

the authors, all too many “true believers” have been quite willing to do *anything* to further the cause of “global harmony,” including perpetrating acts of extreme violence. The Krishnas reportedly have been especially hard on followers who sought to defect. While emphasizing the seamier elements of the Hare Krishna movement, Hubner and Gruson also show that many of those who enter into it do so because of their disillusionment with Western religions

and values. The book is marred by an over-reliance on “reconstructed dialogue,” so that it often reads more like a screenplay than a work of nonfiction. Also, more emphasis should have been placed upon the Hare Krishna theology—it is often unclear just what its basic tenets are. All in all, though, *Monkey on a Stick* is worth reading as a frightening demonstration of what can occur when rationality is thrown out the window for the sake of “enlightenment.” (T.M.) •

these areas, explaining that, because of space limitations, it was necessary to “select out” what he thought would interest his readers. Following are some of the ideas I expressed that I wanted him to include.

**F**undamentalists label as “blasphemy” any deviation from literalist orthodoxy. Someone once characterized this as “the deadliest social psychosis in American life.” They are guilty of misology. Jesus thanked God for making his teachings unintelligible to the “wise and understanding” but clear to the children, the simple, and the uneducated. Paul is not only contemptuous of anyone who rejects these teachings—they are “folly” to him—but justifies the duplicity of his preaching by asking, “Why not do evil that good may come?” (Romans 3:7-8).

Christian scholars have, for centuries, advanced arguments to support this deception. They try to force rational men to choose the comfort of unquestioning faith over the sometimes harsh reality of atheism. Ecclesiastes says, “In much wisdom there is much vexation, for he who increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow” (1:18).

Religion is a form of theoreticism, the concept that unsubstantiated theory can be asserted, not just as an investigative tool but as anti-empirical knowledge in its own right. It employs hermeneutics, in which social-historical actors and texts are given standards different from those of science. Thus, they are absolved of empirical tests and may be used for utopian speculative ends. The philosopher Jürgen Habermas, of the Frankfurt school, redescribes Marxism and psychoanalysis as nonscientific and therefore, like religion, not subject to empirical scrutiny.

It is easy for people to assimilate simple ideas, but ideas that require them to reorganize their view of the world meet with hostility or rejection. Some years ago I formulated what I called the Fallacy of Irrelevant Simplicity. All it means is that when people are faced with complex problems they often opt for simple solutions. Usually, however, the solutions they choose are irrelevant. More penetrating and abstract approaches are needed that are often difficult to understand and even more difficult to achieve. This is why so many people are turning, in this increasingly complex world, to the simple answers offered by religion. Nietzsche said, “Do not boast that you have the courage of your convictions. Be proud, rather, that you have the courage to change your convictions.”

Fundamentalists have converted Christianity, like evil, into banality, a jejune pursuit of pious fantasies in a wasteland of

## An Atheist Handles Life

### Harry Daum

In December 1987, my town was subjected to a concerted attack on the local Planned Parenthood clinic and on a woman’s right to decide whether or not to have an abortion. While we were spared the bombings that have plagued clinics in many cities, there was picketing, with placards denouncing the “murders,” and the harassment of women trying to enter the Planned Parenthood building ranged from verbal abuse to physical blocking of the entrance. The local Letters to the Editor columns were filled with praise for these illegal restraints and with exhortations to heed God’s will, mostly from writers representing right-wing Christian viewpoints. I wrote a rebuttal defending secular humanism.

There were several letters to the editor attacking my atheism and only one supporting it. I got a number of favorable phone calls but many abusive ones. One caller said that was what he would expect from a “Commie Jew.”

A kind lady sent me a copy of Anthony Campolo’s book, *A Reasonable Faith: Responding to Secularism*—a collection of Jesuitical casuistry and scholastic anfractuosity called by the *Fundamentalist Journal* “a true Christian view of being human.”

A dear lady named Carol phoned me to quote largely irrelevant passages from Scripture. She expressed surprise and pleasure to learn that my knowledge of both the Old and New Testaments was at least equal to her own. She pleaded with me to let her come to my home so that she could kneel down with me and pray that I would accept

Jesus as my personal savior. I declined but would hear from her again.

In February of this year, I underwent surgery for the removal of three-quarters of my stomach along with two malignant tumors. The cancer had metastasized to my liver and intestines, inoperable and unresponsive to either radiation or chemotherapy. The surgeon gave me four to six months to live, the oncologist, less than six months.

