

Secularism, Atheism and the Canadian Experience

Speech by Justin Trottier, presented to the Carleton Secular Alliance, November 21, 2006

(SLIDE 1) I'm very excited to be here, both in support of my sister Alex's new Carleton Secular Alliance group, and also to have the opportunity to give my first full length presentation on this sort of material. Before beginning I wanted to take the opportunity to describe some of the groups and projects that I'm involved with and in so doing give you what will turn out to be a reverse history of how I got to be giving a presentation as a representative of the youth freethought movement in Canada starting by seeing a poster just two years ago. If you have any questions, please feel free to signal me - I'd like to make this interactive if possible.

(SLIDE 2) Firstly, I'm currently a field organizer for the Centre for Inquiry, a major transnational science-advocacy organization and charity which promotes scientific naturalism and critical thinking in all aspects of human endeavour. CFI includes under its umbrella the Council for Secular Humanism, with such prominent members as the world's most famous atheist Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, author of the End of Faith, the founder of sociobiology E.O. Wilson, author of Why I'm not a Muslim Ibn Warraq and many other leading lights in freethought today. CFI's umbrella also includes the Council for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), a group exploring everything from big foot to UFO's, the Commission for Scientific Medicine and Mental Health, and the Committee for the scientific examination of religion. CFI also provides secular alternatives for important social services, community outreach activities and humanitarian causes too often monopolized by religious organizations. As an example among many, CFI hosts SOS, Secularist Organizations for Sobriety, as an alternative to Alcoholics Anonymous, which is in essence an organized religion, with 7 of its 12 steps directly dealing with forming a relationship to the divine. Rather than mandating an alcoholic to take AA, courts around the US, at least, are now allowing convicts to choose

SOS chapters instead. CFI also hosts SHARE, a program designed to raise funds for charitable causes and humanitarian relief. **(SLIDE 3)** Finally, CFI is heavily involved in media, publishing Free Inquiry and Skeptical Inquirer, both on display here and hosting the Point of Inquiry podcast.

To meet the growing need for a rational, scientific perspective to issues of the day, CFI is extending itself at an accelerating pace, with 4 branches across the US and another half a dozen in various other countries, and with plans in the works for the establishment of a CFI Ontario branch in Toronto, which would be the first in Canada. Meanwhile, CFI On Campus, the department in which I'm employed, is doing marvellous work helping to found campus groups and supporting major events across the world. As their first Canadian field organizer, my jurisdiction covers this entire country, a huge mandate, over which I will only be successful with all of your help. I look very forward to working with many of you to in the near future to support this new Canadian youth freethought initiative. CFI can supply such essentials as funding, magazines, speakers, flyers and other promotional items, but it really comes down to each of you to make it come together.

In Canada, there's no time like the present to get involved in the youth freethought movement. In fact, there's a major meeting taking place in Toronto this Saturday at which we shall officially approve the transformation of the Secular Freethought Centre into the Centre for Inquiry Ontario, increasing our programming revenues from the tens of thousands to the hundreds of thousands, leading to the establishment of the first North American campus freethinkers publication, major events at campuses across Ontario with leading thinkers, implementation of classes in humanist ethics and science enrichment for youngsters, a broadcasting hub for Canada's own Freethought television, and other exciting and groundbreaking initiatives. So let me tell you a bit about the Secular Freethought Centre, which is Canada's first and only open community space for atheists, humanists and skeptics. **(SLIDE 4)**

The opening of the SFC drop-in centre, which is an area of the SFC that serves as a lounge, library, and gathering spot for hanging out, using our wireless net and other resources officially took place July 1. **(SLIDE 5)** In September we had our major launch of the full premises, with Freethought Celebration Week.

Freethought Celebration Week included in 7 days the sorts of activities and events the SFC is all about, so it's a good example of the sort of artistic, cultural, musical, entertainment, and academic activities the SFC has been engaged in, which will only be expanding with the establishment of CFI Ontario. **(SLIDES 6-9)**

(SLIDE 10) The last organization I want to describe is the Toronto Secular Alliance, which is the group providing my basis of support to accomplish everything that gets done. I like to think of the emergence of CFI Ontario as phase 3 in the continued Canadian youth freethought movement. If that's the case, Phase 2 would be the Secular Freethought Centre, because it involved, for the first time, a working alliance between multiple humanist and secularist groups across Toronto and beyond in a common pursuit. And Phase 1, where it all started less than 2 years ago, is with the Toronto Secular Alliance, a city-wide group. But, to elaborate on this already convoluted history, the TSA is itself the third evolution in what began first as a small college discussion group, then a University of Toronto campus wide student group, and finally a city-spanning youth organization. That college group was called the Trinity College Atheist Society, and it wasn't long ago that I was walking the halls of Anglican-run Trinity College, the most unlikely place for establishing an atheist group, and noticed an innocuous poster for an upcoming meeting. Joining the young organization, I decided Trinity College was too limiting, so we founded a full campus group and the first issue we chose to tackle was the founding of the University of Toronto's faith centre, which, unbeknownst to us, and indeed nearly the entire student body, was in the final phase of a decade-long approval process. We chose to speak out against this project - not because a faith centre is itself a bad idea, if funded by the faith groups that are planning to use it, but because when a public and secular institution decides to spend \$3 million on a project that openly and unapologetically discludes a large segment of its community, without bothering to

