

The Trouble with Faith and Religion

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Joseph C. Phillips is an actor best known for his role on *The Cosby Show* as the character Denise's (Lisa Bonet) husband, Lt. Martin Kendall. He is also the author of a collection of essays titled *He Talk like a White Boy: Reflections on Faith, Family, Politics, and Authenticity* (2006). Phillips is a Black conservative, but was able to get quite a few Black liberals and moderates to generate praise for his book.

In his section titled "Faith," the author has an essay titled "Power of Faith and Religion" from which the title of this column borrows. Phillips' piece is woefully biased in defense of Christianity and against atheism. His ire was raised by an episode of Bill Maher's *Real Time* on HBO. Maher and other guests were talking about the role of religion in evil in the world. Former Canadian Prime Minister Kim Campbell said that then-President George W. Bush's religion "gets in the way of morality." The late George Carlin, another guest on the panel, said that "At the base of most of the evil in the world is religion of any kind."

Not surprisingly, Phillips took exception and trotted out the usual defenses of religion and attacks upon atheism. The author considers the Bible to be rooted in "universal, not relative, morality." He implies that secular morality cannot be considered to be universal. However, Paul Kurtz had long taught about the common moral decencies that are embraced all over the world – sharing, refraining from harming innocent people, prohibitions against stealing and murder, etc. These virtues are embraced by religious and nonreligious people alike. There is simply nothing special, unique or impressive about biblical morality, for the most part.

Phillips is blown away by the generosity of organizations like Catholic Charities. However, the same Church that is responsible for so much goodness is the same sexually repressed Church that has given the world many pedophile priests, and that has done so much to protect them and shield them from justice. No wonder Robert Ingersoll said of the Church, "In one hand she carries the alms dish, in the other, the dagger." Such is the disturbingly paradoxical nature of most religions, Christianity not excluded.

Predictably, the author writes that certain religious people exploit and violate the Christian faith when they engage in evil acts. This is perhaps religionists' greatest false claim. The fact of the matter is that the Bible itself condones, for example, homophobia, and in Leviticus 18:22, commands that men that have sex with men be put to death. It is no wonder that so many Christian leaders applauded the killing of 49 people and the injuring of 53 at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando. This disgraceful homophobic reaction to the suffering of LGBT victims was not the result of the violation of biblical ethics. On the contrary, it was the inevitable result of centuries of Bible-based homophobia.

Phillips notes that Stalin, Pol Pot and North Korean dictators were atheists. Yet he repeats the lie that Hitler was an atheist, and is clearly oblivious to the fact that Hitler appealed to the Christian God throughout his political career. The author also implies that Saddam Hussein was an atheist, but he is wrong. Hussein favored secular government, but like Hitler before him, he also appealed to God.

Phillips also claims that Al Qaeda, Hamas (and he would not doubt add Isis and the Taliban) "are not spiritual orders" that want to bring "anyone closer to God...." Again, this is not surprising. Most theists routinely try to extricate bad actions from the popular and deeply cherished religions that support them. (For example, the Bible condones genocide in Numbers 31:17-18, but Christian apologists try to rationalize it by claiming to have a special "interpretation" of the passage.)

It is always bemusing when Black authors actually try to give credit to Christianity for the eradication of chattel slavery without acknowledging the fact that Christianity sanctioned slavery in the first place. Phillips does not fail to bemuse the reader in this regard. The Bible routinely condones slavery (Ephesians 6:5, Colossians 4:1, 1 Peter 2:18, Titus 2:9-10, 1 Timothy 6:1-4, etc.), and even Jesus never condemned it. One even has to wonder why the First Commandment would not be "Thou shall not enslave another human being."

Phillips has an irritating habit of writing with a pronounced masculine bias. He always talks about "man," and "men" as though women do not count or barely even exist. Yet he has the audacity to suggest that the rigidly patriarchal authors of the Bible inspired the first wave women's rights movement. He goes so far as to claim that the non-religious leaders Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B.

Anthony were inspired by the Bible. He obviously never read Stanton's 1895 book *The Woman's Bible*, in which she eviscerated the "Good Book" and clearly demonstrated that Christianity was a major thorn in the side of women.

Writers like Phillips will continue to give a false accounting of popular religions and unfairly attack atheism. However, to counter such madness, there will always be courageous atheists somewhere to set the record straight.