"[Atheists'] paradise is an earth on which no supernatural claims control the lives of men and women, a planet on which reality rules in the decisions that shape the course of human events."

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to Frank Zindler, why do some people believe that religiosity is a part of human DNA?
2. Why did Thomas Jefferson contend that public education is vital to keeping church and state separate, according to the author?
3. In Zindler's opinion, what caused atheism to become associated with communism?

No Atheist believes in hell or eternal punishment. No Atheist believes in gods or goddesses or supernatural beings of any kind—malevolent or benevolent. No Atheist believes in spirits, souls, or reincarnation. Nevertheless, many Atheists fervently believe in heaven—perhaps paradise would be a more accurate term.

Unlike the paradise of the Muslims and Christians, the paradise they envision is a physical world, a realm in which "religion" is no more than a curious word in their dictionaries. Their paradise is an earth on which no supernatural claims control the lives of men and women, a planet on which reality rules in the decisions that shape the course of human events.

Atheists' Heaven Does Not Depend on Religious Faith

The heaven for which Atheists hope is a land in which the quarreling divisions created by racist religions have been replaced by a humanity united in its resolve to labor together to achieve a global society in which all are treated fairly and all fairly share in the bounty of the soil from which our species sprang so long ago.

The heaven for which Atheists strive is not a world in which there are no problems to solve, nor even a world in which no disasters or tragedies occur. Rather, it is a world in which finding solutions to life's problems is not impeded by benighted and obstructionist taboos and superstitions or blocked by the willful ignorance that everywhere is the hallmark and ensign of religious faith. It is a world in which tragedies and disasters are not of human design but are simply the consequence of living in a universe that was not made for us—an unconscious cosmos, which decrees no destinies nor plans any products, but evolves inexorably under quantum-mechanical conditions whereby even the most implausible event may
eventually occur.

There may be pain in the Atheists' paradise, but it is pain of the unavoidable sort. The pain of Holy Roman Inquisitions, the pain of Jews, Christians, and Hindus killing Muslims who are killing Christians, Jews, and Hindus, the agony of Christian Scientists killing their children with prayer over-dose, the religious wars and persecutions that make the misery of so many lives—these all are absent in the religion-free Elysium [a place of perfect happiness] of which we Atheists dream.

That is the Valhalla [a heaven-like destiny] to which Atheist heroes and heroines aspire. That is the paradise they plan for their progeny—the heavenly heritage they hope to bequeath to a rational race of the future.

Do Atheists wish in vain? Is a world without religion possible? If it is possible, how is it to be achieved? And finally, would it resemble the paradise described above?

It has been argued that religiosity is part of humanity's sociobiological inheritance, that natural selection has favored genes for religiosity as part of a behavioral genetic package that gave the greatest advantage to tribal societies in which religion was a cohesive force enabling them better to exterminate the genetic competition. The fact that almost 40% of American scientists still adhere to religious beliefs of some kind lends credibility to the notion that there is a genetic bias which can override the rational faculties of even well-educated and otherwise rational people. It is doubtful, however, that 40% of humanity is irredeemably religious. In Western Europe, the former Soviet Union, China, and Japan the percentage of persons mentally scarred by religious modes of thought is much, much smaller. It would appear that a world essentially free of delusion is possible.

What would that world be like? Would a world devoid of transcendental temptations resemble Eden without the snake? It all depends on how a religion-free world is attained.

### Education Is the Key to Independent Thinking

If the world as a whole could evolve on the Western European model, where education has been effective in instilling naturalistic modes of thinking and thinking becomes almost reflexively skeptical and critical, paradise will be achieved with minimal difficulty. Scandinavia seems almost there already. Some legal changes only need to be made to disestablish the moribund churches so that they can shrivel away to complete oblivion. In this scenario, there need be no violence, no repression of atavistic individuals who still traffic in supernatural claims and wares. Increasingly, priests and preachers will find fewer customers willing to pay their rent in advance to reserve condominiums in heaven.

In trying to predict the future it is helpful to look for lessons in the past. It may be instructive to compare the different ways in which America and the Soviet Union traveled the road to reason—if possible to see why both have failed ultimately, even though both progressed along that road a great distance early in their histories.

In the case of America, the American Revolution took place at the height of the Enlightenment, when
science and reason were shining their light upon religion and causing it to wither like a cave fungus exposed to the fervent lumination of the sun. Even more important, religion was fragmented at the time and did not create a major impediment to revolution. Only one of the many churches present in the colonies was closely associated with the British Crown, against which the American revolutionaries had to wage war. The Founding Fathers of the American republic did not have to wage war against priests and preachers as well as the king in order to gain their freedom. After the success of the revolution, when an unprecedented, intentionally and utterly godless constitution was proposed, the warring sects could understand that it was in their own best interest not to have an established religion.

The enlightened composers of the secular charter probably believed privately that religion would gradually decline and be replaced by a humanistic, rational philosophy. Thomas Jefferson, however, realized that this was far from inevitable, and he saw the crucial role of public education in maintaining a godless government wherein church and state remained separate:

"Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves are its only safe depositories. And to render even them safe, their minds must be improved to a certain degree.... An amendment of our constitution must here come in aid of the public education."

