

Dear Toronto Star:

I was absolutely appalled by the article written by Stuart Laidlaw entitled "**After gym class, God 101**" dated 15 Sep 07.

I am a military officer serving in Afghanistan and I can see the damage wrought by religion in areas not accustomed to education and pluralism.

Given the limited classroom hours available to instructing our children, any effort to teach religion within our public school system should be considered downright stupid and, perhaps, illegal.

I would rather see my kids do extra physical education or learn an employable skill such as wood-working or accounting...instead of listening to superstition and mythology.

To put it more firmly, since all religions are fallacious and (as David Hume put it) "*originate from fear and superstition*", any religious studies should be embedded within the context of a critical thinking course.

In such a setting, those superstitions and fears could be discussed in an intellectual and honest forum.

I found it amusing that Stephen Prothero was quoted as saying that "**If we learn anything through education...we should be learning that there are people in the world who are different from us.**"

What a completely inane statement...if you watch National Geographic, the Discovery Channel, or BBC International for thirty minutes, it is clear that people all over the world are different from us.

Instead, what we should be learning are useful skills such as critical thinking, scepticism, and the scientific method.

Unfortunately, critical thinking and scepticism are anathema to religion and their supporters.

Religions don't like difficult questions being asked (my wife can vouch for that from her elementary years in a Catholic school) and that is why critical thinking is so fundamental in dealing with religion.

As a result, I think there are many questions that should be asked in such a forum and I have included some:

**Discussion Point One:**

For centuries, disease has been blamed on the concept of “original sin” thanks to the transgressions of Adam and Eve.

Call me a heretic; however, I think disease is caused by the introduction of germs (bacteria and viruses) into our systems and by genetic mutation within our cells.

For centuries, women died by the thousands due to child-bed fever (*puerperal sepsis*).

Thanks to theology, western women were understandably being punished (thanks to their “original sin”) and their deaths were merely God’s will.

However, thanks to advances in modern science, we can conclude that puerperal fever is not due to “the Fall of Adam and Eve” but rather to the introduction of *streptococcus* into the birthing canal during childbirth.

I would much rather place my faith (and my wife’s life) in the hands of Louis Pasteur, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Ignaz Semmelweis...rather than in all the theologians in the world.

**Were those deaths, over the ages, an expression of God’s will or were they merely a shameful by-product of human ignorance?**

#### **Discussion Point Two:**

Cardinal Robert Bellarmine oversaw the trial of Giordano Bruno, and later, the trial of Galileo.

He was also later elevated to Doctor of the Catholic Church.

Since Doctor is one level higher than saint, he must have been quite an example for Catholicism and a man to be listened to.

However, he is famous for the quote “*To assert that the earth revolves around the sun is as erroneous as to claim that Jesus was not born of a virgin.*”

Now, modern astronomy is pretty clear on helio-centrism and modern biology is pretty clear on the concept of virgin birth.

Even in the unlikely situation that Mary actually experienced *parthogenesis*, she would have given birth to another baby Mary and not a little boy.

**Since the concept of virgin birth is central to Christianity, shouldn’t we rationally discuss this central issue immediately after a biology lecture???**

#### **Discussion Point Three:**

On that same note...when the Roman Catholic Church was busy repressing Galileo, why didn't God explain to Pope Urban VIII (and Robert Bellarmine) that the heliocentric system was essentially correct.

I would assume, as a result, that the Pope had no special communications link to a supreme being and thus has no credibility to speak on God's behalf.

**Why should we listen to any "religious authorities" (such as Bellarmine) when their credentials, credibility, and levels of knowledge are so questionable?**

#### **Discussion Point Four:**

On the question of morality, people point to the regimes of Pol Pot, Stalin, and Hitler and say "*look at what atheism does*".

I personally feel that morality and religion have little in common.

If you want to see the murderous nature of religious regimes, look at the Taiping Rebellion in China (1850-1871) and its leader Hóng Xiùquán.

He advertised himself as the second son of God and the younger brother of Jesus and he also helped butcher millions of people.

Also the Nazis Herman Goering was attributed with the following quote:

*God gave the saviour to the German people. We have faith, deep and unshakeable faith that he [Hitler] was sent to us by God to save Germany."*

In addition, since atheists and secular humanists are viewed as sinners, one would think that secular countries would be more dysfunctional and sinful than religious countries.

**A good question is whether or not morality is truly tied to religion. In addition, are less religious nations demonstrably less moral than other nations???**

I could go on...

Every culture or society has formulated some form of creation myth or religion.

Understandably, as a fundamental aspect of human nature, people have forever tried to find meaning in their lives...and creation myths are an attempt to do just that.

Unfortunately, our version of the creation myth has no more merit than the *Mayan Popol Vuh* or the *Rastafarian* belief that Haile Selassie was God-incarnate.

However, Western civilization is unique in its efforts to frame our search for meaning through the development of the scientific method.

I would argue that for western civilization, it is not our Judeo-Christian heritage that defines us, but rather our gift of science to the rest of the world.

Any attempt to waste one minute on religious study would be a betrayal of that legacy.

Luckily, Canada is an exceedingly secular country and, for that, I am thankful.

Without hesitation, I can say that some of the best people I have ever had the honour of knowing are atheists and agnostics.

That these godless people can lead rich, happy and moral lives without deities is a damning indictment on the falsehoods of all religions.

In a recent poll by a leading Canadian newspaper, only a minority of the Canadians who replied expressed a belief in any deity.

Since roughly forty thousand people responded to the poll, I think that is a substantial sampling of that newspaper's readership.

**(Note: I kept a print-out of the poll, if you would like a faxed copy).**

In conclusion, I fully agree with Justin Trottier (Centre for Inquiry at U of T) when he argued that studying religion is a great way to foster atheism.

Only in the spirit of supporting secular humanism, aiding the advancement of atheism, and exposing the sham of religion, would I ever support such an endeavour as religious studies.

All I can say is...Bring it on.

Major Neal Matthews

Kabul, Afghanistan