consult with representatives from the entire community, and when the leader of the project tells you he doesn't need to ask an atheist for advice, well, something's wrong. There's this assumption, which you'll see cropping up repeatedly in this presentation, that so long as a project promotes faith and religion without naming one specifically, there can't possibly be anyone left out. Needless to say, we got some attention from the campus media. From then on, it was a rollercoaster ride of events, campaigns and initiatives to the present time.

The Toronto Secular Alliance's triple mandate is 1. to put on ambitious programming, 2. to lead social and political advocacy campaigns, and 3. to establish a nation spanning network of youth freethought organizations. With the successful implementation of all three, we are now in the process of incorporating as the Canadian Secular Alliance, the first truly national youth group promoting free inquiry, atheism secularism. **(SLIDES 12-14)**

Definition

Let's get some definitions out of the way for those of you unfamiliar with some of the labels people often use to describe themselves. I'm not a big fan of labels, but I do think its important to reclaim the words atheists, agnostic, humanist, secularist and freethinker. These are not dirty words and we should be proud to use them. A humanist is often described as an optimistic atheist, which I don't care for, since it seems to imply atheists are by default pessimists, which is entirely untrue. A better definition of a humanist is an individual who believes that human beings are capable of using rationality, democracy and scientific naturalism as methodologies for ascertaining right and wrong, rather than appeals to divine authority.

Agnosticism and atheism can be very similar. People often say that the non existence of god is not a scientific question and that it can't be proven that god doesn't exist. Well, that's true, but its only true in the same sense that you can't prove the non existence of

anything - be it santa clause, the tooth fairy, thor, or Anubis. Bertrand Russell had the famous analogy of someone claiming to believe there was tea cup in orbit somewhere between Earth and Mars which is too small to be seen by our telescopes. **(SLIDE 15)** Now, in theory, we should be tee cup agnostics, since we don't have any evidence to disprove its existence, but in reality most of us would be tee cup atheists. The burden of proof is not on us to prove the tee cup doesn't exist. This might sound trivial, but, as Richard Dawkins says, now imagine that entire metaphysical life stories are based around the tee cup, that parents pass down tee cup lore to their children for millennia - given enough time, someone who refused to believe in the tee cup would be considered blasphemous and the burden of proof would be put on them to prove it wasn't there. **(SLIDE 16)**

The only unique argument separating tea cups from gods is that from personal incredulity, which goes something like this **(SLIDE 17)**: "Holy crap. Look at how amazing the universe is. I, insert name here, personally can't imagine any way this could exist without a supreme diety. Therefore, ipso facto, god exists."

Another example is this one **(SLIDE 18)**....ok, so this was made up by Stephen Hawking but its an example of the sort of reasoning often used in creation myths. Its also a good example of an infinite regress which is, of course, the counterargument to any appeal to god as the creator of the universe. The power of evolution to create complexity out of incredibly primitive beginnings, is a far more powerful paradigm than the idea that god is self created, given that god would have to be far more complex than his creation, the ultimate Boeing 747 as Dawkins describes him. If you're going to postulate that something as complex as god self-created itself, a concept the famous Canadian science education expert Brian Atlers describes as poofism, why not just allow for an incredibly simple universe to have self-created, with the ability to evolve complexity. It isn't a perfect theory, but its far more plausible. there's also the possibility that, like asking what happens when you reach the edge of the world, something that used to trouble early explorers, the question of origins is inherently faulty. The fact is, we don't yet know even

how to approach this question, and until more evidence comes in agnosticism seems the best position to take.

But putting these philosophical quandaries aside, At a panel discussion I was on several months ago concerning the dangers of malevolent ideologies, I made a series of somehow controversial but what I thought were down to earth statements. I said I was convinced we will never know peace until a number of pre-requisites are met. One, people must acknowledge that religion was created by people, perhaps extraordinary, perhaps schizophrenic, but people. Along those lines, we must be allowed to criticize culture and religion, and to acknowledge that certain religions have within them more potential for human rights violations than others. Why should this not be so? If each religion is the product of different individuals, who each have different personalities, it stands to reason that they will each imbue the religion they create with certain idiosyncrasies, and many such idiosyncratic elements we have absolutely no reason to tolerate. I think this leads us nicely into a short discussion on religiosity, and

COMPARISON OF US AND CANADA

I'd like to do this by examining the socio-political differences between the US and Canada because in many ways they are optimistic, at least for us in Canada, and they are certainly instructive.

