

Rejecting Religion

Four award-winning essays
from the 1982 Freedom From
Religion Foundation
Scholarship Competition

\$3.00

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Introduction

Breaking away from repressive religions may be unnecessarily traumatic for many young people, simply because there is so little social support for their rational decisions. That our Christian dominated society tries to keep dissenters voiceless and closet-bound has meant that those who reject religion not only may experience criticism and ostracism, but frequently are convinced they must be the only freethinkers around.

As part of its educational program the Freedom From Religion Foundation offers \$1,000.00 in cash scholarships each year for freethought essays. In 1982 students who competed were asked to write about rejecting religion, and the four winning essays are published here.

Winners from previous years are Dennis Hillin, CA; David Gewanter, MI; Jimmy Smith, GA; Nicola Carter, IL; and Margaret Thale, WI.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is a national membership group working to promote the constitutional principle of state/church separation and to educate the public about nontheistic beliefs.

The Foundation is pleased to share with you these freethought essays by college students.

*Anne Gaylor, President
Freedom From Religion Foundation
P.O. Box 750
Madison, WI 53701*

August, 1982

Eric Wegner

***Choking
on the Communal
Wafer***

First Place Award



Eric Wegner
Pullman, Washington

Eric, 26, farms with his brother near Pullman in southeast Washington State. He was granted degrees in communications and English in 1979 from Washington State University and currently is studying biology, specifically Integrated Pest Management, a system utilizing biological control and assorted ecologically sensible techniques to reduce the use of farm pesticides. A part-time student, he hopes to enter the master's degree program. Originally, Eric had planned to become a reporter, but when his father became ill he returned to help him farm, and he decided to keep on farming after his father's death. Eric was baptized in the Lutheran church in 1956, confirmed in 1971 and "fell from grace that same year." Eric said, "I appreciated the opportunity, not just to compete for a scholarship, but to finally organize in my own mind the series of events which led to my eventual apostacy. As I like to tell the door-to-door evangelists, I used to be a devoted Christian, but I outgrew it."

I could love my mother, who held me and comforted me when I hurt, but how could I love God, the Father with the bloody hands who was so quick to anger?

Sometimes I remember the night that God came to me in a dream. It was my first nightmare.

God was always near me when I was young. He was in the church with the hard seats, of course, but He watched me at all times, even when I was all alone. I could feel Him most when I was alone, but I never saw Him. God was not like Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, because He never let me see Him or touch Him, and He was there all the time, not just at special times of the year. Also, He didn't just bring good things, He could also bring bad things. That made Him seem even more real than Santa Claus to me, even though He stayed out of sight. I believed in God long after I stopped believing in Santa Claus.

Mom explained to me that God is our Holy Father, and just like my real father, He rewards us when we do good and punishes us when we do bad. He had made the whole world with a word, and He knew what was in men's hearts, so I should always remember that God would judge me, and stay from sin.

I learned about God as I grew. My mother read the Bible to me for bedtime stories, and sometimes I couldn't sleep after the night's chapter had been read, and I would beg to hear the next chapter to find out if Abraham would really kill his son as God asked, or if Moses would bring another curse on Pharaoh, or if Daniel would be torn apart in the lions' den.

Between the lines there was God, and He seemed to be very hard to please. I listened as God drove Adam and Eve from paradise for eating an apple, flooded the earth to drown those who did not love Him, brought pestilence and famine and plague to the Egyptians, forty years of misery to His chosen people, condemned whole nations to bloody and violent deaths, handed down enormous volumes of strange laws and never seemed satisfied with the people He had created. I was told to fear and love this God. Fearing came easily, for what child

cannot be taught to fear the powerful and unseen? But I found to my distress that I could not love Him. I could love my mother, who held me and comforted me when I hurt, but how could I love God, the Father with the bloody hands who was so quick to anger? How could I love such a God?

