

Preaching to the converted

The inaugural conference of the [Free Society Institute](#) was held on August 29, 2009. I recently launched the FSI with the intention of providing an umbrella organisation for the various atheist/secular/etc. organisations in South Africa, much as the [IHEU](#) does internationally. What follows is the speech from which I no doubt deviated at the conference.

The first question many of you may be curious about is: "Why do we need another secular/humanist/atheist association or grouping in South Africa (or anywhere, for that matter)?" The answer to that question is a combination of philosophical, political and practical motivations, and will hopefully become clear before too long.

As a starting point, let me be clear that I in no way intend to diminish or discredit the work done by various individuals and associations in defending free thought and rationality in South Africa. I'm proud to myself have been associated with many of these groupings, yet have often felt that coherence and organisation has been lacking - we start with good intentions, relying on goodwill and the motivation of individuals, and then find our enthusiasm waning as time passes. Part of the reason for this is the splintering into various factions, where some call themselves free-thinkers, others humanists, others agnostics or atheists. These fragmented headquarters seem to sometimes forget the underlying, and obvious, truth - that we're fighting the same battle, and should therefore join forces.

And a battle it is: despite the fact that the majority of the human race are fully committed to the tenets of reason and the principles of scientific enquiry that most of our activities depend on to run smoothly, we still have parents teaching their children to believe in sky-gods. We still encounter tax-breaks or preferential treatment being afforded to organisations premised on Iron-age mythology, and we still have to run the risk of having law and policy being influenced or dictated by people who claim to have a personal relationship with their invisible friends. Despite the fact that many of these people are generous and friendly, none of this can be counted on to be benign, as I have previously argued, and we should therefore remain on our guard.

One thing we should certainly remain on guard against is complacency and arrogance. The mantra of the secular movement has long been that we are guided by reason, rather than by dogma or superstition. But as some of our critics have pointed out, the tone of our discourse, and the uncharitable nature of our engagements with believers, has sometimes appeared to be as dogmatic and intolerant as that to which we profess opposition. We sometimes forget that it's not enough to be right - to win this war, we need to persuade people that we are right, and that sometimes requires more subtlety, more finesse, and more strategy than we sometimes allow for. Beating someone about the head with your logic-stick is unlikely to have them leaving the exchange as a sympathiser, rather than someone who has had their existing prejudices against atheists reinforced.

More important, perhaps, is that we become so comfortable with our arguments, and our essential *right-ness*, that we forget to even listen to what the opposition has to say. This is part of the reason why we have some believers among us today, who are given an equal opportunity to present their arguments. Our commitment is to judge arguments on their merits, rather than to pre-judge any viewpoint as being inescapably absurd or noxious.

We should recall that strategy requires choosing your battles wisely, as all participants in a battle have a certain amount of currency to squander, or to wisely invest in potential future rewards. As an example, consider the recent nomination of Francis Collins to head the National Institutes of Health, which had atheists up and down the aisles in apoplexy, given that Collins is an outspoken defender of the Christian faith. Most of us, I'd imagine, delight in quoting some of Collins' more absurd utterances, and some of us claim to be genuinely afraid that a man whose world-view is so polluted by metaphysics has been given the keys to the scientific kingdom.

But any knee-jerk reaction to the appointment of Collins may not serve our longer-term interests. There is no doubt that Collins is not the perfect candidate, and I would certainly prefer for the head of the NIH to not be a god-botherer. But is he nevertheless the best available candidate? I worry that our negative reaction to his appointment is so immediate, and so *unthinking*, that this possibility never occurs to many of us. And if this is true, we should be very concerned at being so unthinking, never mind whatever concerns we might justifiably hold regarding Collins.

Reasons to suppose he might be the best available candidate are his impressive track record as both a scientist as well as an administrator - in a job where being a competent administrator is perhaps the most important virtue - as demonstrated by his successful completion of the brief awarded to the Human Genome Project, where he brought the work in on-time and under-budget. Of course it is of concern that he might end up blocking research in directions that run contrary to his religious beliefs, or that he might reinforce the unfortunate notion that the demands of scientific enquiry and religion are happy bedfellows. They are not, and I have no doubt that mental contortions are often required when one tries to hold these positions simultaneously.

But do we have any *evidence* that Collins lets his religious beliefs get in the way of science? No. And is evidence not the thing we claim to be driven by? Second, are we being consistent in this instance - where consistency of argument is again a principle I'd imagine us all to subscribe to? I think not. Instead, it's quite probably the case that there are other scientists in prominent positions who hold views we think odious - perhaps on gender relations, perhaps on race, perhaps on Zionism. But perhaps these views are not interrogated as closely as those implicated in this atheist vs. theist/deist war, and we can therefore claim ignorance. All the while, Collins will most likely attract significant amounts of funding, and will most likely advance science and the scientific viewpoint more effectively than any other available candidate, *despite* his curious commitment to certain fairy-tales. In other words, his appointment may end up representing a *net gain* for the secular cause, even though many of us appear to be too blinkered to see that possibility.