It is a statistical fact that a self proclaimed theist in the US will not be elected to public office. **(SLIDE 19)** Lori Lipman Brown, lobbyist for the Secular Coalition said " You can be elected as an openly gay politician in this country, but you can't be elected as an openly atheistic one..." Yet the same people who would unapologetically and even happily declare they would never vote for an atheist might consider it bigoted to declare publically they wouldn't vote for a jew or a muslim. While great progress has been made in tolerance and multiculturalism, leading to the roman catholic president John F. Kennedy, and popular politicians like Muslim Keith Ellison and Mormon Mitt Romney,

self-proclaimed atheists, humanists and freethinkers are essentially absent from the political arena. In fact, Ronald Reagan's son famously remarked on Larry King when asked if he would run for political office: "I'm an atheist. So there you go right there. I can't be elected to anything because polls all say that people won't elect an atheist." Think he's exaggerating? Take for example the Republican Party of Texas. They recently called Ben Franks, the Democratic nominee for a seat on the 6th Court Of Appeals a "professed atheist" in an effort to tar his reputation. Think McCarthyism. Think homosexuals coming out of the closet. In the US, those analogies are entirely appropriate. George Bush Sr. is well known to have declared his doubts that atheists should even be considered citizens. Let's keep in mind that in the US, in the prestigious National Academy of Sciences, among the country's brightest minds and those probably more responsible for the US being a superpower than anyone else, over 90% describe themselves as atheists - that is, over 90% are, in the words of Bush Sr, not fit to be considered citizens or patriots.

And in the US things are in fact getting worse for atheists. In 1999, a Gallup poll found 79% saying they would vote for a Mormon, 59% for a homosexual, and 49% for an atheist presidential candidate. But in September 2006, just a couple of months back, a Newsweek poll found that now only 37% would vote for an atheist. At the same time, only 14% of Americans felt the nation was ready for an atheist president. This question is meant to poll people's thoughts regarding the tolerance level of their peers, but psychologists believe it may in fact represent the true feelings of those polled. In comparison, 61% believed the country was ready for a female president, 58% for a black president and 55% for a Jewish president. Only the idea of a homosexual president was seen as negatively as an atheist president.

(SLIDE 20) Now let's compare this to Canada. A very interesting MacLean's feature article from 1996 was on the differences between Americans and Canadians, specifically religiosity. Not surprisingly, significantly more Americans say they go to church, pray and read the Bible than Canadians, and more than twice as many Americans say religion influences their political thinking.

Now to the surprising part. Firstly, in Canada about 3% of those polled said they call themselves atheists, 3% agnostics, and 16% had no affiliation. This is hugely progressive compared to the US and compared to Canada just a few short years ago. Asked whether they would vote for a government leader who was either an evangelical Christian, a Muslim or an atheist, a large majority of the Canadians would accept any of the three. When those responses were broken down by religion, each of the hypothetical nominees got at least 50-per-cent support across the board - except for the highly committed evangelical Christians who turned their backs on atheists.

But in a very recent report in the Ottawa citizen in April of this year, called "Keep Religion Out of Politics, Canadians Say" , it was shown that among the public at least, secularism may be at a relative high. Ironically, thanks to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, support for atheists and muslims is higher now than for evangelical Christians, though it has dropped slightly from 72% to 68%. At the same time, thanks to President Bush, the belief that religion should infuse politics is going down as well. So there's no question but that things are measurably better in Canada if you're an atheist, or really just about any minority group. Perhaps we are doing something right.

(SLIDE 21) But on the other hand, the impression from south of the border that our country is a secularist paradise really needs to be revisited - we have our own unique cocktail of issues that currently undermining rationality, science and critical thinking. Most decisively, Canada does not enshrine the separation of church and state in any of its highest documents, such as the constitution or the charter of rights and freedoms. This is in marked contrast to the US, where their first amendment to the constitution states explicitly "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." What our charter of rights and freedoms in fact starts with, is an acknowledgement of the supremacy of god, as if the laws of the land still descend from heaven. One can't help but think that if it had been an acknowledgement of Jesus Christ, that would have been sanitized, as for example it was in the case of religious prayers before graduation ceremonies across Ontario, for the benefit of non-christian minority

religious groups. But who could possibly be insulted by the innocuous inclusion of god in one of Canada's most important legal documents. This is the sort of ignorant assumption-laden discrimination I mentioned earlier in relation to the Faith Centres. In Canada, our official head of state is of course the Queen, who is also the head of the Anglican church. And let's not forget that Ontario is the only jurisdiction in the western world in which one religious group has a school system entirely funded by taxpayers of every religion and non religion. Irrespective of the pope condemning Canada for being too secular and by extension anti-catholic, if secularism means that no one religious is privileged, than for all these reasons, and especially the latter, Canada and Ontario are definitely not secular and Catholicism in fact privileged beyond any other religion.

