

Speaking with Historical Figures

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

It is a fascinating exercise to decide to whom we would speak if we had the opportunity to speak with anyone from history. First, I must state that I would have no interest whatsoever in speaking with Jesus Christ. I do not believe that he was the Son of God or even a particularly interesting or brilliant moral leader.

The first person from history that I would like to speak with would be Malcolm X. I would ask him what he thinks of the Nation of Islam since Minister Louis Farrakhan assumed power. I would like to get his views on women's rights and LGBTQI rights. I would like to know what he thought of Obama's Presidency. I would be interested in getting his views on rap music and hip-hop culture. I would like to get his views on humanism among people of African descent. I would like to get his views on the relationship between the individual and society.

The second person I would like to speak with would be the great 19th Century freethinker Robert Green Ingersoll. Ingersoll was way ahead of his time on practically every major issue of his day. I would like to get his views on every important issue regarding human rights today. I would like to get his views on the New Atheists and the current state of organized humanism. I would like to get his views on the role of science and how science has been misused and abused (e.g., in eugenics, debates over race and IQ, sexism, experimentation on unknowing human beings, and so forth.)

Third, I would like to speak to Socrates. Socrates was a master at asking the deep questions and following the arguments wherever they lead. I would love to hear him have deep discussions about Christianity and Islam. I would like to get his views on American-style democracy and capitalism. I would like to ask him how important wisdom is in government. What does he truly think of a nation that somehow managed to bring a man like Donald Trump to power? Does participatory democracy always bring about positive results? What happens when, as his star pupil Plato predicted, democracies become "too free" to the point where, paradoxically, democracy itself is threatened?

Fourth, I would like to speak to Confucius. He asked, if we do not know human beings, how can we know gods? He was all about good conduct guided by wisdom. In short, he was putting Paul Kurtz's life stance of eupraxsophy into practice millennia before Kurtz was born. He had the *true* humility not to claim to be God or one of his representatives. He never wanted to be deified after his death. He never claimed to perform miracles of a religious nature and never tried to coerce or trick people into accepting his views. No holy wars are fought in his name. He certainly was not perfect, and did not profess to be. However, he did not call his students fools if they had honest questions. He was a superb moral teacher. What better teacher to ask to make a critique of modern society?

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to speak with my greatest heroine, Eleanor Roosevelt. First and foremost, I would like to ask her why she believes that so many White women voted for a misogynist like Donald Trump when they had the rare opportunity to elect the first woman as President. I would like to ask her what the role of First Lady (or First Man) should be. I would like to get her views on intersectionality, or the idea that people from various backgrounds and with varied interests should unite and fight for freedom and justice for all.

I would certainly like to ask all of these historical figures their opinions on the best way forward for the human race. However, unlike Christians speaking to Christ, I would not accept any of these figures' words as gospel. I would use their words to sharpen my own thoughts and come to my own conclusions.

Unfortunately, this is all fantasy. We can only guess what they would say on various issues given the changing times. Still, there is something to be said for the "What Would Jesus Do?" mindset. We could ask ourselves what our heroes, heroines and role models from times past might do today. However, the ultimate decisions must rest with us. This should not be cause for trepidation. On the contrary. We should embrace it as the opportunity to do our very best, and maybe even make history in our own way.