As I mentioned previously, we need to pick our battles. As soon as Collins shows that he has directed the NIH against reason or science, we should jump in with all cannons blazing. But until that time, he seems to be a good man, and the evidence suggests that he is a good scientist. We therefore seem intolerant at best, and nasty and judgemental at worst, for labelling him a failure before he's even had a chance to do anything to deserve our scorn. Perhaps he is able to separate his professional life from those particular beliefs. I confess to being skeptical, but in this, as in all cases, I aspire to be guided by the evidence rather than by my prejudices.

At Atheist Alliance International in 2007, Sam Harris argued that we should stop calling ourselves atheists, as that does little more than polarise opinion. Harris also pointed out - correctly - that we should not need a word for what we believe, seeing as there seems little reason to define a philosophical position in opposition to a bundle of primitive myths. I'm not making that claim, although I'm happy to support the sentiment insofar that we don't all need to be militant atheists. As Dennett points out, people like Dawkins act as lightning rods, laying plain the terms of the debate and the consequences of ignoring the real dangers that metaphysical beliefs present to Enlightenment ideals. We do need such people on our side - but that does not mean that there isn't room for other sorts of engagement, and other types of strategy.

Calling people misguided, or stupid, or irrational is no way to get them to engage in debate with you. And as much as we might despise the current situation, where religion is accorded respect as if it were a sensible way to derive policy, or morality, we should be aware that short-term gains may come at a long-term cost. It's easy to win an argument with a religious believer, as their evidence is almost exclusively incoherent, circular or contradictory. And we can win these arguments till the end of our days, and perhaps feel noble or virtuous in that we are contributing to the project of reason. But we should remember to ask ourselves whether we are effecting any significant social change by doing so, and whether there is perhaps a more efficient way to effect such changes.

Consider the example of Denmark, often cited as one of the most secular societies on the planet - and also, notably, one of the societies with the lowest rates of crime on the planet. A notable thing about public discourse in that society is that religion is hardly ever mentioned. Believers keep their beliefs to themselves, understanding those beliefs as a private thing, and atheists are, well, redundant. The norm is that secular arguments are what dictate policy, and one could imagine religious interactions as being more akin to social gatherings than anything else. A large part of the reason for this is most likely their relative wealth, where most people have the sort of education the average South African could only dream of, and where one has no need to comfort oneself with metaphysics on another cold and hungry night.

We'll get there, as will any other country that resists insanities such as tariffs and quotas on trade that are premised on some misguided nationalism. As education and social welfare improve, our people will no longer be incentivised to believe in fairy-tales, as they will have no need for them. In the meanwhile, when people talk nonsense - about morality depending on religion, about the sanctity of the heterosexual union or whatever, we should point that out. But they are talking nonsense *regardless* of these metaphysical disputes, not only *because* of them. The *because* is merely descriptive - an account of their particular histories - and we should be more concerned with the normative; with how to persuade people to adopt a more considered view with regard to these issues, and to their lives in general.

To some extent, we should remember that we're on the same side as many the believers - we all want happier lives, which means less crime, more companionship of the right sort, material comfort and so forth. They have a vision of how to get there which involves persuading people to adopt a bizarre, and very complicated, worldview which involves talking to unknowable entities. It's fairly clear from the outside that their strategy is doomed, in that as people become more educated, it becomes less likely that an unfalsifiable package like Christianity, or Islam, or Judaism will strike them as reasonable or coherent. But at the same time, we should remember that we see clear evidence - in felt experience at least - that

people like narratives, and like narratives especially when they are grand. So if we can stop the intrusion of religion onto policy, into University timetables, into op-eds in newspapers, then we've already stripped it of most of its power. It's little or no threat that people huddle to sing songs to a common cause, as football fans do every weekend. Where the threat lies is in people tying their beliefs together in a package they have been sold as Protestantism or whatever, whereby they can no longer provide any arguments for that position except for their foundational stance, and whereby they essentially remove themselves from the conversation - and from civilised society, in that civilisation is premised on exchange, whether of ideas or goods.

So let us engage on the ideas, with some of us fighting the lightning-rod battles, and others focusing on the equally important, but perhaps less sexy battles: against bad science, against dogma and superstition dictating public policy. But let us remember, all the while, that it is the yearning for idealism that drives people to fundamentalism, as Neiman recently reminded us in *Moral Clarity*. Realism and pragmatism of the sort provided by most atheists don't offer that utopian vision, which is a political reality we'd do well to bear in mind. And while we don't want to exchange the current set of myths with a different set, and thereby perpetuate the infantilisation of the species, we can at least set an example via reasoned and considered engagement with our opposition.

With that in mind, let me very briefly state what I imagine the FSI's role to be. We are (or will soon be) a registered non-profit organisation. I hope that we will continue to organise events such as our conference today, and grow into becoming a significant voice in South African public policy, while exposing our members and interested parties to the most recent and interesting developments in the so called "culture-wars". I would hope for like-minded groupings across the country to use us as a central repository for archiving talks and announcing events, and for the media and South Africans in general to realise that there is a constituency out there who are curious, and critical, and that we are many. I hope that you'll all go to the [FSI website](#), register on the forum, and join the conversation.

Jacques Rousseau

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