

# How much Reality do you want?

by David Fitzgerald



*Show of hands - How many people here are going to Hell?*

*(That was to be my opening, but I decided against it when I gave this speech to my Toastmasters group in San Francisco. Instead, I opened with a confession: that “How much Reality do you want” was NOT the real title of my speech, that I was uncertain that the actual topic was 100% appropriate for this particular venue, and that I was afraid I might offend some people. In fact, I admitted part of me was HOPING to step on people’s toes. “How was that for an opener?” I asked. By now the audience was riveted, and I said “Well now that I’m out on that limb, I might as well go for it. The actual title of my speech is “Why I Am an Atheist.” And I went on to give the best speech I ever gave in my life (so far). Here it is:*

Like everyone, I was born an Atheist...

However, as I continued to grow, something happened to that young Atheist. I was raised as a Southern Baptist. Now there are a lot of things about being raised a Southern Baptist (or any kind of Baptist, I suppose) that are really nice: You have an entire community to protect & shelter you, an extended family really. And above that you have an omnipotent all-knowing God who loves you, has got it all under control, and has a plan. A special plan --just for YOU! You just can’t beat that kind of certainty. Oh yeah, and you have ALL the answers – to everything - in this wonderful book, the Bible (King James Version only, natch) that (most of) the Protestants know how to interpret correctly to get God’s say-so on any topic you want.

There IS a down side, however. For one thing, sometimes it seemed the whole world didn’t always fit so nicely in the Baptist paradigm. Armed as we were with the truth (the Gospel truth!), it became very easy – necessary, even - to view anyone & anything outside the little Baptist box with suspicion and scorn. This is because Satan, the master of THIS world (for now) was pretty much everywhere, and was always targeting YOU especially, trying to tempt you into sin. Sin was separation from God’s tender love – the kind of separation that could land you in a lake of fire & accompanying eternal torment.

And did I mention that we are all sinners? Oh yes, we are ALL a bunch of miserable sinners from birth; and even after we’ve accepted Jesus as our Personal Savior™ we still will continue to sin, no matter how hard we try, because no Christian is perfect, and in fact it’s only by the grace of God Almighty himself that we are saved, unlike the overwhelmingly vast majority of people created by him in his image of perfect love who are going straight to an everlasting Hell of constant torment after death.

But I digress. We were also scornful of Science. Not so much the good kind, like that of Doctors & Astronauts, but

those arrogant, misguided Biologists who ignored the plain facts laid out in the book of Genesis and poisoned people's minds with their godless Ee-vo-lution nonsense.

You may be surprised to learn I had some struggles with conformity. But for the most part, I managed to keep myself in a heightened state of close-minded religiosity throughout my youth, and the times I did have serious doctrinal difficulties I managed to pull through with some simple re-interpretation of scripture. And that's how things stayed up until The Day It All Changed.

Like all of the defining moments of my life, there was a woman involved. On The Day It All Changed, that woman was my friend Wendy the Pagan. Wendy the Pagan was the perfect foil to an uptight Baptist boy. A funky groovy Renaissance-Faire type who smoked, frequented new age occult stores, read tarot cards and believed in all manner of interesting and contradictory beliefs. The way we liked to flirt with each best was to argue Theology. Which is what we were doing on The Day It All Changed.

We were in the middle of a juicy deliberation one afternoon. I had just come up with some brilliant and biblically-approved point, when Wendy came up with a saucy rejoinder: "Well, Dave," this with a raised eyebrow, "you KNOW the Hindu religion is like, 4000 years older than Christianity." Well, this line of reasoning of course had no merit whatsoever, and I started to counter with "No, it's not--"

But I never finished the sentence. That was when it hit me... That I had no idea whether the next thing to leave my mouth was true or not.

Let me say that again: I had

No idea

Whether the next thing to leave my mouth

Was True

Or NOT!

And it hit me like a bolt from the blue: I was giving a knee-jerk Pavlovian dog reaction --I was just as bad as those Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses!! I swear, in my mind I could literally hear that Talking Heads song:

*Same as it ever was...Same as it ever was...*

*And you may ask yourself*

*What is that beautiful house?*

*And you may ask yourself*

*Where does that highway lead to?*

*And you may ask yourself*

*Am I right?...or am I wrong?*

*And you may tell yourself*

*MY GOD!...WHAT HAVE I DONE?*

The debate was over. I was in a stunned daze for the rest of the day. And that was just the beginning.

I never looked at anything the same way. I began to question everything. In hindsight, loosing my virginity was a breeze. Loosing my religion took me a whole year to get over!

I felt like a trap door had fallen out beneath me, and instead of plummeting to the ground I was suspended in midair 10,000 feet up with the clouds going by beneath me. For a year I kept wondering “what’s keeping me up?” All those years I thought there was an all-powerful invisible god protecting me, and suddenly that was gone... What was keeping me safe?

