

My Religion Rejection Story

by Donald B. Ardell

I was born Catholic. By coincidence, my parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts and everybody in the Southwest Philadelphia neighborhood where the stork dropped me off were also Catholic.

Actually, I checked the records recently and discovered I was not born Catholic. I was born a “None.” However, I became a Catholic at age two days. That’s when my parents took me to the local Catholic Church and had me baptized.

Thing is, I don’t recall being asked what religion, if any, I preferred or even if I consented to the medieval ritual of baptism. If I had any interest in religion at the time, which I suspect I did not, I would have picked Pastafarian or Jedi. Pastafarianism, come to think of it, hadn’t yet been discovered so I probably would have gone with the Jedi order, with its glorious 25,000 year tradition of doing good and keeping the peace. This religion focuses on raising Humanist leaders who serve throughout the cosmos. That would have been just the thing when I got here in the middle of July, 1938. Alas, at this time, the Jedis must have been elsewhere, keeping law and order in other galaxies. Thus, **Adolf Hitler**’s stormtroopers were going about breaking windows and otherwise doing permanent damage to the idea that any group henceforth could ever claim to be a master race. Der Fuhrer was drafting what in two months would be known as the Munich Agreement that, after being signed by Prime Minister **Neville Chamberland**, encouraged German troops to occupy the Sudetenland, after which nearly everything here on Earth went to shit for the next six or seven years.

But Christianity? The Roman Catholic Church? No friggin’ way! I may have been only two days old at baptism time, but I was certain I had not committed any sin, which is what this foolishness is designed to eradicate or absolve with holy water and magic words. The Catholic religion considered my first sin to be an original one. How could that have happened? I was innocent and I could have proved it. I was never out of my mother’s sight those first 48 hours.

Anyway, the baptism ceremony seemed totally ridiculous, but I was not sufficiently resolute of will or strong enough of body to invite the priest, my parents or the crowd of relatives and friends to bugger off and leave me be. I missed the chance to assert that I did not intend to commence my life as the star of a mindless ritual of superstition. My alleged sin was neither accurate, sensible nor original. I didn’t do what they said I did (arrive with a sin) so I didn’t need a baptism, and I would have told them so, if it had occurred to me.

The fact is, I barely remember the baptism — I only recall that the priest who tried to drown me was decked out in a silly robe, looking like **Charlton Heston**, while my parents, glowing and happy and dressed in their Sunday finery, approved wholeheartedly. I was clothed only in a loaded diaper. I must have been mortified.

Throughout my preschool and first three grade years, I didn’t think much about Catholicism. I didn’t challenge what I was told — nobody, not my parents and certainly not the priests or nuns, wanted little Catholics (or adults, for that matter) to think for themselves, to challenge or question anything about church teachings. Doubt was not good; faith was all one needed. Some guy named Thomas was a doubter, and no nun or priest ever spoke well of the old boy.

By fourth and fifth grades, however, I began to lose interest. Not to rebel — just to zone out when exposed to Lent, Holy Days of Obligation, prayers, sacraments, rituals, miracles, and especially the horrors of Hell. Nuns used to compete among themselves to see who could scare us the most with illustrations of what Hell was like. Compared with these cloistered ladies, **Hieronymus Bosch** was painting verdant, peaceful landscapes.

I remember a lesson on eternity and Hell described by Sister Saint George: She drew a line on the blackboard between our schoolyard and the moon, a distance of 238,900 miles. We were to imagine how long it would take if a sparrow could fly to the moon, take a peck, and fly back to deposit the peck in the schoolyard, then continue round trips until the entire moon was moved to earth, presumably filling the schoolyard. “That’s how long we would be in Hell,” she said, writhing and screaming and thirsty beyond belief “if we died with a mortal sin on our soul.” And if that were not enough to appreciate how long we would suffer, the dear lady in black and white with the nun behavioral clicker on her hip announced that the bird would have to return the moon to where she got the peck, and that this cycle would be never-ending. It was rumored that several classmates decided then and there to declare a calling from God to become priests.

