

On the Internet and Religion

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

If only most religious people would use very simple Web searches when religious questions arose, organized religion would shrink at incredible rates. In the 1990s, freethinker Farrell Till predicted that religion would wither away with the growth of the Web. Though the rise of the Web has been a factor in turning people away from organized religion, there are still large numbers of people attending houses of worship, and so forth.

When I was younger, I had to go to libraries and order rare books and other literature through the mail to learn about atheism, freethought, rationalism, secular humanism, and so on. Just as today, there were no major television or radio programs promoting non-theism. In many cases, if some religious bozo in a pulpit made some outrageous claim, there was no way to immediately find out if it stood up to critical examination. There were no bestselling books on atheism. On the contrary, the only time that atheism was mentioned in public was when it was being bashed by dogmatic theists. The entire culture was set up in favor of theism.

However, today there is no excuse for the widespread ignorance of the masses where religion is concerned. Whenever a religious leader gives a sermon filled with questionable claims, anyone with access to the Web can easily examine these claims. There is no longer any need to leave home or order books through the mail. Within a matter of minutes, anyone can have information at their fingertips easily demolishing the strongest of spiritual claims. Why are so many religionists reluctant to go this route, though they might peruse the Web in any other area?

Many religionists have bought the popular lie that spiritual faith is perhaps life's greatest virtue. They are not bothered by blatant contradictions, inconsistencies, atrocities and absurdities in their sacred texts. Their motto is "faith at any cost," even if it means throwing reason away.

Other people simply waste too much time on the Web. They spend countless hours reading and sending mind-numbing messages on social media, playing silly games, gossiping, and so forth. All the while, they are imbibing religious messages thoughtlessly.

Today there are numerous non-religious writers, bloggers, authors and others all over the Web. There are countless YouTube videos featuring atheists, scientific critiques of religion, and so on. There is more information than ever before on great freethinkers in history such as Robert Green Ingersoll. There are numerous excellent Websites dedicated to non-theism. Yet if religionists do not open their minds, they will never see the light.

Some religionists use the Web in the same way that most people in general use it. They use it to strengthen, rather than challenge, their deeply cherished ideas. Most non-theists use it in this way. The major difference is that most non-theists have already been exposed to theism since they were very young. Conversely, most theists do not get exposure to the strongest critiques of theism at least until they are in college.

I wish the Web had been available to me when I was younger. I would have embraced non-theism at least by the time I was in my teens. (As it turned out, I did not become a full-fledged atheist until I was 31.) I might have become a full-time secular humanist activist and author at a much earlier age. I might have gone on to excel in other areas.

When I was a religionist, I was blown away by the design argument, creationism and a belief in biblical prophecy. I did not have access to strong atheistic critiques of these ideas. However, today, simple Web searchers will lead inquiring minds to Websites, videos, articles, and so on demolishing all of this nonsense.

As a young child, whenever I would ask my mother to define a word or give me information about a particular subject, she would tell me to go to the dictionary or an encyclopedia, even when she knew the answer (which she usually did.) Similarly, today we should teach children that there are good answers on the Internet to practically any question they might have – even questions about the existence of God. By telling me to find information on my own, my mother taught me one of the most valuable lessons of my life.

This is not to say that we can believe everything we read on the Web. There are bad sites and a lot of misinformation out there. However, there are reliable sites with excellent information. We need to teach children how best to determine which sites contain good information, and to develop their critical thinking skills to the fullest. In this way children will more easily understand the weaknesses of theism, the paranormal, and many other subjects.