Wally Trabing, a featured columnist for our local newspaper, the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, heard of this prognosis from a mutual friend. Remembering the notoriety I had earned with my letter on secular humanism, he invited me to tell him how an atheist feels about his imminent demise.

Public response was equal to that from my letter. One man sent me a Jehovah’s Witnesses tract and called to ask if he could come and discuss it. My old friend, Carol, called, expressed sympathy, and then said it was not too late to receive the Holy Spirit. Could she come and pray with me?

The tone of most of the letters to the editor was one of outrage; only one or two expressed agreement. About half a dozen calls and a number of friends thought Trabing’s column made a favorable impression. I was, nevertheless, dissatisfied. Though we had talked for more than an hour and he took several pages of notes, I would estimate that 95 percent of what I told him was ignored in the column.

There were two topics on which I had discoursed at some length: the menace of fundamentalism, whether Christian, Jewish, or Islamic; and the status of an American who is both a Jew and an atheist. I also explained my position as a rationalist based on logical positivism and Ayn Rand’s objectivism. Trabing gave almost no attention to

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broken images and stony rubble. They hope to perpetuate their existence by controlling the interpretation, formulation, and enforcement of their rituals. This is not designed to nurture their young to maturity but rather to assert their authority beyond challenge by the force of reason. This oppression is more than symbolic but is rigorously and systematically used to indoctrinate and subjugate young minds. Fundamentalism is a contraceptive designed to prevent intellectual fertilization.

Trabing seemed puzzled by my secular Jewishness. To be a Jew in the United States means to be an outsider. To be an atheist invites even greater estrangement. Therefore, to be both a Jew and an atheist is an extreme of isolation (or, perhaps, of narcissism). Conservative Jews are made uneasy by this alienating choice. They hold that the viability of Judaism depends upon a common tradition and culture, a common language, and, most important, a sense of community, which they define as belonging to a synagogue or temple.

Sartre said, "The authentic Jew is one who asserts his claim in the face of all the disdain shown him . . . a lover of lost causes, an outsider resisting even his own successes." In my youth, my Jewishness was an admission. Now it is an assertion. The status of pariah perhaps explains the special nature of Jewish humor, which non-Jews seem to

enjoy without understanding its source. Rabbi Nachman of Bratislav said: "Laughter is the refusal to be victimized by the folly of others. To really know the heart of something one must be able to mock it, to make fun of it."

The secular Jew who honestly examines his life faces unreckoned consequences, the most painful of which is the intractable question of Jewish identity. His perceptions are distorted in the mirror of his spiritual exile. He resists the possibility of harmony with his perception of reality, whether it could be through assimilation or through accommodating his Jewishness to that reality. His resistance is a least common denominator, a minimum credo in a despairing vision of apocalypse.

The secular Jew is something of an oxymoron. He rejects the Jewish god even while he glories in and is uplifted by the beauty, mystery, and wisdom of much of the Torah, the Talmud, the Mishnah, and the Midrash. He recognizes the cognitive dissonance that plagues his orthodox brothers, who, like their Christian and Muslim counterparts, cling tenaciously to their religious convictions and practice their empty rituals even when reason and reality demonstrate the falseness of their religious beliefs. I am reminded of Peter's reply to a Roman nobleman who asked him if he really believed in the bodily resurrection and ascension of

Christ to heaven. "Credo quia inceptum," Peter replied; "I believe because it is absurd." A secular Jew believes in the dynamic universe described by Einstein and in the unstable, even chaotic rules for the physical world posited by Heisenberg. His motto is *Homo intellegendus fit omnia* (through his understanding, man can accomplish everything).

Trabing seemed equally puzzled by my attitude about death. I told him that it is a vital fact, like breathing and having a heartbeat. I told him the legend of Gilgamesh, who sought, found, and then lost the Tree of Life, which would have made him immortal. At first, Gilgamesh is ravaged by grief. Then he reflects that all men wish to be eternally young. Immortality is a human hunger, he says, but it is not given that man should emulate the gods. He must accept his mortality as he accepts his humanness. And Gilgamesh faces death a better and wiser man.

In the Old Testament, God, the Existentialist, says to the Hebrew people, "I call Heaven and Earth to witness against you this day. I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life that thou mayest live, thou and thy seed" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

When death comes, I want to meet it, like Oedipus, not with lamentation but with awe and wonder. Until then, I choose life. •

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