I remember reading **Theodosius Dobzhansky**, an evolutionary biologist, who famously proclaimed in 1973 that “nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution.” I had never encountered the word “evolution,” never mind a chapter in biology about it. In 12 years of Catholic education, nothing made sense about astronomy either, or of geology, human sexuality or the nature of other religions, for one simple reason — nothing of the kind was even broached. The only lesson that came close to an understanding of our own solar system, galaxy or the larger universe was the lesson given by Sister Saint George featuring the bird pecking at the moon to convey the enormity of time. Good thing I did some remedial education in such matters during a few years of military service before enrolling at George Washington University.

There are countless factors large and small that, over time, affect my thinking about Catholicism specifically, and religion in general, even while still in grade school. By the time I finished high school I was certain all of it was dotty and daft.

The first factor was exposure to the writings of skeptics, particularly **Bertrand Russell**, **H. L. Mencken**, **Madalyn Murray O’Hair** and **Sinclair Lewis**. The latter’s book, *Elmer Gantry*, was enormously influential and led to the second major factor in my mental liberation from childhood indoctrination.

The second factor was **Billy Graham** and, to a lesser extent, television and radio preachers of the early 1950s, including Bishop **Fulton Sheen**, **Percy Crawford** and **Oral Roberts**. My parents listened to these fire and brimstone mountebanks because they liked the music! I was always gobsmacked that my otherwise sensible parents were not appalled at the drivel that emanated from these grotesque creatures, let alone being attracted to their programs. If what these holy men had on offer was religion I definitely wanted no part of it.

My parents were nominal Catholics. My dad was raised Methodist, and only switched to Catholicism because that was the only way he could marry my mother. That's how it was in the mid-30s and some time thereafter. Save for having me baptized and sending me to Catholic schools because parochial schools were alleged to be superior and safer than the nearby public schools, they were nominal Catholics. They wanted to believe in God and an afterlife, but neither discouraged my growing resistance to religion.

The third factor was the doctrine of eternal punishment, and "a God who lacked a pardon power," to borrow a phrase from "The Great Agnostic," **Robert Green Ingersoll**. It was much easier to turn against this horrific idea than to live with it.

The final factor was a streak of independence and an inclination toward rebellion. This quality did not always give me the best results growing up, but served me well in breaking the bonds of religion.

For me, the absence of religion is one key condition of happiness. My life as a freethinker is reliant on reason and is one way I live in accordance with the condition of happiness free from religion.

I'll conclude this journal of my religion rejection story with these words from Ingersoll:

I am doing what little I can to hasten the day when the human race will enjoy liberty, not just of body but liberty

of mind, and by liberty of mind I mean freedom from superstition, and added to that, the intelligence to find out the conditions of happiness, and added to that, the wisdom to live in accordance with those conditions."



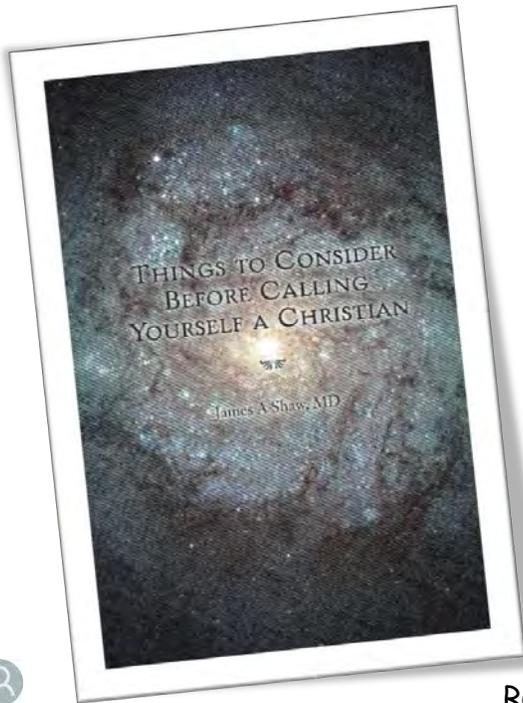
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Ardell is a champion triathlete, having won more than a dozen national and seven world championships in the sport. He is the

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His latest book, *NOT DEAD YET: World Triathlon Champions 75+ Offer Tips for Thriving & Flourishing in Later Life* is available on Amazon.com. When ordering, please participate in the AmazonSmile program designating the Freethought Society as your benefits recipient.



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James A. Shaw, MD

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