Separate schools

(SLIDE 22) I want to make a short aside on the separate school issue, firstly because the Toronto Secular Alliance last year made that our highest priority in our activism mandate, secondly because it will give any of you curious as to the details of how we in fact fight for secularism some strategies and responses to expect, and thirdly because I've in fact brought a petition that I want to convince all of you to sign. We're working with the largest coalition yet on this, under the umbrella name of the Campaign for a Unified Public School System, or CUPSS, with the goal of merging the two public school systems. The coalition includes a lot of humanist and secularist groups, but also a number of religious ones, some student unions and groups dedicated exclusively to this issue, notably Civil Rights in Public Education and Equality in Education in Ontario, the latter two located in Ottawa itself, and I invite all of you to get involved in their activities. Just this weekend in fact we've begun a canvassing blitz in the local area. Meanwhile, the coalition is pushing ahead at a variety of fronts.

One, letter writing - we have a yahoo group in place so that any newspaper article anyone spots that has to do with this issue will be flagged and someone will immediately write in a response, and most of the time they are published.

Two, enlisting support from a variety of groups. My close colleague on this, Edward Ackad, was able to bring the York University Graduate student union in on this campaign, and they are now helping us enlist other student unions across the province. This is an education issue so it makes perfect sense for, say, the Canadian Federation of Students, to take a stand on this sort of monetary waste. Then there's the religious front - just this week, the Canadian Muslim Congress has pledged to support this cause and will be releasing a news release shortly. Other members of our coalition are busy approaching the United Church and other more liberal religious communities. Strategically, we need to make sure our coalition isn't overwhelmingly humanist groups, to avoid being smeared as simply anti-religious by the defenders of the status quo. It's gotten pretty nasty in the past and we've learned that apparently when a humanist defends secularism and equality, that's the sort of intolerant response to expect. This should give you an idea that we don't in fact live in a secularist paradise.

Three, approaching school councils. Our friends in Ottawa have found that public school councils are a good place to enlist support. School councils are composed of concerned parents who are deeply aggrieved when their students don't have textbooks because 500 million a year is wasted by doubling the amount of bureaucracy, buses and other resources that go in to two needless systems because of some illusion of constitutional obligation. A number of such councils, such as right here in the Carleton-Ottawa school board, have firmly come on board on this issue.

Fourthly, and this we've just started on, we're going to level our own media and PR resources. For example, one of our groups, called the Society for Ontario Freethinker's, hosts Freethought TV, an online TV show, and we'll be airing all sorts of one school promotional material on there. Another member of the coalition, Homa Arjomand, famous for leading the successful push to remove religious arbitration and sharia law in Ontario and awarded the Canadian Humanist of the year for this achievement, also has access to local television time, and a huge troop of volunteers. And the TSA will be throwing a huge public forum on this issue, for which we'll invite any catholic school trustee willing to attend, to defend the status quo.

Fifthly and lastly, partisan politics - that is, targeting specific parties. Since John Tory's conservatives pledged to increase funding to highly subsidize private religious schools, an inane and uneconomical idea that has been tried and failed repeatedly across the world, most recently and locally, in Newfoundland, and since McGuinty's response on the air to one of our members asking about supporting one school system was "I'm not prepared to champion that at this time," possibly because it would mean withdrawing his own kids from catholic schools, we've now been focusing on the NDP party, which for a short period did in fact have a unified public school system as part of their mandate. And here we're finally finding a lot of movement. In the last week alone, which shows you how fast things are moving, the NDP Toronto Centre riding and last night in fact the Trinity-Spadina riding, also in Toronto, which you may know federally as Olivia Chow's riding, both voted overwhelmingly in favour of this motion. This is huge. We're now travelling around the various NDP caucuses gaining support and next month we plan to attend the major Ontario NDP policy convention to get this officially passed. Our strategy is that by sandwiching the liberals between parties with opposite solutions, they will have to come up with something, which will then make this a major political issue for the next election.

And this petition does a great job of summarizing the arguments for why, when push comes to shove, they're likely to see things our way. I'll only go into three major arguments. **(SLIDE 23)**

Firstly, catholic schools have a guaranteed right to discriminate in only admitting catholic students in secondary schools and only hiring catholic teachers - complete with a faith portfolio and letters of reference from priests - to teach all grades. There are exceptions, such as when they need teachers desperately, but we know of cases where non-catholic teachers were fired to make room for catholic ones. Can you imagine going for a job interview and being declined because you didn't belong to the right religion. Private companies could never get away with that - they'd have the Ontario Human Rights Commission on top of them pretty quickly - yet these public teaching jobs, paid

for by all of us, are only open to those from one unique religion. This has led to two United Nations condemnations of religious discrimination against both Canada and Ontario. Strangely, our federal and provincial leaders have issued public statements against just this sort of discrimination in, for example, Iran and China, while being unwilling to champion the issue at home.

