

## **The Rise of Reason**

*By Jacob Aliet – May 2006*

In the beginning, there was no atheist. And the world was full of dogma and superstition and the spirit of fear ruled the minds of men and they blissfully worshipped a creator they believed was deep in the sky. This god, they believed, would one day come down and wage a ruthless war on disease, drought, old age and all the sufferings that man experienced, and transport man to paradise. They worshipped him without interruption. Their worship was unperturbed by doubt and untrammelled by reason or skepticism. Science had no place in the society and miracles and sacred rituals were the order of the day. Mankind created beautiful altars and declared them sacred. And humans were in bondage, for they feared that god would punish them by abandoning them to suffer endless epidemics of disease, endless floods or ravaging famine if they stopped worshipping him.

The praise of god and creative ways of expressing devotion to god was mankind's sole purpose. Humans did not dare seek their own happiness or claim anything for themselves. For they feared that the god they worshipped was jealous and the only thing the god enjoyed was love and devotion directed to the god. After all, their god was the creator, they reasoned as they relinquished all that they desired for themselves. Their fattest lambs and best crops were consumed by fire at the altars for god. Beautiful virgins lost their lives on altars in the name of god. Some even gave away their children to god so that god would be pacified and keep droughts, volcanic eruptions and diseases at bay, and in exchange they expected victory in war, bumper harvests and good leadership. This was a very profitable exchange. Or so it seemed.

Mankind wrote books with legendary characters and of the great deeds of the benevolent god in the cloudy past and declared the books sacred, the narratives historical and the writings free of error. These books explained ways of getting gods blessings, establishing contact with him and taming his fiery temper. They interpreted volcanic eruptions, floods, droughts, barrenness, disease and losses in war as god's punishments and they were taken to mean that god was unhappy. Over time, mankind's rituals became so elaborate and god became so esoteric that they had among them people who specialized in detecting god's desires and directing the communities on what to do to in order to win god's favor.

Men erected buildings that were purpose-built for the job of worshipping god. Some among them occupied positions in the sacred buildings and proceeded to collect offerings from those who came to worship. These were the clerics, the priests and the Bishops. They were the fathers. They were the Popes. They were respected by mankind and highly venerated. They wore purple robes and pious looks and could be spotted voicing advice to troubled members and pouring reassurance to doubting members. Be Strong! They often exhorted impatient members. They were the agents of god and were held in awe. People stood up and stopped talking and chewing in their presence.

Despite of these efforts, despite the sacrifices, mankind suffered calamities, disease and engaged in several wars where many died. Widows and orphans multiplied. Disease wiped out entire populations and many starved to death. Then mankind decided that, perhaps, god was not going to reward them here, but in the afterlife. They reasoned that god detested material things and would only reward them with an afterlife, a spiritual gift that would be immeasurably good. So this became mankind's ultimate desire: to be with god. They believed that one day, one day, they would meet god and live in eternal joy, away from their world of pain and suffering. The time was near, the priests exhorted them. This generation! They emphasized. This generation shall see god! Everybody looked forward to it and they composed beautiful songs in anticipation. They composed and sang songs of love, songs of devotion and songs of the ineffable love of god. Sweet songs that made birds stop singing in envy.

But mankind went on suffering. God did not come and generation after generation died. Diseases killed her members, Tsunamis wiped them out in thousands, earthquakes and heat waves consumed them. The more man suffered, the more she convinced herself that god was testing his faith. The hardest iron goes through the hottest fire, mankind reasoned. But god never responded. God never showed up. Years turned to decades and decades turned to centuries and centuries turned to millenniums and there was no sign of god. But mankind gritted her teeth and vowed to hang on to the death. Better be wrong than sorry, many reasoned.

And mankind suffered and suffered. And the coils of dogma that were wrapped around the mantle of mankind's intellect tightened their boa-like grip. In that death-like stranglehold, like water from the banks of a drying river, light receded from the mind of man and approached a vanishing point. And mankind's mind became engulfed in darkness and reason became an object of hate. Those that survived the countless tragedies that were visited upon them reasoned that the tragedies were proof that god was lonely in his upper chamber and needed company quickly and in large numbers. This was their explanation for the unprecedented tsunamis and raging floods that submerged cities. And mankind bedecked her altars with more gold and bound their sacred books with leather and declared that the end of the times of suffering was near. And their rewards were at hand. If only they could show more faith.

They tightly clutched their sacred books, banged their heads on the brick walls, wept, spoke in tongues and invoked the god to come. Come and take us! They prayed. We are not worthy of your love! They wailed. You are the greatest god! They chorused. They knelt, fasted and abased themselves. Tears of devotion flowed freely. They recited hymns, read and reread the holy book and gave countless sacrifices. To prove the potency of their faith to audiences, "cripples" walked, the "blind" saw and the "impossible" was made to happen even as the hospitals remained full of sick and dying people. With god, all things are possible, they advised.

But mankind suffered more and more. The end of times never came. God never came, never intervened, and never responded to their prayers. But mankind's faith remained steadfast. And mankind built more churches and more religions. And the bubbles of

reason were making a slow exodus from mankind's ever-darkening mind. The priests told them that nobody knew the hour or the second that god would come. Like a thief in the night, he will come, they maintained. Anybody who questioned gods coming or his existence was called a fool, a heathen, a heretic and was rejected from the society. If only we believe! The priests urged the masses. Faith! The priests admonished. Do not let the devil deceive you! They appealed.

Then one man woke up from the dream and realized that he had a brain. He started to observe. He started to think. He started to study. He looked at the rivers and the mountains. He looked at the sky. He interrogated the world. He studied fellow men and their beliefs.

He realized that mankind was asleep. He realized that fear; ignorance and suffering had driven man to create a god. He realized that mankind's thirst for immortality had driven him to fabricate an afterlife and plant a god in the sky to be the agent of benevolence and to be the source of love and order in a vast, uncaring and implacable universe. This man started to question the beliefs of fellow men. He asked them why they believed god existed and what they had to show for god's unending care. He used science to explain volcanic activities. He was able to explain why people fall sick without using god as an explanation. He showed fellow men that victory in war was a matter of military strategy, not a blessing. He explained why volcanoes erupted and what caused floods. He explained mankind. He urged mankind to face his fears and accept his place in the vast universe. Even though mankind never understood the atheist, the atheist understood mankind. The atheist could explain mankind's religions and their role in the life of man.

But mankind refused to wake up. The atheist was branded as an agent of satan. His explanations were rejected. He was told he was using the limited knowledge of man instead of god's infinite wisdom. Even while science provided them with medicine and enabled them to undertake intergalactic journeys into space, scientific theories were regarded with suspicion and seen as a threat to dogma. Instead of evolution, which was a scientific theory explaining the origins of species, mankind erected what he called intelligent design theory as a competing theory alongside evolution. According to mankind, god has blown life into a lump of dust and mankind magically emerged from the pile of dust. The atheist explained that soil comprises weathered rock and other particles and was nothing compared to human body cells, but men shook their heads in disagreement. God did it, they maintained. Show me how. The atheist beseeched. It says so in the good book. They maintained. Wasn't the book written by men like me and you? He asked. They were inspired by god. They answered. How do you know that? He asked. Faith! They chorused. But you had faith that it is god that caused earthquakes and disease? He challenged them. What happened then? Why not have doctors replaced with priests then? God works in mysterious ways, they said. Could you please show me how you know that? He asked. His question was met with silence.

And the atheist looked at this. And he saw that it was bad. And he said, let there be...

**To be continued**