

Happily Defending Science and Reason

A Book Review

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

The Happy Atheist, by PZ Myers. (Vintage. New York, NY, 190 pp., 2013, ISBN: 978-0-307-73980-3, paper, \$16.00.)

PZ Myers is a biology professor at the University of Minnesota. His blog, Pharyngula, is widely regarded as one of the best science blogs in the world. He is an outspoken atheist and defends science and reason uncompromisingly.

Myers is highly irreverent and has a great sense of humor. In fact, he writes that:

Religion has at least two weaknesses. One is that it is empirically false. All its specific claims are either pointless and unverifiable or else have been falsified. The other weakness...is that religion is hilarious....religion is a clown circus and asking us not to point and laugh is unnatural and dishonest. (pp. 34-35)

Voltaire once said that those who believe absurdities will commit atrocities. To demonstrate this point, Myers draws upon history. Many Catholics believe that communion wafers are literally the body of Christ. Myers shows that extremist Christians have massacred people over the “crackers.” He writes:

The first recorded accusation that Jews were stealing and desecrating communion wafers was made in 1243, near Berlin; in what was a typically hysterical reaction for the time, the good Germans of the area killed every Jew in the neighborhood by burning them to death. (p. 21)

Myers writes that there were also pogroms in Europe in 1290, 1294, 1298, 1299, 1306, 1337, 1338 1370, 1388, 1401, 1420, 1453, 1478, 1492, 1514, 1558, and so forth. “That is the true power of the cracker,” Myers dryly notes. One cannot help but to notice the similarity between how Christians have raged over the crackers and how Muslims have raged over real and perceived offenses against the Qur’an and the Prophet.

The author became embroiled in a controversy over the crackers when he gave support to two students in Florida attending a Catholic mass. Rather than swallow the wafer, one of them simply kept it. Religious nuts went bonkers and it actually became a national issue.

To draw heat away from the student, Myers used his famed blog to get people to send him wafers so that he could “desecrate” them. His plan worked. Religious crazies came out of the woodwork to criticize him. One person wrote, “Your act is far more deplorable than Hitlers’ [sic] Holocaust or the terrorists [sic] on 9-11.” (p. 24) Myers was called evil and a Jew. All because he held crackers hostage!

Myers seems to have hit upon a novel response to book burning. He asks of book burners:

Don’t they know about CO₂-driven climate change? Books are made of cellulose, which contains lots of interlocked long-chain carbon molecules, and burning them simply releases all that carbon into the air, where it contributes in a small way to anthropogenic global warming. Stop it! Instead, try carbon sequestration: bury the books. (p. 39)

Myers eloquently – and hilariously – writes about the benefits to nature of burying books (such as the Bible and the Qur’an.) He writes:

...you cover it up with topsoil, and then you plant flowers on top of it. That’s right, turn anathema into flowers. Everyone loves flowers. And the plants take more carbon out of the air and release more oxygen! It’s win-win-win-win, a triumph every way you look at it. (p. 40)

The author has a thoughtful list of “the Top Ten Reasons Religion is Like Pornography.” Examples include:

2. It exploits perfectly natural, even commendable impulses.
3. Its virtues are debatable, its proponents fanatical.
4. People love it but can’t give a rational reason for it.
5. It objectifies women while it worships them.

7. The costumes are outrageous, the performances silly, the plots unbelievable.
(p. 51)

Not surprisingly, *The Happy Atheist* does not have an adequate secular replacement for religionists that need to believe in an afterlife. It does seem that the best that humanists have been able to do is to advocate trans-humanism and the belief that people will be able to live forever through cryogenics. However, for most non-theists, that sounds about as farfetched as heaven or paradise.

There are people that live miserable, short, brutish lives. There are people that die in early childhood. What can the humanist say to people that simply need to believe in an afterlife? Nothing seems to fit. However, is a fantasy to be preferred to what many consider to be an ugly reality?

It has been said that “life is like an oil well. Some people get the oil and others get the shaft.” It seems that the most humanists can do is to spread the oil wealth around as generously as possible, and hope for the best.