that direct arguments against christianity & theism produce hardly any effect on the public; & freedom of thought is best promoted by the gradual illumination of men’s minds, which follows from the advance of science. It has, therefore, been always my object to avoid writing on religion, & I have confined myself to science. I may, however, have been unduly biased by the pain which it would give some members of my family, if I aided in any way direct attacks on religion.

And I should add, also, that of course it’s not only science but also technology that can lead to victories in the war against religion. Thus, the biggest blow against the Catholic Church was probably the printing press, and although, after the Apollo mission to the Moon, the Mormon Church managed to shrug off Brigham Young’s “prophecy” that men would be

found there, it probably won't be able to dismiss so easily the DNA evidence that the Americas weren't first settled by "the lost tribes of Israel".

And then, think of the ramifications of the internet, which are now beginning to be realized. In that regard, you may find the following quotation to be interesting.¹⁰

The Rise and Fall of the LDS Church by Ed H. Yong

Grassroots Opposition

It was John Naisbitt who pronounced the death of the Nation state, and in its stead is the rise of the Network. Unbeknown to the LDS church, this may well be a doomsday prognosis. The most extensive and divisive propaganda against the church is disbursed through the internet – ironically, the medium of choice for guerilla protesters at Seattle, Davos, and Melbourne. So worried is the church that internet missionaries (or in cyberlingo: "net-mishes") are appointed by the church to do surveillance on the anti-Mormon campaign.

The anti-Mormon campaign has made a huge detrimental impact [on the LDS church] for three reasons:

1. They are invisible – The church can censor the newspapers, radio, and television that missionaries consume, but they cannot block its members from accessing the internet. In fact, the literature is so overwhelming, it is purpose-defeating to even attempt to trace or refute them.
2. They are invincible – For every Mormon apologetic website like FARMS or SHIELDS, there are mobs of alternatives that link to one another. Killing one off will automatically spark an uproar among proponents of free speech and allow the victims to free-ride on "martyrdom". This was exactly the aftermath of the church winning a court injunction against the internet-based Utah Lighthouse Ministry (UTLM) for posting a link to an ominous church website, but eventually losing the public relations war.
3. They are effective – It is interesting to note that while people have a healthy distrust of institutions, they find the internet credible. Already there are far more hits on anti-Mormon websites than there are on pro-Mormon ones. Testimonies of those who left the church abound and are hugely popular. For example, the bulletin board on "Exmormon.org" receives an average of 1 million hits a month, or around 30,000 a day. It maintains e-mail newsgroups that swell in subscription, even from Mormon "lurkers" who are curious to exit the church.

¹⁰ Copied from <http://www.utlm.org/onlineresources/riseandfalloftheldschurch.htm>.

The weakness of the effort to thwart these critics is exacerbated by the church's indifferent or outwardly "agreeable" approach – for good measure though. Lest it becomes involved in a frenzy of negative dog-eat-dog publicity, the church will never associate itself with its apologetic forums or websites. For example, it is a deeply unsatisfying anti-climax to read Robert Starling's stirring critique of the "Godmakers" films only to find in the end that he is not representing the official views of the church! And the list goes on and on.

Because the church is so media-friendly, you will not find a concerted defense of church doctrine. This shoves an additional incentive for critics to play hardball. Sandra Tanner, who heads UTLM observes: "The church is so concerned about PR, that I can't imagine them wanting to be involved in a lawsuit that would get everyone in the internet mad at them." Chances are, the church will back off because it does not want to lose the popular vote.

And of course it's not just the Mormon Church that's finding the internet to be so challenging: on the internet can be found similarly effective assaults against every organized religion. Shucks, even some old grandfathers have jumped on the bandwagon... But returning to my recommendation that you try to constrain yourself, Dear, let me state more generally that, before you decide to fight in any battle or choose to wage any war, try to evaluate not only the consequences of your moves and your enemy's potential countermoves but also the time-scales involved.