And yet I knew that not loving God was a terrible sin. I tried to love God, I tried very hard, but it was too much to ask. Every time I thought I was starting to love God I would remember how horribly angry He would be if He read my heart and saw my love was pretended, and my love would turn back to fear. I was trapped, like Adam and Eve in the garden. I could not get into Heaven without loving God, and I could not hide from God's wrath on Earth. I knew that soon He would punish me for not loving Him. He had to, because He was a Just God, and He could not ignore sin.

The punishment came in the form of a dream. God Himself came into my sleeping mind, with Jesus on his right side and a shadow on his left. God looked like the lithograph of Moses in the old testament of my grandmother's Bible, with the same angry face and wild hair. He pointed at me, and Jesus tied me with ropes. The ropes hurt terribly. God pointed at the shadow, and told me that was where people went who did not love Him. I woke up screaming.

My mother was there, telling me it was alright, that it was only a bad dream.

God had spoken to me. God spoke to people in dreams: I knew that from the Bible. I also knew that my mother could not come between me and God should He decide to send me to the shadow. Had Abraham tried to save Isaac when God demanded human blood? No, that patriarch had lifted the knife himself.

It was alright, mom was saying, tell me about the bad dream and then you'll be able to go to sleep again.

I couldn't tell her the dream. She would be hurt to find that at the age of five I was already damned, after she had tried so hard to teach me about loving God. And she couldn't help me anyway. You can't stop God from doing anything He wants, even if it's a terrible thing.

I told mom one of my earliest and most desperate lies: that I had dreamed of falling. Another sin, I figured, would not make Hell any hotter.

I learned about God after that in Sunday School, and He didn't come into my dreams anymore. In fact God changed completely. In the Sunday School lessons He always helped men and listened to their prayers, and even sent His own son to be killed instead of asking other people to kill their sons for Him. I began to wonder who this God was that these people wor-

There seemed to be two Gods in the Bible: the one I remembered and the one the church was selling. The churches' God was a favorite uncle, the family doctor and the President of the United States during wartime. My God was a stern judge, Jack the Ripper, a demanding parent and the school principal.

shipped, and why He seemed so different from the God in my dream.

As I continued to grow in the church I came to question its teachings more. There seemed to be two Gods in the Bible: the one I remembered and the one the church was selling. The churches' God was a favorite uncle, the family doctor and the President of the United States during wartime. My God was a stern judge, Jack the Ripper, a demanding parent and the school principal. I believed in my God, but I could not love Him. I could have loved the churches' God if I could have believed in Him.

I decided that my fellow Christians didn't know what they were worshipping. In confirmation class I asked why God allowed bad things to happen.

"Because of sin."

But didn't Christ take away sin? Why, after that bloody sacrifice and atonement, is there still suffering?

"Because man is still sinful."

Then did Christ's death accomplish nothing?

"We are to be born again through Christ, this time without sin. When there is no sin there will be no suffering."

What is sin?

"Sin is not loving God."

* * * * *

Introit:

Celebrant: We come before God as children.

Congregation: To purify our souls we purge our minds.

Celebrant: Let us lobotomize ourselves.

Congregation: Lord, we confess that we have sinned against Thee, by creative thoughts, critical analysis and rational action. Thou, who art the originator of all, teach us not to desecrate Thy work by attempting originality on our own. Bring us to Thy divine stagnation, that we may become even as Thy plants are.

Celebrant: O Lord, who didst give man his brain which hath set him above the beasts of the earth, accept our brains back, pure and unused, symbol of our devotion.

Congregation: We have used them not. Take them back.

Celebrant: We have kept our talents buried. We have been as Thou hast commanded, like the birds of the air, not thinking of our own futures. We neither plan nor prepare for we wish only to die and leave this life which we have made miserable according to Thy will.

Congregation: We are ashamed of our bodies, and of the act of procreation. We have surrendered our minds to others, who think for us and interpret Thy Infallible Word for us. Yet we have not passed into extinction, but through the miracle of Thy grace we have multiplied like the very rabbits.