The current system and any solutions that create further religious schools, only result in religious segregation of our community, the second major argument. For this reason, and economic waste, Newfoundland recently pulled out of funding all religious schools to funding none. England is now looking into doing the same, citing possible links between religious segregation, isolationism, alienation and the rise of terrorism in that country. But these so-called multicultural solutions force me to comment on the realities of multiculturalism in this great country. I've seen first hand, the eagerness with which non-catholic religious people sign this petition, and the complete unwillingness of catholics to even read the petition, some of whom will actually tell me unapologetically that they understand the issue, realize its discrimination and like it that way. Well, why shouldn't they I guess, except that if we want to describe our society as multicultural, I don't think its enough to simply have a lot of different cultures living and working together. I think we need to actually see members of one group fighting for the rights of others, even if it disadvantages themselves, but in reality people only seem to fight for multiculturalism when they belong to one of the groups benefiting from it.

Finally, as to the so-called constitutional obligation, it really is just an illusion - a simple constitutional amendment is all that's needed to end this wastefulness once and for all - and that is recently just what both Quebec and Newfoundland have done. In fact, a parliamentary committee looking into the issue after Quebec withdrew its support for separate schools, concluded that it was now likely, though still ambiguous, that the constitutional clause was more or less voided, since initially put in place to protect catholic francophones. The government, characteristically, never followed up on this. Something I've never gotten though is, doesn't the constitution also say something about equality and fairness, and isn't that probably more fundamental than a denominational

school right, which really should be called privilege rather than right, since it doesn't extend to anyone else. Therefore, isn't the constitution in fact violating itself? Few people seem to see it that way, but I'm not sure why.

Postmodernism

Science needs to be defended, and, notwithstanding what I've said so far, not just from the ranks of the religious. While religious fundamentalism is a greater threat in the US, Canadians need fear more the undermining of critical thinking from other corners, from ideologies like postmodernism, cultural relativism and some groups on the academic left. I'd like to move into this area now and describe the dangers from postmodernism, which in fact is little more than an (anti-)intellectual movement rejecting objective truth and Enlightenment rationalism in favour of epistemological relativism, backed up by theoretical discourses removed from empirical tests, and denigrating science to the position of a social construct no better than any other.

Why is this such a dangerous concept? Once the scientific method is dismissed, science becomes but one "myth", a commodity to be accepted or rejected, discarded or traded for a different "science". A well known English professor Andrew Ross of Princeton University asks for a science "publicly answerable and of some service to progressive interests." This reminds me of a recent comment by a high ranking US official, that once they had all the facts concerning the environmental situation, the government would choose the best science for the American people. As if there were multiple sciences which could be compared and the most convenient accepted.

Instead of objective critical analyses, Ross and his followers believe the tyranny of the majority should rule the day. He asks "How can metaphysical life theories and explanations taken seriously by millions be ignored or excluded by a small group of powerful people called scientists?" In other words, whatever the majority in our culture and time period believe in is the truth, an approach that would have instantly falsified the theories of Galileo, Darwin and Einstein.

Ideological multiculturalism, which similarly parcels out truth-bits to each culture, and frowns upon cross-cultural criticism, is just as dangerous.

In a great book called *Higher superstition*, the authors explain that the concept that truth changes depending on time and culture completely robs a student of the faculties for critical thinking, which demand an acknowledgement that any belief could be wrong and must at all times be tested empirically against the physical universe.

There should be a mechanism for falsifying a cherished conviction, but that possibility is eliminated by epistemological relativism. The famous Nobel Laureate Peter Medawar in his landmark *Pluto's Republic* said "We should say more often 'I used to think that once, but now I have come to hold a rather different opinion'. People who never say as much are either ineffectual or dangerous."

It's funny how misunderstood science is, which isn't too surprisingly considering its never explained once in grade school. I'm not talking about the "Scientific Method", that list of 7 or 8 steps, which is handed down to students almost like revealed wisdom in grade 3 or 4, I'm referring to imbuing in students a deep appreciation of the major concepts of falsification, verification and how they differ from other systems of thought, like faith, appealing to authority, or the ever popular, appeal to personal incredulity. Science is accused of relativism by theists and its accused of objectivism by the postmodernists, but neither is entirely the case.