Estimating such time-scales is especially important. Realize that we're all immersed in a vast sea with waves and tides of cultural change, and each wave and tide has its own characteristic time-scale. Thus, clothing and similar fashions typically have time-scales for change that span only a few years, changes in "life style" (e.g., unmarried couples living together) typically have time-scales of few decades, changes in political structure (e.g., adopting and then abandoning communism) have time-scales that can extend over several generations, and changes in religions have time-scales that can span from decades (e.g., founding a new sect) to hundreds or even thousands of years (e.g., finally eliminating Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and all similar stupidities).

Consequently, Dear, if you are have the misfortune of being immersed in a culture with slowly decaying ideas and institutions (such as was the case with the people trapped in the communist system of the USSR, and such as is the case for people currently living in the religious fanaticism of most Islamic countries and the US), with "decay time constants" long compared

* Go to other chapters *via*

to an individual's lifetime, then you should make careful evaluations of your best course of action. In some cases, it may be best to just "go with the flow." In other cases, exemplified by the attitude of Goethe and Shakespeare toward Christianity, it may be best to try just to ignore the decaying institutions and ideas. In still other cases, for especially brave and competent people (such as, in the Soviet Union, Andrei Sakharov the winner of the 1975 Nobel Peace-Prize, whose awards committee described him as "a spokesman for the conscience of mankind"), the world is better for their having attempting to speed up the institution's decay.

As for your decision about joining the war against theism, a war that has already been raging for thousands of years and that may continue for many centuries, doing so would be like "going on a mission" – and I would discourage any "youngster" from going on any mission. Instead, for you in particular, I advise you to wait until you're older, and then carefully choose your weapons and battlefield. But if you do decide to join in the war (it wouldn't be the first time that a certain grandchild ignored the advice of a wise old grandfather, ☺), then let me just remind you from earlier X-chapters that, in my opinion, most important are: educating children in evaluative thinking, liberating women from male chauvinism, and exposing the stupidity of religious leaders. Further, I'd agree with many (including Darwin) that generally the best approach would be for you, not to attack religion, but instead, to promote science. As Buckminster Fuller said: "You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."

I'm sure that, eventually, probably not longer than a few hundred-or-so years from now (less in the West and unfortunately more in "the Islamic world"), modern science will drive out primitive science (aka "religion"). Thus, Darwin's ideas about evolution will be so widely accepted that God (aka Allah) will go the way of Zeus and Thor: gods don't die, they simply disappear – when people stop believing in such silliness! And what a great day that will be! Envisioning it, I'm stimulated to quote the following, from Issue 6, Spring 1996, of the Canadian Atheist ONLINE.¹¹ If nothing else, it's something to dream about:

¹¹ Copied from <http://www.atheists.net/tcas/canat6.html>.

TOP TEN ATHEIST COMEUPPANCES

10. Jurors must take an oath upon a copy of Darwin's *Origin of Species* before they can serve.
9. Forms for job applications, government aid and so forth often ask what type of atheist you are, with check-boxes for "atheist", "agnostic", "humanist" and so forth. If you are a religionist, the only thing you can do is check the "other" box – if one is provided.
8. Most major newspapers run a special weekly section devoted to atheism. There are no equivalent sections for religious news.
7. Organizations such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides deny membership to anyone with religious affiliations.
6. In the military it is impossible to obtain Conscientious Objector status for religious reasons, but one may do so easily for philosophical reasons.
5. Churches, temples and mosques are forced to pay exorbitant taxes to make up for all the years of free rides.
4. Many religious people will have to stay in the closet, fearing retribution if their dirty little secret becomes known.
3. It is impossible to drive anywhere without seeing a Darwin fish, a "Jesus Was A Fraud", or a "Muhammad Sucks" bumper sticker plastered to a car.
2. On Sunday mornings, all major television channels broadcast pro-atheist shows. Religious programming is relegated to one half hour per week between 3:00 and 4:00 AM, when the children are safely asleep.
1. Gallup polls show 85 to 90% of North Americans do not believe in gods, myths, soothsayers or superstitions of any kind.