Celebrant: We are stupid but numerous.

All: Ours is the power, to dominate the land: to spread Thy Word through fanatic zealots, embarrassing evangelists and genocidal missionaries. Ours is the glory, to crush new thought, to burn at the stake those who can disprove the flimsy lies which are our faith. Blind us to our hypocrisy, Lord, that we may continue Thy work as always, Amen.

* * * * *

I tried to fit into the church. I sang the hymns and tried to concentrate on the lessons and act like a good Christian, because I still believed in God and I still feared Hell. And still, I did not love God.

The fear of damnation drove me to hope that the church could fix things between God and me. I had failed, but the church said that was alright, that everyone failed. I had sinned, but the church held out the promise of forgiveness. I had not loved my God, but the churches' God loved me anyway. I struggled to accept all this, and soon it was time for my first communion and the laying on of hands.

I had seen the ritual before, had seen the elements being prepared, knew their significance, and was not afraid. As we knelt at the altar the girl on my right started speaking in tongues under her breath. I had heard her do it before. I was given a thin white wafer, which I took in one hand, instead of using two as if it were a great weight, as most people did. The wafer tasted like fish food. Next they brought the wine, the blood of Christ. The man passing out the little thimbles of blood was trembling from the responsibility of his task. I took the wine, and it loosened the wafer from where it had stuck to the roof of my mouth. I swallowed, and both wine and wafer went straight into my windpipe.

God disapproves of sex, of laughing in the library, of marijuana and Mark Twain.

With all my will I fought the gag reflexes, trying not to spit the body and blood of Christ onto the white carpet of the altar. The ministers placed their hands on my head and intoned a blessing. The girl next to me was babbling happily. The organ was playing softly. I was on the verge of throwing up. At last we left the altar. My face was scarlet and I almost passed out, but I did not so much as cough.

It was only a matter of time before I left the church after that. The promised reconciliation failed and I was left to face God, my God, on my own. I struggled to understand Him, that I might be free of Him. It took me over a decade from the time of my dream before I was able to throw off the stranglehold God had over my life. I had searched for Him in the Bible, in the church, among my fellow Christians, and He had always eluded me. When I found Him at last, I realized His weakness, and His evil. He is me, or at least a part of me. He lives in my mind, a paranoia which preys on childish faith and innocence. He exists to create fear, to drive man from paradise for eating apples.

Paradise, however, is only mindlessness, and the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is freedom. The serpent was right: when we eat of the fruit we do become equal to God.

I have caged my malevolent God in the darkest corner of my mind. I cannot kill Him, because He is a part of me, but I can prevent Him from dominating me again. He wants domination even now, and so I still fear Him, at least a little.

God no longer influences my life as He once did. He disapproves of sex, of laughing in the library, of marijuana, and Mark Twain. He shrieks with rage when I break His many commandments. Sometimes He tries to throw a fog of guilt on my mind over past mistakes, but I am stronger now and can suppress Him.

God once ruled my every breath, but now He only sulks and storms about His cell, telling me I am damned. I am not damned! I am free to be myself, my own twisted self. I am free because God overplayed His hand once long ago and sent me a dream. He revealed Himself for what He was, and I never forgot it. I searched for Him since that dark night, like a man driven by revenge, until I found Him in my own mind. He is a combination of my mother's outdated morality and an old lithograph. We fought for the control of my destiny and I won. I lost innocence and gained freedom: I lost faith and gained self-knowledge; I lost my sin and gained life.

Allison Heather McEwen

***How I became
a “Heathen”
in Sixteen
Short Years***

Second Place Award



Allison Heather McEwen
New Orleans, Louisiana

Allison, 20, was born in Atlanta and has lived in Nashville and New Orleans. Now a junior at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, she is majoring in journalism and political science and is editorial page editor of the University of Wisconsin student newspaper the Daily Cardinal. She is a member of Crucible, a women's honor organization. She plans a career in writing or law, as a public defender. Allison is from a Methodist family and also attended Presbyterian church.

