

"Nothing can be more
contrary to religion and the
clergy than reason and
common sense."
— Voltaire

Critical Thinker

The Bimonthly Newsletter of United States Atheists

November/December 2004

Things You Didn't Know About Christmas

by Jerry Billings Treasurer & Co-host of "Bunk Busters," United States Atheists

Christmas is coming! This is clearly the number one holiday in America. Yet it is without a doubt a celebration of a mythical event. There are many opinions regarding the birth of the half-god, half-human named Jesus. These opinions range from a strong belief in the virgin birth of the savior of humanity to simply that it never happened. Since the Christmas season that celebrates the birth of the god-man is almost here, it seems a good time to mention your United States Atheists' studied opinion on the matter.

Here is the evidence that the Bible teaches. For the sake of argument, we will assume that a man named Jesus was born to a woman named Mary around the appropriate time. First, they got the year wrong. The baby was not born at the end of our count of time as BC ("before Christ"). The baby was born in 4 BC or earlier. How do we know? The Bible claims that Jesus was born during the reign of King Herod. But history establishes that Herod died in 4 BC. Thus Jesus was born at least four years before the end of BC time.

Now we move to the date December 25th. This was a very popular date for the birth of various god-men, Jesus being only the latest. Nobody knows if this date is accurate or even close to accurate. The New Testament mentions that the shepherds were tending their flocks in the fields, but shepherding is not a midwinter activity around the place of Jesus' birth. The date of December 25th did coincide with the Winter Solstice,

when days stop getting shorter and start getting longer. In the Northern Hemisphere, winter is a time of hardship, food shortage, bitter cold, sickness and death. It must have been a joyful time to realize that spring was on its way. The Romans celebrated their Saturnalia from December 17th to 24th and on the 25th they celebrated the birth of the new Sun and their god, Mithra. Later in time, when Christianity was replacing Mithraism, the birthday of Jesus was decreed to have been on the same date as was Mithra's. But when was the actual date? Your guess is as good as anyone's in that respect. Several religions celebrate Jesus' birthday on September 11th. The date of December 25th was set during the reign of Constantine in the year 325 CE (AD). The birth of the god-man was so insignificant that at the time nobody made a note of it.

Many god-men were reported to have been born at the time of the Winter Solstice. Here are just some of them: Adonis, Bacchus, Krishna, Mithra, Quetzecotl.

We all know the story of the three wise men who rode their camels to the place of Jesus' birth. We notice that the biblical account merely mentions "wise men." There is no mention of any particular number of them nor is their means of transportation (camels or otherwise) noted. They were said to have been from the East and they had followed an eastern star. But if they came from the East then they had to travel west; a star in the East would

Upcoming Events

Solstice Social

Saturday, Dec. 18, 7:00–9:30pm Join us at the Atheist Community Center for good times, appetizers and an auction benefiting USA. Bring your family and invite a friend.

USA Food Drive

Each year we collect food for a family in need. This year we will present the gift at Winter Solstice rather than Thanksgiving, allowing more time to collect the items. Please bring non-perishable food to any Tuesday night meeting and put it in the collection bin provided at the Center.

Weekly Meetings

Every Tuesday, 7:30 PM Join us at the Atheist Community Center, 6514 SE Foster Rd., Portland. Guests and the public are always welcome to attend.

November 2, 9, 16, 23, 30

December 7, 14, 21, 28

"Bunk Busters"

"Bunk Busters" is the cable TV show produced by USA and co-hosted by Jerry Billings and Kendall Auel. It is cablecast by Portland Community Media. Contact: Alfredo Torrejon at bunkbusters@unitedstatesatheists.com.

Schedule (subject to change):

Tuesdays 7:30 PM Ch. 22

Saturdays 1:30 PM Ch. 23

Sundays 5:30 PM Ch. 11

For an up-to-date program schedule, go to www.pcmv.org, click on "Programming" and type "Bunk Busters" in the search field.