**Atheism Was Unfairly Linked to Communism**

Up until the second half of the nineteenth century, until the time of the Civil War, education seems to have been largely effective, and free thought and even outright Atheism flourished as never since. Crowds of people actually paid large amounts of money to hear "The Great Agnostic" Robert Ingersoll lecture, and he died a wealthy man in 1899. In fact, education in America seems to have continued to prepare improved minds up until World War II. It was only with the development of the Cold War that American public education fell prey to religion as the nation struggled against "Godless Communism." Suddenly, Americanism was identified with religiosity and Atheism was identified with Communism—and Communism was un-American. Since then, American education has continued to decline, and the United States has now sunken to the level of religious sophistication of the Age of Inquisitions.

In the case of the Russian Revolution, things were quite different. In Russia, religion was monolithic and inseparable from the Czarist government against which the revolutionaries had to struggle. It was not possible to fight the Czar without also fighting against the Russian Orthodox Patriarch. As a practical necessity, religion had to be suppressed if the world envisioned by the revolutionists were to become a reality. Alas, compulsory education in Atheism was never able to eradicate the roots of superstition from the Soviet people, even though the ruling class was largely free of religious ideation. As the government became ever more repressive in its attempts to stay in power, even though religion was only one of many things being suppressed, it became the rallying point of the resistance and attracted all who had legitimate objections to the ruling regime. When at last the Soviet system imploded, religion was a major component of the gases and vapors which rushed in to fill the void created by the disappearance of the secular government. Today, creationists, astrologers, faith-healers, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and charlatans of every stripe are picnicking everywhere from the Baltic to the Steppes of Central Asia, and Muslim fundamentalists are leading what from afar seems to be a second Russian revolution.

Will the Atheists' heaven be attained by the American, Soviet, or West-European method, or will some
other means be required? We have already noted that the American and Soviet routes to reason have failed, even though in their earlier stages they achieved considerable success. It is disturbing to note that the West-European model also is now exhibiting considerable signs of strain.

Pacifying the Religious Will Only Lead to Fanaticism

The presence of multitudes of Muslims in France—the land of Voltaire, d'Holbach, and Dupuis—has made it necessary to prohibit religious garb and symbols in the public schools. This has been widely denounced even by freethinkers who do not seem to realize that failure to defend secularism—by tolerating the intolerant and by embracing those who seek the destruction of secular government—is tantamount to societal suicide. Can a society be so free that it allows its citizens to abolish freedom?

In the Netherlands, where even the Roman Catholic Church and the Calvinists have been tamed and are no more sanguinary than sedated hamsters, a Muslim fundamentalist recently assassinated a Dutch filmmaker who dared to criticize Muslim misogyny. (We all remember too the Salman Rushdie affair, where even today the 1989 fatwah of the Ayatollah Khomeini has not been disavowed by the Muslim communities of America and Europe.) There are now nearly a million Muslims in that tiny nation. How can Dutch secular society survive? It appears that education is failing in Holland and that, as in America, parochial education is churning out fanatical, politically radicalized religious know-nothings.

In every part of the world in which even the slightest promise of an Atheistic Utopia has flickered in the consciousness of thinking men and women, hopes are being dashed by the recrudescence of religious fundamentalisms. The violent nature of these fundamentalisms—whether they be Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or even Jewish—bodes ill for those who hope to build bridges to heaven using American or West-European blueprints. Increasingly, there grows the fear that the road to reason will have to be built upon the Soviet model if violent fundamentalisms are to be subdued and even a semblance of democracy is to be preserved.

I suggest that the path that will be followed depends upon the failure or success of education—not just the education occurring in schools and colleges, but also the education gained from the print and broadcast media, the Internet, and the daily interactions of Atheists and Humanists with the larger society. The schools are failing not so much because they are teaching things that are untrue—although there is certainly a lot of nonsense that can be found in what is taught in many places—but that the truth about the world is being drowned in a flood of disinformation gushing out of churches, mosques, temples, moneyed interests, and governments. Those who would broadcast truth to the uninformed and the misinformed are faced with a horrific signal-to-noise ratio problem. The signals of science and reason are swamped by the noise of religion, superstition, willful ignorance, and the credos of credulity.

Reason and Science Must Be Supported by the Government

Without any evidence in its support, many Atheists confidently believe that truth will ultimately prevail. Even so great a thinker as Thomas Jefferson wrote in his *Notes on Virginia* that "Reason and experiment have been indulged, and error has fled before them. It is error alone which needs the support of
government. Truth can stand by itself."

It is painful to argue that one of my greatest heroes could have been wrong on so basic an issue, but I must respectfully disagree. Truth, too, needs the support of government if it is not to be choked in a new Noah's Flood of falsehoods. Truth needs also the support of Atheists, Humanists, Rationalists, and Freethinkers of all kinds, but it needs even more if it is to prevail and a new day of enlightenment is to dawn. We all must help truth keep afloat in the flood of fantasy that gushes forth on all sides. It is up to us to solve the signal-to-noise problem so reality awareness can be propagated amongst the masses. We must make our governments realize that it is in their own ultimate interest to side with science against superstition, knowledge against ignorance, reality against illusion, and reason against raw emotion.

The future of the world now depends upon us. Whether we shall progress to the paradise proposed at the beginning of this editorial or descend into a hellish Hades such as Khomeini's Iran, Calvin's Geneva, Torquemada's Toledo, or Cotton Mather's Salem—or worse—depends upon our ability to find a solution to the signal-to-noise problem. No greater problem confronts our reasoning race. No greater emergency calls for our aid. No urgency has ever been more urgent.

Further Readings

Books

- Deborah B. Haarsma and Loren D. Haarsma Origins: A Reformed Look at Creation, Design, and


**Periodicals**


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**Source Citation**