**Girls who wear mascara grow up to be
prostitutes, bikinis cause venereal disease,
and God is the only man you can trust. . . .**

- 1968 Our father, who art in heaven
Halloween be thy name
Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us for trashbaskets
As we forgive those who trespass against us
On earth as it is in heaven
All men
- 1970 Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the
world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are
precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of
the world.
- 1971 "Does Jesus love the little children in Viet Nam?"
"What do you mean?"
"The little children in the war are dying; I saw it on
the news."
"Would you please go downstairs and get the
collection envelopes?"
- 1975 "Yeah, she's pregnant all right. Pregnant in the name of
God. It seems the wonderfully righteous Catholic
church forbids abortion, birth control, and pre-marital
sex. She only wanted to commit one sin. Guess which
one she chose? She's only 15 years old."
- 1978 "Helpmate, you say? You've got to be kidding. Women
don't belong in religion if they've got to be mere
sidekicks."

Father Bernie should have tipped me off, but I was too naive to see things clearly. Father Bernie was forcing young boys to have sex with him on the yearly retreats.

Sister Lawrence Mary helped to confirm my fears. This particular woman of god was the most ferocious nun I've ever encountered. Teaching botany at St. Bernard's School for girls, one of Nashville's finest, she taught the eighth grade class about life. Girls who wear mascara grow up to be prostitutes, bikinis cause venereal disease, and god is the only man you can trust, were just a few of her words of wisdom.

I was never liked by Sister Lawrence Mary. Her disgust was induced by my affinity for wearing "masculine" shoes and my religion. It wasn't the "right" religion. In other words, I was Presbyterian. According to Sister Lawrence Mary, if I didn't change my wicked ways, I'd be going to hell in a basket. Let's just say, it hasn't happened yet.

Not being Catholic in a Catholic school was no easy chore. The inability to produce a Hail Mary upon command caused me to lose grace in the eyes of my educators. Attending my Presbyterian church was much easier. I knew all the words to the Lord's prayer and things were going well until I learned that "we Presbyterians" believe in predestination.

Predestination is the theory that our lives are planned for us from day one. In sociological terms, the theory asserts that those who are wealthy are so because god planned it that way. Those who are less fortunate are poor because god is frowning upon them. It's interesting to note that Presbyterians are predominately in the middle-upper to upper economic class.

My disenchantment with religion grew with the knowledge that one of the church's bigwigs beat his children on a regular basis. When my family moved to New Orleans, the minister at our Methodist church also beat his children. It was all done in the name of god, however. Cracked doors and dented refrigerators in the name of the lord.

At our fine upstanding Methodist church, I was thrust under the wing of a holier than thou (and everyone else) Sunday school teacher. From this man I learned of the perils of hell:

"Your waist down will be in flames. From waist up, you're frozen in a block of ice. You can't move. The devil walks up and down the line of sinners and bops you over the head with a nine iron."

He also spoke of the horrors of abortion saying that any unmarried woman who happens "to get herself into a pickle deserves everything she gets."

My Sunday school teacher's warped and vehemently anti-feminist ideologies, I was later to learn, were not exclusive to

It must never be said that I didn't give religion a fair chance, for I did, I tried to be Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic and Charismatic. Their basic premises are similar: women don't exist in the church as viable entities. Women don't belong.

him. The lack of respect women receive in churches was the clincher in my eventual (and joyful) "fall from grace."

Cynically sixteen and disgusted with everything from machismo to the Gospel according to Mark, I ventured to the desert mountains of Texas. It was there I found the true meaning of pain, and of Jesus.

After a particularly grueling day of lugging around my ninety pound pack, two of my friends and I moved away from the male members of our hiking group. It was a little before midnight and I was still shaken by having the sterno stove blow up and catch my braids on fire. While discussing our disgust with Born Again Bob, otherwise known as Robert Benson, we heard rustling in the brush.

