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AN END TO ARROGANT ATHEISM

by Roy Speckhardt

*As an atheist who is also a humanist, I find that in our efforts to point out the dangers and failings inherent in religion, we sometimes fall into the language of arrogance.*

Roy, according to Dictionary.com, arrogance is defined as:

"Offensive display of superiority or self-importance; overbearing pride."

Roy, some Atheists might fit that description. Others do not. But just because someone is offended doesn't mean the person accused of being offensive is actually guilty. Manufactured offense is one of the most common tactics employed by religious people.

And there is no question that the Atheist position is superior to the one that is based on faith. That might be why religious people feel offended at the mere mention of the word Atheism.

*I read a recent quote from famed evolutionary biologist and past Humanist of the Year awardee, Richard Dawkins, which, upon reflection, showed that even he can fall prey to this tendency. He stated that "religion is an organized license to be acceptably stupid." While Dawkins certainly has a valid point regarding mainstream religion's frequent opposition to critical thinking and empiricism, he makes his point in such a way that is likely to leave religious people offended by, instead of interested in atheism and rational thinking.*

Roy, what makes you think religious people might be interested in Atheism or rational thinking? The only interest they show in either is in finding ways to combat them.

Also, if the truth leaves them offended, don't blame the messenger, blame those who refuse to think rationally.

*Dawkins did something similar when he stated that the combined number of Nobel Prizes won by Muslims was less than that won by a single English university, implying that the notoriously nonreligious achievements of academia are superior to those of adherents of an entire religion.*

Roy, Dawkins got that one right. Perhaps you have data to show otherwise?

I didn't think so.

*Yet again, Dawkins has a valid point -- that the anti-science mentality of many religions has limited its adherents from learning about science and working in the scientific field, but by saying it in such a way, he is less likely to inspire mainstream religious people to care about science, and more likely to offend and antagonize them.*

Roy, it doesn't matter how Dawkins says it - they are going to take offense anyway. Remember when signs went up telling other Atheists they were not alone? Remember how the Christian community went berserk and claimed religious persecution?

Well I do.

They tried it your way and got the same result as if the signs had a picture of David Silverman flipping them off. The same thing happened with innocent signs on buses. Christians vandalized them anyway.

Roy, google Neville Chamberlain. The history lesson would do you some good.

*I know Richard Dawkins to be a self-effacing and warm person, but when he says things like that above, it harms more than helps.*

Roy, as I just pointed out ... no it doesn't.

*Unfortunately, he is not the only atheist to make these kinds of statements, as our movement has a history of sometimes blatant elitism.*

Roy, it's not that difficult to feel superior and elite in the presence of superstitious Ghost Worshippers with an antipathy towards science and facts.

These people desperately need psychiatric help and the only reason they don't get it is because there are simply too many of them.

*Past American Humanist Association Honorary President Gore Vidal once said, "There is not one human problem that could not be solved if people would simply do as I advise." Clearly, even humanists aren't immune from such arrogant behavior.*

Roy, that all depends on what Vidal advised.

*It's important to note that the subset of atheism I think is a problem isn't the so-called "militant atheism" that encourages evangelizing disbelief; there's nothing inherently wrong with promoting one's position to others. And I'm definitely not talking about the so-called "angry atheism," because the nonreligious should be mad about abuses by religious organizations and discrimination against religious and irreligious minorities.*

Roy, well said. So what's the problem then?

*What's often holding us back is "arrogant atheism," which is seen when atheists speak as if their view is infallible, and act as if their unwavering non-belief makes them superior to those who do believe.*

Roy, you, of all people, should know better than to refer to Atheism as "a view." Atheism is the rejection of a view. That is the exact opposite.

And their nonbelief does make them superior, but only in the area of religion. You used the word "superior" in a general sense.

*The problem with arrogant atheism is that it scares away those who would otherwise self-identify as atheists, and it prevents us from building the alliances we need in order to achieve our aims.*

Roy, alliances built on deception are worthless. Our nonacceptance of their superstitious nonsense should be open and honest. If that makes them cry, then we should just agree to put aside our religious differences, and work for the common good by building alliances with believers based on common values: things that both groups agree on, like fighting hunger, poverty, discrimination, and war.

*This is an argument about tactics and attitude.*

Roy, you are attempting to convince everyone to march to your tune. Freethinkers aren't too fond of following like little ducks. If they were, they would more likely be believers.

Interestingly, among the Atheists that are on the other end of the spectrum from you, is an individual named PZ Myers who also fancies himself an Atheist pied piper. He too wants all Atheists to follow his tactics and attitude. If you've been watching his progress, you should have noticed the lack of success he has had in attempting to control a bunch of freethinkers.

*Religion is by no means beyond criticism, so we should feel free to critique and even poke fun at the occasional absurdity. Most people appreciate humor, whether it's in the form of stand-up or just friendly banter.*

Roy, you can't be serious? Throughout history, religious people responded to humor with a stake and lighter fluid. How could you even make such an ignorant claim?

Tell you what Roy, why don't you drive over to Dearborn, Michigan and see how much the Muslims there appreciate some of your light-hearted humor and banter.

Be sure to get back to us on how well that worked out for you ...

if you can.

*But when that humor is used to hurt others, it becomes a form of derision that is inconsistent with humanism's compassionate principles. When critique becomes belittling, when poking fun becomes ridiculing, the respect that is the foundation for any meaningful conversation is lost.*

Roy, your error in that paragraph came near the end when you erroneously assumed a foundation of respect. Maybe you need to refresh your memory of recent polls which showed that Atheists are the most hated, distrusted people in our society. What makes you think believers have a foundation of respect for people they consider evil?