It is not the case that the method of science is perfect with no room for improvement - quite the opposite, the power of science has always been that everything, from its lowliest theories to the scientific method itself, is mutable and dynamic. Take for example the introduction of double blind experimentation when studying biological or psychological phenomena. The power and beauty of this dynamism is something I can't seem to get across in debates with theists, who often want an absolute revealed set of laws and morals that never change, which is, you might realize, quite contrary to the very ideals of a progressive democracy in which the final word is never written in stone. (I'm kind of

glad it isn't and I'm sure most of you, if you think about what the world was like even 100 years ago, would probably agree.)

On the other hand, postmodernists see science as altogether too objective, decrying the existence of objective truth independent of culture or time period. But they don't get it either. Even if science isn't perfect and never will be, even if, as the authors of another great book, *Intellectual Impostures*, describe, science is difficult to codify, that doesn't mean that it isn't a constantly improving methodology, especially compared to others. Take the process of criminal investigation as an analogy. We can never be 100% certain we're convicting the right individual, and here too the methodology for conducting criminal investigations is hardly perfect, but on the other hand, I think few would argue that the use of evidence, witnesses and reason is clearly an improvement over the trial by fire approach that used to be utilized.

The all encompassing belief of the Centre for Inquiry is that critical thinking, freedom of inquiry and honest criticism must be extended to every human endeavour, even to our most sacred cows. But at universities across Canada, where this is purported to be their *raison d'etre*, tolerance and criticism only seems to go one way. I'll give you some personal anecdotal examples from my dealing with student media and government over at the University of Toronto, cause I think they are representative of what tolerance means these days.

The Students Administrative Council at U of T spent \$1500 to send students to demonstrate at the American Republican Convention in 2004 and publically graded the Canadian federal political parties on their support for education, even though they were supposedly bound by a "Neutrality Policy" that prevented them from taking political sides. The quality of double speak they used to justify this was both impressive and a testament to a real failure of critical thinking. Compare this to how I was received when I asked the same student union to support an end to religious arbitration and Sharia law in Ontario. Besides the typical claims that non-Muslims were not fit to understand or speak

on Muslim issues, a symptom again of how ideological multiculturalism can trump universal human rights, the Chair informed me that I had breached protocol by bringing a guest without consent, even though such a thing was entirely commonplace. She also informed me that it was wrong for me to have brought such a controversial issue to the Commission - the same Commission that was nearly torn apart by the Republic Convention controversy. In fact, of course, the only difference between my actions and business as usual for the student union was that my special guests and my controversy were on the wrong side of the political divide.

In another encounter, this time with student media, I wrote a long piece defending certain currently unpopular biotechnologies, hoping to publish it in the opinion section of the student newspaper. The editors informed me that it was inappropriate to mix science with opinion. This did not stop them from publishing a number of articles critical of science and condemning U of T for investing in companies working with genetically engineered foods. The last book I'll mention in this vein is *Intellectual Morons* by Daniel J. Flynn, in which he says "University administrators and professors preach the gospel of 'tolerance' but are completely intolerant of anyone who might challenge the liberal orthodoxy."

The challenge for many of us humanists, as I see it, is that while many of us are highly sympathetic with the causes of the left, with progress and social justice, we also tend to value universal human rights, fairness, reason and critical thinking over relativism and special privilege. I strongly support multiculturalism and empowerment if it means fighting together to create a society where every individual and group is treated equally, but I worry that few people truly see it that way.

Speaking of how so-called empowerment often really meaning privileging. consider the new Defence of Religion bill introduced by Stephen Harper which is in a sense the flip side of the old US Comstock, or obscenity laws, which in the late 19th century saw people jailed for daring to criticize religion or publish material that was seen in any way as violating religious morals and sensibilities. Instead of legally and directly forcing individuals to live by the religious beliefs of others, the new law simply makes it

acceptable for people, in the name of religion, to discriminate against those who decide not to.

If you can read into the current Canadian charter of rights anything resembling a separation of church and state concept, this bill is designed exclusively to do away with precisely that. It will be the end of any kind of secularism in this country. Currently, one of the greatest defences of equality and against special privilege is the Charter guaranteeing that government officials and other service providers cannot deny services based on race, creed, colour, or sexuality. If this seemingly innocuous Defence of Religion bill passes, a justice of the peace could refuse to marry a couple based on anything from them being homosexual to them simply not wanting religion to be a part of their wedding. What about a police officer whose religious laws contradict with the laws of the land - what are they allowed to do now? As one commentator put it, every single governmental department then becomes a minefield - You get one official whose beliefs allow for one thing, and another whose beliefs allow for another. If it passes, individuals could openly refuse to do business with so-called gay activist companies or to provide services to anyone that contravened their religious beliefs. And to determine if this were the case, they could ask you to fill out a questionnaire on your belief system. And worst of all, forget big cities where there's plenty of competition and think about rural towns where civil services are monopolized by just a few individuals and where its already extremely difficult to live life as a freethinker or an atheist.