We were scared. No, that's a lie, we were terrified. Curiously, Born Again Bob emerged from the darkness and began to chat. He managed to sneak in a few quotes from Revelations which helped to frighten us further. After noticing our quivers, Born Again Bob launched into a "if you'd give your life to Christ tonight, you wouldn't have to worry about things anymore" crusade.

Born Again Bob convinced us. Yes, it's true. More importantly, it's embarrassing. We left Big Bend National Park with pocket sized Bibles and gift shop crosses made of copper and turquoise. Our friends were appalled, but we were ready for a better life.

I was "born again" for three weeks.

Women at the Four Gospel Charismatic church were required to wear dresses or skirts at all functions, and were frowned upon for working outside the home or for not having children in droves. One woman even stood up at testimonial time and spoke about the "worst years of her life." It seems she used to be a feminist. A FEMINIST! Horror among horrors!

Born Again Bob reprimanded me on the way home. He'd heard me mention that I might like to be a pastor. I figured that if I were to get into this religion stuff full force, I might as well do it right. WRONG, WRONG, WRONG.

Women aren't allowed to have such power in the church, according to Born Again Bob. My husband could be a pastor,

but not me. He became excessively outraged when I said that I didn't want to get married.

Goodbye church. Goodbye Jesus.

It must never be said that I didn't give religion a fair chance, for I did. I tried to be Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic, and Charismatic. Their basic premises are similar: women don't exist in the church as viable entities. Women don't belong.

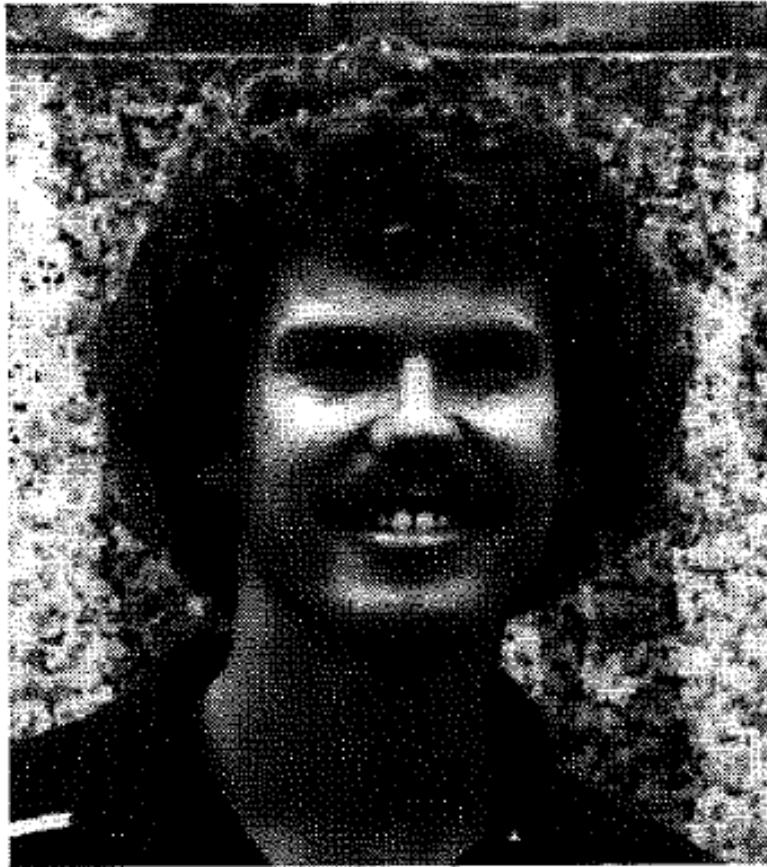
According to religion (pick your favorite), being humane means being "sinful." Reproductive rights, gay and lesbian rights, women's equality, and any other fight for civil treatment of humans goes against the grain of religious ideology.