Web Site

www.unitedstatesatheists.com

Dial-An-Atheist

For a weekly message of common sense, dial 503-ATHEIST (284-3478).

Critical Thinker

Deadline for next issue: December 15, 2004. Submission guidelines at: www.unitedstatesatheists.com/criticalthinker. Send submissions to the editor at criticalthinker@unitedstatesatheists.com, or mail in care of the USA address.

Christmas

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have been behind them. Whoops! Common sense was not a strong point among the authors of the Bible. And we must mention how far-fetched it is to say that a star hung over the legendary manger. Stars do not stay in one place in the sky (due to the rotation of Earth) but even if a star were stationary, it would not be “over” any particular location.

Now, let's take a look at the so-called “virgin birth.” The Good Book tells us that Mary conceived as the result of having been impregnated by a ghost. Later, her boyfriend Joseph claimed that he had dreamed that an angel had verified Mary's claim. The young couple were married immediately afterward. Is this the way a rational person would imagine that the supreme God and creator of the entire universe would come upon the scene, shotgun wedding and all?

Most Christians accept that Jesus is God and also the Holy Ghost, which is also the third person in the Trinity. They also believe that it is a mystery how one personage can also be three separate persons. That is probably the only honest belief in Christianity. But let's just accept that belief for a bit. That means that Jesus is actually his own father. Then the Ghost becomes his brother and uncle in addition to being his father. But it doesn't stop there. God is also Jesus' and the Ghost's father and since Jesus is actually God, guess what? Jesus is his own grandpaw. That concludes this little Christmas tale and although that is the way the Bible tells it, don't you believe a word of it.

So, let's stop here. The most astounding thing about the “virgin birth” is that millions of people believe it. But there are also millions of people who do not believe it, including the

see **CHRISTMAS** on page 3...

God is a Cognitive Illusion

by James E. Archer *President, United States Atheists*

What is the single most difficult fact about the world for atheists to explain? It's not who created the universe or where life came from. These and other questions of this sort can be dealt with without much difficulty, although I will not address them here. No, the real problems don't lie in the nature of religious claims. To my mind, the really tough question is this: If atheists are right and theists are wrong, then why are there so many of them and so few of us?

One common explanation is to argue that a belief in supernatural forces is (or was) a positive adaptation to the world and can be explained by the principles of natural selection. The argument here is that religious beliefs result in behaviors that enhance survival. I omit details here as these arguments are well known and easily found in the literature.

I think that this argument is incorrect and is based on an overly-narrow interpretation of how evolution works. So let's review the basis for modern evolutionary theory.

Contrary to popular belief, there are three (not one) basic principles that guide evolutionary change. They are:

- Natural selection
- Random processes
- Spandrels

Natural selection says that any human trait that reduces the chances of people reproducing will not be around for long. This is obvious and most people understand it.

The role of random processes is much less understood. It is a little-appreciated fact that chance events will, over time, exhibit directionality and tend to a definite result. Thus, many human traits can be attributed to chance processes, and are not the direct

result of natural selection.

Finally, a spandrel is a human physical or cognitive structure that evolved for one purpose but was later adapted for a different purpose. For example, modern linguistics suggests that the human language facility may have originally evolved for a different purpose and only later was adapted for speech.

If a human cognitive ability were the result of natural selection alone, then we would expect it to provide essentially correct information about the world. However (and this is very important), if the cognitive ability is the result of chance or is a spandrel, then it will most likely provide incorrect information about the world in certain circumstances. To put it another way: it will result in a cognitive illusion. What we perceive will not be correct.

With this deeper understanding of how evolution works, we can now give a better explanation of the ubiquitous nature of religion. Religion is rooted in a collection of cognitive illusions that are the result of non-adaptive processes in evolution.

This argument has several advantages over the one given earlier. First, it acknowledges that religious experience is real, but illusionary. Religious experience may be compared to an optical illusion in that what we perceive is not what is: God is a cognitive illusion.