RIGHT TO EXIST

I originally thought I would open my talk by defending the right for secularist and freethought groups to exist, but I then I thought I would move it the this point since, by now, I hope the comment that I receive surprisingly often, that secularist groups aren't needed in our society, seems as ridiculous to you as it always has to me. But just to deal with the issue, and, I hope, to motivate others to organize themselves in a similar fashion, let me address why organizations like the Toronto Secular Alliance or the Centre for

Inquiry, which promote reason, scientific thought and free inquiry, do in fact exist. The traditional distinguished goal of the university is to be a place for critical and analytical thinking and unfettered free inquiry into every and all areas of endeavour, but, partly due to the divisions of the university into such specialized departments, people can now go through an entire tenure at university without ever having their most cherished beliefs questioned or challenged, and this is a major problem.

The fact that each and every poster that was put up for this event was ripped down in a matter of days, with all manner of nearby posters left up, is an indication that the Carleton Secular Alliance and similar groups are badly needed. The fact that we host a Coping Without Religion support group in Toronto and every week hear stories about ostracism and persecution felt by those who leave the religion of their family and are devoid of a social or community network, tells me that every university couldn't profit from an organization like this one.

Consider that in a recent interview on Christian TV between myself and a rabbi, the rabbi's comments to the effect that unbelievers were responsible for all the catastrophes of the 20th century didn't raise an eyebrow, yet my pointing out that maybe Hitler was in fact catholic was seen as deeply offensive to their catholic viewers. Notice the hypocrisy, and tell me if atheists don't need to organize against this kind of pernicious and below the radar discrimination.

Consider that its no longer seen as controversial at many universities for jewish or muslim students to demand that the institution close during or in some fashion accommodate their holidays, essentially forcing all students to observe them, but that it is controversial to attend a wedding and not stand up with everyone else during grace, which was recently hammered home at a family wedding I attended. Again, notice the hypocrisy - if a powerful religious group demands everyone honour their holiday its seen as intolerant not to oblige, but if an atheist asks simply that their own beliefs be respected, at the expense of no one else, that's somehow seen as intolerant of the majority opinion.

There's this constant inconsistency going around. On the one hand, some people tell me we already live in a secular country, so it's at best a waste of time and at worst positively intolerant for a secularist organization to exist. These same people often say catholic schools are innocuous, and don't teach much religion anyway, so why bother worrying about them. I call this the apathetic camp. In this camp fall a surprising number of atheists who think those who speak out are betraying one's commitment to atheism by daring to criticize, comment on, or in any way notice religion or its effects. This group believes we have no role to play in defending and promoting universal individual human rights.

On the other hand, there are those who respond to attempts to remove religious arbitration and separate schools by telling me that our society was founded on a Christian heritage, and that the presence of religion in the public sphere somehow infuses a higher moral environment to our civilization. This is a common response from non-Christian minority groups, who, rather than valuing multiculturalism for its own sake, see Christian privilege as a precedent on the road to privilege for their own religion.

In the early US history, Thomas Jefferson, perhaps history's greatest secularist, managed to arrange a brilliant alliance between freethinkers and religious minority groups, including and especially Christian evangelicals, against the introduction of religion in schools. The rationale was that rather than allowing government control over religion, which would favour the majority religion of the day in schools, all the minority groups banded together in a realization that their common interest would be served if no one had that privilege and kept religion out of schools, at least until creationism and intelligent design came along much later. However, things are very different in the 21st century in Canada, and a sort of divide and conquer methodology has kept atheists and freethinkers from partnering with religious minority groups against Christian privilege, and hence to the continued existence of the separate school board.

In the interests of furthering their own religion, jewish, muslim and other non-christian minority religious groups would much rather partner with other religions rather than atheists or secularists, and hence we get the thoroughly Canadian phenomenon of what you might call the new multicultural alliance, meant to favour everyone, since everyone believes in some sort of higher power...right? Hence the unwillingness of U of T's student affairs to list secular humanist officiants alongside religious chaplains on their website. Hence the calling of an engineer ritual, displayed at the back of this room, and other school prayers, which have sanitized all specific religious connections but keep the mention of god. Hence the slogan for Christian television not specifically saying anything Christian, but simply "We believe" or "Television you can believe in" since believing is all important, no matter what it might be, even if, as one add for Happy Days featuring a big picture of the Fonze put it "Believe a leather jacket makes you cool." (SLIDE 24). Not that I have anything against Arthur Fonzerely, but is CTS so obsessed with the value of belief over unbelief that they're promoting the Fonz as one of their mascots? Without evidence, there is absolutely no reason to value belief over unbelief.