I've been called a heathen and a stupid feminist (are the two really synonymous? You'd better believe they are).

Women's equality has no place in religion, and neither do I.

Kenneth Ibold

*If God were god
by any other
name . . .*



Kenneth Ibold

Madison, Wisconsin

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, Ken, 22, has lived in Madison, Wisconsin since 1974. From a Catholic family, he attended parochial schools in Ohio, but switched to a public high school in Wisconsin, graduating from Madison Memorial High School in 1977. He started college at the University of Wisconsin in pre-med, but dropped out for a year to work full-time for an engineering company on a survey crew. Back in school, he changed his major to journalism. A senior, he will graduate in 1983. Ken plans a career in writing and hopes to write for a magazine after graduation. A current pastime is playing drums in a local rock band.

... being a Catholic meant that every Sunday you had to punch your heavenly time clock by spending an hour in church. Participation and mental awareness did not matter, as long as your body was there.

My father was furious. In an almost hysterical rage he began grabbing things from the shelf in my bedroom and throwing them to the floor. My older brother prevented him from turning his rage on me. My crime: I had refused to go to church that morning.

That day in 1975 was when I finally decided that I had had enough. I was 15 years old, and had attended Catholic schools for seven years. I was well versed in the latest Catholic dogma, perhaps better than my father, and I had come to one conclusion: You are a good person if you do what you think is right and a bad person if you do what you know you should not.

For me, being a Catholic meant that every Sunday — plus a few other days sprinkled throughout the year — you had to punch your heavenly time clock by spending an hour in church. Participation and mental awareness did not matter, as long as your body was there. The same words were spoken time after time, expressionlessly, as if by repeating them you would believe them. Staring at the blank, distant faces around me and observing the hypocritical show-offs made me hate attending mass. It wasn't the ritual itself that I disliked, although it offered me no rewards, but the attitude of the people who were there left me cold.

For a person like my father, being a Catholic meant that certain rules and regulations must be followed faithfully. To question those rules was sinful. But did my father know, for example, that the pope who decreed that Catholics must not eat meat on Fridays did so in order to help Italy's struggling fishing industry? Did he know that when one's sins are "forgiven" after confession they are not merely wiped off the slate, but one is still destined to be held responsible for them? Perhaps he had never questioned what he was taught.

During my gradeschool years, I did not question the

meaning of the doctrine I was taught. At a Catholic school music, art and phy ed classes are sacrificed a few days a week so that students may learn about their church. The history of the church, especially the bloodiness of the Crusades, Inquisition or the Italian Renaissance, is conveniently glossed over or ignored. The important thing, the school stresses, is that students know the answer to such questions as "Why did Christ die for us?" Answer: "Christ died for us to show his love for us." No other answer would do. A fourth-grader who could correctly volley seven or eight memorized answers back to the memorized questions would be rewarded with a "holy card," an artist's conception of a good person with a short description of that person's goodness on the back.

As I grew older, the doctrines became more familiar, the responses more automatic. I began to question the limits of their applicability. I would attempt to determine, for example, at what point ignorance became a valid excuse for sinning, or whether intention was more important than actual behavior in determining whether something was "good" or "bad." My persistence was entirely out of curiosity at first, then I realized that my instructors had never considered these things before and were ad-libbing their answers. I knew that I had struck a nerve. I tried to pin them down with ridiculous scenarios. The answers were often contradictory, and I decided that I had lost a religion.

At the same time that I was reconsidering what my religion meant to me, I was trying to decide what God meant to me, and what relationship a god had by necessity with a religion. Is it possible, I asked myself, to have a religion without a god, or a god without a religion?

A godless religion would cease to be a religion. Religion implies that human actions are connected in some way with a superhuman entity. Whether through pre-destination or as after-life full of rewards and punishments, religion stresses that people are responsible to some higher authority. A religion that had no immortal authority would not be a religion but a clique or a political party-like group.

