

What does free-thinkers have in common?

From Siddhartha Gautama to the present day.

Summary

There seems to run a **common thread** through the strivings and actions of free-thinkers and revolutionaries. Starting with Siddhartha Gautama's endorsement of free-inquiry in the Kalama Discourse we try to identify the different fibres that constitute this common thread between free-thinkers.

Address by Roux Malan
at the FSI/IHEU Conference on 29 August 2009

Roux Malan is a **free-thinker** and on certain days of the week he identifies with the role of **life-coach** and on other days the role of **minister** of the **Cape Town Unitarian Community** (<http://www.unitarian.net23.net>). He holds a **Masters Degree in Theology** that he still is trying to master. He sometimes enjoys a little "Boere Boeddisme", philosophy, poetry and art.

CONTENT OF THE ADDRESS

JOKE

During the French Revolution two men were due to be executed:

One was a **Catholic priest**
and the other a **freethinker**.

The Catholic priest was marched up onto the platform first.

Facing the guillotine, he was asked if he had any last words.

So he cried out, "I believe in ONE GOD, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and he will save me!"

With that the executioner positioned his head below the blade and pulled the cord to set the deadly process in motion.

The heavy blade rushed downwards through the air.

But suddenly with a crack, it stopped only centimeters above the priest's neck.

Looking at the executioner the priest said, "You see. I told you so!"

"It's a miracle!" exclaimed the crowd. The executioner had to agree, so he set the priest free.

Next was the freethinker's turn.

"What your final words?" asked the executioner?

But the freethinker was lost in thought.

So the executioner poked him in the ribs for an answer.

Suddenly the freethinker cried out, "You gullible, superstitious fools. This was no miracle! It is a blockage in the gears, right there!"

So I guess now you know why there are so few freethinkers in the world.

But freethought didn't begin or end with the French Revolution. Nor was it limited to Europe alone. Freethought has a long history that has spanned many centuries, many continents, and many cultures.

TWO QUOTES

Two quotes, one from the East and one from the West illustrate this fact.

The first is the words of **Siddhartha Gautama** (better known as the Buddha) to the Kalama clan when they didn't know whom to believe:

"It is good for you, Kalamas, to doubt and to be uncertain. For you should not accept something due to revelation, or tradition, or hearsay, or the authority of sacred texts. Nor should you accept something on the grounds of pure logic, or due to the fact that it seems rational or only because you agree with it. But when you know for yourselves that it is acceptable or unacceptable then you can either adopt or abandon it."

The second quote is from an essay of the philosopher **Bertrand Russell**:

"What makes a freethinker are not his beliefs but the way in which he holds them. If he holds them because someone in authority told him it is true his thought is not free; but if he holds them because, after careful consideration he finds a balance of evidence in their favor, then his thought is free."

A WIDE RANGE OF PEOPLE

These two quotes demonstrate that we can consider a wide range of people to be freethinkers: not only atheists and agnostics but also deists and liberal religious innovators. In fact we can include all those who have challenged the predominant orthodoxies in every field of endeavor be it science, politics, religion or the arts.

QUESTION: WHAT DO THEY HAVE IN COMMON?

The question that really interests me though is what it is that these freethinkers have in common. So in the rest of this paper I will try to illuminate some of the common themes.

DISCOMFORT IN THE FACE OF UNQUESTIONABLE TRUTHS

One major trait I believe all freethinkers share is a profound discomfort when faced with so-called unquestionable or absolute truths. This feeling of resistance and discomfort probably stems from a freethinker's deeply held belief that everybody ought to have the right to think for themselves. For freethinkers so-called unquestionable truths or dogmas are a denial of this basic right.

It is therefore fully understandable that **religion** very often has been one of the prime targets of freethinkers. The fact that religions very often try to protect their beliefs from being scrutinized by appealing to a sacred text or a sacred individual doesn't seem honest to freethinkers. And like in so many spheres in life those who dare to question tend to be rejected or marginalized.

WILLINGNESS TO FACE REJECTION

Therefore the second common denominator among freethinkers is a willingness to face rejection and ridicule and in some cases even death in order to assert their right to think for themselves. Freethinkers are not afraid to bite the proverbial apple and to be expelled from the garden. In fact most freethinkers believe that freedom doesn't necessarily lie within the confines of the garden of their own cultural conditioning, but that true freedom can only be gained by visiting and tasting the fruit of multiple gardens. They prefer open to closed systems of thought. If someone closes the door they will open a window. If someone imprisons them they will still claim the undeniable freedom of their own thoughts.

DOUBT IS HIGHER THAN FAITH

Therefore freethinkers tend to deem doubt and uncertainty of greater value than belief and certainty. They know that critical thinking is one of the most powerful tools to keep a thought system open and healthy. They also know that healthy doubt is the best insurance policy against the human tendency to get attached to its own beliefs and particular worldview. Obviously like unquestioned faith doubt can be over-exercised. But then it is worthwhile to remember that history taught us that unquestioned answers very often prove to be more dangerous than unanswered questions.

IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL THINKING

Therefore freethinkers hold reflection, critical thinking, research (which doesn't need to be academic) and inquiry in high esteem. They are keen to engage with the minds of others be it in person or via books and other means of communication. But it is also important to note that freethinkers never are satisfied to engage an issue merely in a second hand way. In fact freethinkers value direct experience far higher than any text, authority or second hand testimony. Freethinkers are committed to not only think for themselves, but to experience things for themselves as well. They are keen to do their own empirical research and inquiry and dare I say freethinkers very often doggedly follow their own instincts and gut feelings.

ENGAGED IN THE WORLD'S PLIGHT

Therefore it will be wrong to say that freethinkers are dispassionate and unemotional individuals who only live in their heads. In fact the great freethinkers of this world were directly engaged in efforts to make this world a better place whether it be on the religious, political, social, scientific or the artistic front.

Freethinkers believe that if we ought to claim our freedom we also need to be prepared to take on the responsibilities that freedom requires. Due to the fact that most freethinkers do not rely on others or forces beyond themselves to make the world a better place they are prepared to play their part to be the change they want to see.

HUMANISTS & NATURALISTS

Most freethinkers are deeply moved by the issues that they and their fellow human beings grapple with. Therefore many freethinkers throughout human history were humanists at the core even those who held certain religious beliefs. They were generally people who were deeply moved by the plight of their fellow-human beings especially those who found themselves to be marginalized and disempowered. But this sense of care and compassion extended far beyond the human realm to all living beings on our dear planet as well as to the natural world in which we dwell. Consequently many freethinkers were also naturalists.

FASCINATION WITH PRODUCTS OF HUMAN CREATIVITY

Furthermore freethinkers have a deep fascination with the products of human creativity and inquiry. Therefore freethinkers tend to explore and question the many realms in which human creativity express itself whether it be music, art, poetry or religion.

EXTENDING THE SAME FREEDOM TO OTHERS

Lastly freethinkers are happy to extend the freedom that they claim for themselves to others as well.

The famous freethinker Thomas Paine said:

"I have always strenuously supported the Right of every Man to his own opinion, however different that opinion might be to mine. He who denies to another this right, makes a slave of himself to his present opinion, because he precludes himself the right of changing it."

And it was our own Nelson Mandela who said:

"For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

So this needs to be our aim. To claim freedom of thought and speech for ourselves while simultaneously respecting and enhancing the freedom of others to do the same.

I thank you!