But they don't hate us because they consider us evil, but because of the threat that rational people pose to their domination of society. If we continue to convince people that the emperor has no clothes, then their 2,000-year monopoly on the riches and control of society come to an end.

*Encouraging is the fact that a new generation of nonreligious public figures from diverse backgrounds have emerged to spread the word about disbelief in a compassionate and unpretentious way, as exemplified by groups like the Secular Student Alliance.*

Roy, that sounded really great; except that you forgot to mention that none of those "public figures" are electable in the United States. Also, you failed to mention that the 20% of nonreligious Americans get 0% representation in American government. Only superstitious, irrational people are allowed representation by the religious majority.

*The emphasis on a less monolithic and more empathetic strand of atheism is one of the main reasons that the number of self-identified atheists is rapidly growing and relations between the religious and nonreligious communities have never been better.*

Roy, you live in a fantasy world rivaled only by the one inhabited by religious believers. Read the polls - they hate your guts. You aren't just someone with a different opinion - you are evil. Ask them if you actually *deserve* to be tortured forever. See how many say "no."

Contrary to your claim, Atheism isn't growing because of empathetic Atheists ... it is growing in spite of empathetic Atheists.

If that were not true, you wouldn't be writing this whiny essay.

*If we ever want to truly reach the general public with our message of skepticism, scientific inquiry and a conviction about the importance of basic civil rights and liberties, we need to recognize that you can respectfully disagree, but you can't respectfully ridicule.*

Roy, I agree. Ridicule should be devoid of respect. That's why it's called ridicule.

*Let's drop the arrogance and reemphasize the humanist values that appeal to so many people of varying faith traditions.*

Roy, that's like asking us to eat the outside of the Oreo cookie, and then throw away the cream filling ... that's the best part.

*We can still be vocal about our disbelief and should seek to challenge ignorance (be it religious or otherwise) whenever it rears its head, but we should do so in the way that opens minds instead of closes them.*

Roy, your style will work on some. The more militant style will work on others. People are way too complex to apply a "one-size-fits-all" mentality to the problem.

We are at war, Roy. We don't need an army of clones. We need the army, navy, air force, and marines. We need to strike with everything we've got from every angle. From accommodationists, like you, to angry Atheists, and everything in-between.

Or we could just go through another 2,000 years of horror; begging them to please become civilized.

Hey Roy, remember how well that worked out ... in the Civil War?

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THE SCIENCE SEGMENT

How Electricity Helps Spider Webs Snatch Prey and Pollutants

Spider webs actively spring towards prey thanks to electrically-conductive glue spread across their surface. Researchers found that the electrostatic properties of the glue that coats spider webs causes them to reach out to grab all charged particles, from pollen and pollutants, to flying insects. They also showed that the glue spirals can distort Earth's electric field within a few millimetres of the web, which may enable insects to spot the webs with their antennae 'e-sensors'.

According to researchers, common garden spider webs around the world could be used for environmental monitoring as they actively filter airborne pollutants with an efficiency comparable to expensive industrial sensors.

The elegant physics of these webs make them perfect active filters of airborne pollutants including aerosols and pesticides. Electrical attraction drags these particles to the webs, so you could harvest and test webs to monitor pollution levels -- for example, to check for pesticides that might be harming bee populations.

Even more fascinating, you would be able to detect some airborne chemicals just by looking at the shape of the webs. Many spiders recycle their webs by eating them, and would include any particles and chemicals that are electrically drawn to the web. We already know that spiders spin different webs when on different drugs, for example creating beautiful webs on LSD and terrible webs on caffeine. As a result, the web shapes alone can tell us if any airborne chemicals affect the animal's behaviour.

Webs like that of the garden cross spider also cause local distortions in Earth's electric field since they behave like conducting discs. Many insects are able to detect small electrical disturbances, including bees that can sense the electric fields of different flowers and other bees.

Pretty much all flying insects should be capable of sensing electrical disturbances. Their antennae act as 'e-sensors' when the tips are connected to the body by insulating materials, meaning the charge at the tip will be different from the rest of the insect. As insects approach charged objects, the tips of their antennae will move by a small amount, which they may be able to feel. Bees already use e-sensors to sense flowers and other bees, so it now remains to be seen whether they might also use them to avoid webs to avoid becoming dinner.

Electrical disturbances caused by spider webs are extremely short-ranged, so it is not yet clear whether insects would be able to sense them before the web snaps out to grab them. Either way, it is clear that electrostatic charges play an important role in the insect world.

People often underestimate the static electricity that builds up in airborne objects, but it is important at all scales. The Hindenburg disaster might have been caused by a discharge of static electricity, and helicopters have been known to explode if they discharge suddenly when landing. Everything that moves through the air develops static charge, so it's fascinating to see how spider webs make use of this, to actively catch prey.

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FAMOUS QUOTES

DAVID BRIN (no biography - previously quoted)

"For all its beauty, honesty, and effectiveness

at improving the human condition,

science demands a terrible price—

that we accept what experiments tell us about the universe,

whether we like it or not.

It’s about consensus and teamwork

and respectful critical argument,

working with, and through, natural law.

It requires that we utter, frequently, those hateful words—

'I might be wrong'.”