On the other hand, a god without a religion seems much more possible. A dictionary attaches the words "faith" and "worship" to religion, but not to God. Faith implies belief without proof, and religions have no proof except miracles as documented by the Bible. Worship, by definition, attaches itself more to religion and ritual than it does to a deity, since an omnipotent, all-knowing center-of-the-universe would scarcely need so meager a creation as humans grovelling on the ground in respect and adoration.

Religion would seem to be an invention of humans who attempt to place themselves in some privileged position with the power they call a god.

Religion would therefore seem to be an invention of humans who attempt to place themselves in some privileged position with the power they call a god. Different religions define "god" in different ways. The ancient Greeks and Romans had many gods, each one capable of dominating one particular part of nature or humans. Subsequent religions combined many gods into few, eventually ending up with only one. That one god, named God, is worshipped by many different religions in many different ways, but is seen by all to possess the same, or nearly the same, attributes. Even so, wars have been fought and people have been tortured because of the different rituals that have evolved among different people.

Suppose, for a moment, that God need not be worshipped, but instead exists independently of many. Such a god would, in fact, be the embodiment of all physical and natural laws; it would BE all physical and natural laws. Part of the Catholic doctrine says that "God is within all things. He is in everyone and everything." I would argue that God is the entire universe. God is nature.

Isaac Newton, who pictured the universe as an immense clock, called his god "The Divine Clockmaker." He was implying that what he called god was the power responsible for ordering the universe in the way that he observed. If God were god by any other name, I would call it Nature. By avoiding the personification of God, one also avoids attributing to God all of the human needs and faults that religions tend to do. For example, a god who needs to be worshipped, or who turns an almighty wrath on a whole civilization for the actions of a few hardly deserves to be called a deity. Such human faults would only be present in the absence of perfection, but perfection is a trait claimed by all religions of their figurehead.

Assuming that "nature" is just another label for "god," where does religion fit in? In the minds of the strong, it has no place. Only in the minds of the weak can religion take on meaning.

People who know that they are the masters of their own destiny have no trouble taking credit for their successes and blame for their failures. Those who have no confidence in themselves need the security of being able to call on their god to aid them. If they fail, they say they were not worthy of god's help. If they succeed, they give god credit for aiding them.

Is not prayer merely a way of articulating to oneself the troubles one is facing and the hope one needs? The answer that many people get from prayer is actually a result of introspection rather than divine revelation.

Another source of religion can be found in the fact that ancient people did not understand natural laws. Thunder, earthquakes, even rain were attributed to the intervention of some powerful being. By altering their behavior, these people thought that they could influence the course of natural events. This was the birth of ritual. As rituals became more refined, the people who practiced them became more discriminating, more critical of others who did not do things exactly the same way. A sort of religious evolution occurred, and eventually there came to be the vast array of religions present today.

All of my criticism is not to say that religion serves no purpose. If someone takes comfort in thinking that some being is controlling their lives from afar, let them. If someone needs the security of "God" in a time of crisis, let them pray. Is not prayer merely a way of articulating to oneself the troubles one is facing and the hope one needs? The answer that many people get from prayer is actually a result of introspection rather than divine revelation. But the label does not matter, the effect does.

God, Nature or the Divine Clockmaker. The label may be all that changes. All of these labels imply that there is some force more powerful than man that makes the stars shine and unites life and death. It is important that people be free to respect these forces as they see fit. The freedom of choice is important, because when choice is forced, the very goodness which is begging to be served becomes tyranny.

Connie Gehling

***Why I
Rejected
Religion
— An Essay***

Honorable Mention



Connie Gehling
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Connie, 22, is a senior in communications arts at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. A native of Greendale, Wisconsin, a Milwaukee suburb, she attended high school there. A model, she also has a part-time position with the Wisconsin Student Association. The only freethought person in her family, she has "two born-again siblings."