CONCLUSION

Living life as a freethinker

I'd like to end this talk by addressing my last point - living a full and satisfying life without god and removed from religious dogma. Firstly, let's deal with the inane idea that god = morality and lack of god = lack of morality. Everyone, regardless of their metaphysical beliefs, exercise reason and common sense when dealing with day to day moral issues, and as explained previously, the fact that the ethical wave continues to expand is actually a rather good thing - I'm sure no one would want to return say two centuries ago when slavery was commonplace, women had little rights, homosexuals didn't exist, etc, and if you read Freethinkers by Susan Jacoby, its pretty clear that it was mostly humanists and freethinkers in the vanguard of progress, with most, though there

are acceptations, of the religious communities being pulled along kicking and screaming. Only now do they push their revisionist histories, pretending that enlightenment progress was something they've always been pushing and that religious communities were the exclusive origin of the abolitionist or suffragist movements.

Anyways, one can be defensive and bring up the fact that since holy books give all sorts of contradictory and horrifying advice, every religious person in fact uses their own, entirely secular, reasoning, to decide what to follow and what to doublespeak-away. Or one can point out that in studying primate evolution you can clearly see the emergence of a system of proto-ethics based on kin selection, useful for cooperation and altruism, now described by what philosophers call the Golden Rule, a concept that has actually been at the core of many religions but also many entirely non-metaphysical philosophical systems, from Kant to Confucius to Buddha. But I'm getting so tired of answering this question that I'm starting to take a far more aggressive stance.

After all, can you even begin to image, in the 21st century, a Christian getting away with asking a muslim in a public setting, how he or she could be moral without accepting Jesus Christ. Of course, many believe privately that might be the case but its now considered horribly intolerant to express that sort of belief in public.

The question How can you be good if you don't believe in god presupposes that atheists aren't good, that we do break the law or violate other ethical imperatives, but that's a scientific question that one can easily examine, and many have. For example, if you study the demographics of people in prison, there are more, not less, people from the religious communities. In the states, Sam Harris has done an interesting comparison between the bible belt states and the rest, showing that the highest instances of drug abuse, burglary, and violence are in the former, with three of the five most dangerous cities in the US being in the pious state of Texas. Worldwide statistics show that, per capita, the more atheistic countries, countries like Norway, Sweden and Germany, where some reports indicate almost 50% atheists, contribute more, not less, to AIDS, humanitarian relief and other social justice causes. In response to this, the best the other

side can come up with, is that religiosity somehow imbues a society with a more moral consciousness, as explained in the separate school portion of my talks. So after explaining that the stats actually support unbelievers as at least equally ethical, unbelievers who don't need to believe in divine retribution for their sins to know how to be good, does that not speak for an even stronger moral system. Compare how a freethinker and a religious fundamentalist responds to the stem cell debate. A freethinker, understanding evolution and embryology, realizes that there is no precise point where a blastocyst transforms into a person, and hence the use of stem cells to save potentially thousands of people from horribly debilitating and fatal illnesses is entirely justified - in fact, some might say its unethical not to use them now that the technology is mature. In contrast, a religious fundamentalist, by virtue of desiring absolutes and black and whites, is convinced there must be a precise instant when the soul enters the zygote, and has decided this happens when 8 cells become 10 cells, or some similar nonsense, and in elevating a ball of cells to the status of person, serves to degrade the status of those dying or suffering of alzheimers, Parkinsons, diabetes and a host of other diseases.

(SLIDE 25) So if you'll grant me that unbelievers are as moral as believers, let's discuss happiness. Statistics due seem to point to a slight increase in the happiness levels of the religious, although, as George Bernard Shaw said "the fact that a believer is happier than a skeptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one." Statistics also show that the real difference lies not so much in belief as opposed to unbelief, but in the social and community network that religion can provide.

Unfortunately, humanist and freethought organizations have been so busy defending their right to exist and tackling the deep philosophical issues of meaning and morality, that we haven't had the chance to invest enough to make humanism and freethought fun, and that's a shame, because, at least in Toronto, my group has a great time promoting free inquiry, building a vibrant community with links to social awareness organizations, hosting entertainment and social activities, and scoring a few points against our cultural competitors now and then in areas we feel strongly about.

And that's what I want to leave you with. There's clearly plenty of work to do. But we also need to focus our efforts on making atheism and secularist movements not only acceptable but sexy, appealing and accessible to everyone. **(SLIDE 26)** We need to tell others about the really exciting world-recognized experts you can meet, like Richard Dawkins, Sir Harold Kroto, co-discoverer of the buckyball, Sam Harris, Michael Persinger. We need to form a vibrant freethought community full of social events, parties, entertaining and community building activities and enhancing a growing network of people from across the country. **(SLIDE 27)** and the world, people from incredibly diverse cultural backgrounds, ages and fields of study. **(SLIDE 28)**