Well, somehow I survived...

And not only that, but things actually got better! I began to look at people completely differently; I stopped seeing people as Catholics, as Christians, as Jehovah’s Witnesses, etc. etc. and just saw them as People. People just like me, with their own dreams, problems, and thoughts on the universe. Most importantly, I stopped automatically categorizing people as “Saved” and “Hellbound”!

Suddenly Evolution made a lot more sense.

The Universe seemed much bigger, and at the same time closer and more connected to me than it ever did before.

Cue the upbeat music for the closing credits: Now I’m astounded that I could ever have believed all the ridiculous & hateful nonsense even for a minute. Life is free, really free when your mind is free. Even though Life can be an unpredictable all-bets-are-off scary place sometimes, I couldn’t and wouldn’t go back to the spun-sugar sickly-sweet illusionary comforts of Christianity, or any other religion lurking around for that matter either.

I want to tell every religious person out there that when they have doubts, when what they are being told doesn’t seem fair or make sense, to respect that part of them that gives them that gut feeling.

I’m alive. We’re all alive. Go out there and enjoy Life & Love.

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## **Why I am an Atheist, Part II: Common Reactions**

(with apologies to the many, many freethinkers whose ideas are presented here)

Today it’s interesting to come across the ideas & stereotypes people have about Atheists. People aren’t upset because I’ve lost my religion, they’re upset because I’ve lost THEIR religion. Here are some of the more common reactions:

1. You don’t believe in anything?

You don’t think Buddha or Allah or Vishnu are real, do you? Well, I only believe in one less of those imaginary gods than you do...

2. But you’re so happy!

Well, yeah! People think we're all gloomy, black beret-wearing Jean-Paul Sarte-reading existentialist types leading gray, empty, meaningless lives... But how happy can you be always kissing up to an angry god?

3. Where do you get your morals from?

Do you really need anyone else to tell you the killing, stealing, and hurting people is wrong? It's really not that hard to figure out.

4. But look at all the good Religion has done?

To that, I would say really look at what religion has done. It took 300 years for the Roman Catholic Church to pardon Galileo and longer than that to apologize for burning heretics at the stake. Billy Graham (who it turns out is a rabid anti-Semite) has taken in over \$35 million from his ministries and refuses to disclose how it is being spent. And he is very respected – not like most of the more infamous televangelists who have been uncovered as out-and-out scoundrels.

Throughout history, more people have been tortured or killed in the name of religion than any other conflict -hands down. Look what it did on 9-11. Look what it's doing in Bethlehem this morning. If no one challenged religious authority & the scriptures, there would not be democracies, public education, women's rights, science & medicine, or the abolition of slavery.

5. Atheists are angry at God!

It's hard to be angry at someone who you think doesn't exist. But I admit, I do get angry with the Religious Right when they try to force creationism in schools. I get mad when the Roman Catholic Church spends more energy in protecting pedophile priests than in protecting their victims. I get mad when I see how women are treated in Islamic countries. And I get mad when the Israelis treat the Muslims like it was pre-apartheid South Africa.

6. Why take the chance of going to hell –be a Christian just to be safe

What kind of God would want that kind of follower? What kind of god would create hell for that matter. And what if you go to heaven and everyone there is speaking Arabic or Chinese? Who's going to hell now, smart guy?

7. Atheists are Arrogant / Communists / Tools of Satan /There are no Atheists in foxholes /

Too ridiculous to even go there, though I will say there's women, crossdressers, homosexuals, and yes, Atheists in foxholes. Always have been.

8. Well, there's just too much that's unexplainable...

There's always going to be the unexplainable; as Einstein said: "One thing I have learned in a long life: that all our science, measured against reality, is primitive and childlike -- and yet it is the most precious thing we have."

9. Well, I know God is real because I have a personal relationship with Jesus and he has done this in my life....

I'm happy for you, I really am. But if I told you what a difference Scientology or Allah or Falun Gong has done in my

life, would you believe me?

10. But what happens when you die? Is that it?

Death IS big and scary, and it's natural to be afraid of it. If we didn't, our species wouldn't have survived for millions of years. That's why the idea is so strong. But honestly, I believe that when we die, we go back to where we came from. There was an eternity before you were born when you didn't exist, if there's another is it really so bad?

- If there's one thing to learn from Atheism, it's Live Now.

Here's more:

- Hands that help are better than lips that pray.
- It's nice, but is it true? How much reality do you choose to accept?
- We're all in the same boat together.
- Science says We're all related, even the plants and animals.
- I heard Peter Ustinov once say something like: "Our firm beliefs divide us. It's our doubts that bring us together."
- Don't take my word for it. Don't take anybody's word for it. Think for yourself. Don't stop asking questions.

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