Furthermore, we need not acknowledge religion as a valid form of human adaptation. I feel it is a serious mistake for atheists to elevate religion to the level of a positive adaptation when it is rooted in falsehood and illusion.

Finally, this argument suggests that atheists are most effective when focus on rationality as the only effective way of overcoming illusion. ■

What Would Jerry Do?

by **Jerry Billings** Treasurer & Co-host of "Bunk Busters," United States Atheists

*Jerry,
My life as a Christian has often been beset by great problems. I have been a sinner as probably you have been. God has forgiven my sins and I am now ready for His companionship through eternity. I have repented my sins and when I first realized that I had been forgiven, I decided to become a minister and share this good news with everyone. But I failed in that task. I found that I did not have the ability to lead a congregation. However, I am not discouraged. I am doubly blessed. Listen to me! Repentance is more important to God than being a minister. If you will only repent of your sins you, too, will be saved.*

*—Washed in the
Blood of the Lamb*

Dear Washed,
I am pleased to tell you that no atheist in history has ever sinned. "How can that be?" you ask—and the answer is simple. Sinning is a religious activity which usually is related to pleasure and enjoyment. It is, in more technical terms, nonconformity with the Diety's orders. Since for an atheist there never were Gods or Goddesses, there could not have been any orders that could be disobeyed.

But moving on, I am always impressed by hearing from you folks who get your knowledge directly from the Almighty. But, I must ask, how do you know that you are in communication with your God? Did He speak directly to you? Or was the message passed to you in a dream? Maybe you simply assumed that it made more sense that repentance was superior to being a preacher (who apparently holds an inferior position in the heavenly hierarchy to that of serial killers, rapists and child molesters who are sorry for what they did). Lastly, do you just read

Yahveh's mind?

My position has always been that many people believe that they speak to God. That is called prayer. Not as many hear God speak to them. That is called schizophrenia.

—Jerry

*To You Who Are Lost From God,
You believe that you can succeed without God. Here is Truth from my own life.*

I got an "A" in my materials science course at Oregon State University and a Pass grade in my other courses. It was a living hell for me as the stress at OSU is almost unbearable. I give all of the credit to my success to God. Although I worked really hard, that alone is not enough for me to be successful in this competitive school. It had to be God at my side and with His help I succeeded.

*—Joseph in
Corvallis, Oregon*

Dear Joseph,
Do you realize what you are telling us? You are bragging that you have, in effect, brought an invisible tutor into the classroom to whisper the answers to your tests. And you are proud of that?

What you have done is like the football team that prays before the game that an invisible twelfth player will be on the field with them, thereby giving them a great advantage and fooling the referee into believing that the team has only the allowed number of players at any one time.

We often hear victorious players loudly thanking God for helping them win. I have yet to hear a losing man whine that he missed a tackle only because God interfered and thereby caused his team to lose.

If you were correct, you have two ethical choices, (1) confess that you

cheated, or (2) plan to keep your strategy secret from the college and any prospective employers. You wouldn't want to fraudulently claim that you are as learned as it appears by your grade record.

You cannot have it both ways. Either you didn't cheat (by having your god's help), or you did it on your own and your god didn't really help you at all.

—Jerry Billings,
Atheist, waiting for
Joseph to return his
degree

Modern Dating

Most of us grew-up using "BC" and "AD" for indicating dates. Many people consider it presumptuous to assume that everyone is a Christian, so the more acceptable and scholarly terms for dating are BCE ("before the common era") instead of "BC" and CE ("of the common era") instead of "AD." The current year is 2004 CE. ■

Christmas

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thirty-eight to forty million atheists who live in the United States. Congratulations and Happy Holidays. Let's all get together any Tuesday night at 7:30 in the headquarters of United States Atheists, located at 6514 SE Foster Road in Portland, Oregon. ■

*Join us every Tuesday, 7:30 PM at
the Atheist Community Center,
6514 SE Foster Road in Portland
for lively discussions.*

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