I'll never forget it — it changed my life. I'd always been such a *good* girl. Raised in a Catholic environment, educated in a Catholic school, one of my fondest wishes was to die a martyr. (A *martyr*, for God's sake!) Or, barring that, to enter the convent, a la The Singing Nun. And then . . . and then . . . I saw it.

You must understand, I *believed*. I *really* believed. God, Satan, Heaven, Hell, purgatory, limbo, mortal and venial sins. I knew it all by rote. It was my life, and I was consumed with the passion of the ignorant for religion. I could go through the rosary (with appropriate embellishments) in fifteen minutes. I read the Bible cover-to-cover at least a half-dozen times, and I *liked* doing all those things; much like the kick I get now off of Yoga and health foods, the *pureness* of that lifestyle attracted me. I felt holy and good, cared for by the patron saints on the church walls. It was they who forgave and comforted me during those Saturday afternoon rituals in the confessional. One half-hour session per week and I was pristine once more, until the next time I stole my sister's Hi Heidi! doll.

So you see, I had a great deal at stake. I *had to* keep on believing. In return for my life, I was promised the whole world.

And then I met Paul. You've heard of Paul. He changed his name by divine order on the road to Damascus. I read *about* him in the Bible, and then I read *him* in the Bible, and the things he said to me were outrageous and hateful. I was probably twelve years old when this sacrosanct misogynist first slapped my face with his words, and I will never forget the sentence that changed my life: "I do not allow a woman to teach, neither to stand before the public." Time and circumstances have led me to banish all religious texts from my house, so I cannot even accurately reference this passage. Well, never mind; it is certainly the thought that counts here!

"He hates me," I thought to myself. "He hates *all* women!" It was a totally new idea to me, that one could unilaterally despise and fear a whole gender! MY gender! I demanded an explanation from my mother. She, too, had recognized Paul's Anti-Woman sentiments, and it bothered her a good deal more than I, sure as I was that this was an isolated case. Oh! The naivete of youth! But she could offer no comfort, no placebo, no soothing explanation. I brooded.

Perusing the Bible with this keen new sight, I now viewed with suspicion the excellent horror story of Revelation (with its Harlot as Evil Incarnate), the account of Lot's wife, turned to salt for her compassion for a city, and the myriad tales of evil/barren/adulterous women who were men's bane.

In all these I heard, as if for the first time, the scorn, the disgust and fear that the writers of these books held for their mothers and their wives. I read, as if for the first time, how Jesus said Margaret was blessed because she cleaned his feet with her hair. I watched the windings and twistings of a history, condemning and saving and condemning again the powerless women in whom was feared great power. And a twelve-year-old mind struggled to work it all out.

In the Church, one has no say. A believer follows the edicts of various clergy unquestioningly, lest they be labelled Heretic, lest they lose their faith.

In religion there are not several solutions, multiple answers; only The One True Way.

In the Bible, there are no good women. (Mary, of course, was not so much *good* as she was *chosen*. And in return for this privilege of being the Mother of God, she was granted the uniquely cruel knowledge that her son was born to die.) No, there were two types of women in the Bible, 1) Evil, and 2) Reformed. Number 1's were those who refused to become number 2's. *Evil* women slept with men who weren't their husbands; although the daughters of Abraham (was it Abraham or Lot? — the knowledge has grown rusty) slept with their father, and that was *good*. It all gets rather confusing.

I could tell you about how I slowly, dreadfully let go of my precious Catholic beliefs in later life, and lived to laugh about my fears. I could tell you about my new and infinitely healthier view of this world and others, where there is no male hierarchy, no Divine Intervention, no "Heaven" per se, no Hell. But this is, after all, an essay on *why* I rejected religion.

I did so because our Judeo-Christian heritage despises its women. From what I know of other religions, it is not unique. And at the age of 12, I was damned if I would let them tell me I was lesser, Other. I was DAMNED.

And that is why.