And if, thereby, you conclude that I'm encouraging you to be an atheist, then my response would be "No!" That is, Dear, if you want to define yourself as "a negative", then I'd much prefer the term "anti-theist". But it would be better to define yourself in positive terms: a realist, a Bright, a Humanist, or a scientific humanist. Then, the others can be defined "in the negative", e.g., "anti-realist", "Dim", "anti-humanist", or "unscientific antihuman".

But such levity aside, some cases unfortunately arise when more seems to be needed than just waiting for all gods to simply disappear. Examples include when another stupid Ayatollah issues another stupid "fatwa" (e.g., about

war, about women, or how flat the world is!), when another stupid pope issues another stupid “ruling” (e.g., about abortion, about birth control, or about euthanasia), when another stupid Christian leader issues another stupid proclamation (e.g., about homosexuality, about “intelligent design”, or whatever), or when another stupid Mormon “profit” has another stupid “revelation” (e.g., about polygamy, about racism, or about some other “abomination before the Lord”). As the astrologer Barbara Marciniak wrote (even astrologers have some good ideas!):

The ultimate tyranny in a society is not control by martial law. It is control by psychological manipulation of consciousness, through which reality is defined so that those who exist within it do not realize they are in prison

To help people break out of their religious prisons, to expose the stupidity of religious leaders, probably the most effective approach for most people is to use ridicule (“mocking laughter, mimicry, or comments intended to make fun of somebody in a contemptuous way”). As H.L. Mencken said “One horse laugh is worth a thousand syllogisms”, and as Benjamin De-Casseres said “Progress is the victory of laughter over dogma.” But, Dear, it would probably be best if you left the ridicule of religious leaders to those who are more competent and more secure (at least until you’re older), not only because they’d probably be more effective but also because in our culture, there can be serious economic and other consequences of defying religious stupidity. Think of John Lennon... Best for you is probably, at most, to repeat the ridicule, e.g., by singing Lennon’s *Imagine* or repeating some joke, e.g., Emo Philips’s:

A Mormon told me that they don’t drink coffee. I said, “A cup of coffee every day gives you wonderful benefits.” He said, “Like what?” I said, “Well... it keeps you from being Mormon.”

Of course I agree with what Zindler wrote at the end of his article that I quoted near the beginning of this chapter:

The need to find a cure for religiosity is pressing. The world cannot survive much longer if problem-solvers’ minds are clouded by the opium of religion. We must perceive reality as accurately as Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle will allow! We cannot afford illusions. The games our species is playing with us and with our environment are of life-and-death importance.

We Atheists must do all in our power to brew the wake-up potion that will clear the minds of our fellow men and women. We must revoke the evolutionary curse that nature laid upon us when it created religion as the mediating agency for the most

complicated form of sociality life on our planet has known. We must break the evil spell that religion has cast upon the castles of our minds and upon the towers of our thoughts. We must do everything in our power to free the thought-prisoners of our planet.

Not only is this an ethical necessity, it is a practical necessity as well. We who, by whatever means it came about, have freed our own minds, cannot forever remain free when all about us not only are not free but are busy forging – in their ecclesiastical dungeons – chains with which once again they can confine our minds.

It is too great a job for Batman and Robin – too much even for Superman. But it is the job American Atheists has taken on. It has given its solemn promise that it shall work ceaselessly and with all its energy resources to bring about the liberation of the human mind, to free religion's prisoners, and to find cures for all the varieties of that most deadly disease, religiosity.

But in spite of my agreeing with Zindler, if you similarly want to wage the war against theism, against the “believing sheep” who are organized and fighting hard for their power-mongering leaders against those who would drag your children and grandchildren backwards into another “Dark Age”, from which it may take humanity thousands of years to relight some scientific candles, yet still I encourage you to wait until “you’re older”, when you’ll be stronger financially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically – provided, of course, that you get more exercise!