



Liberated FROM Religion

PAULO BITTENCOURT

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**The Inestimable Pleasure of
Being a Freethinker**

Paulo Bittencourt

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Except when referring to a particular person, all gender-specific terms are to be considered to refer to both the feminine and

the masculine form.



Universe, Pisces-Cetus Supercluster Complex,
Laniakea Supercluster, Virgo Supercluster, Local Group,
Milky Way, Orion Arm, Radcliffe Wave, Local Bubble,

Local Interstellar Cloud, Solar System, Earth

FREETHOUGHT



Challenge

If you are one of those Christians who read the Bible, I imagine that you are an Evangelical, and if you are an Evangelical I consider it a miracle that you are reading this book. No offense, but Evangelicals don't read anything that hasn't been published by a Christian publishing house, let alone books that stimulate critical thinking. I know what I'm talking about, because I too was an Evangelical and my entire family is. That said, it's likely that this book came into your hands by recommendation, and even more likely that already the first paragraphs of the first chapter will make you stop reading.

The reason why devout believers, especially Evangelicals, don't read anything that induces free thinking is very simple: fear of losing the faith. Well, if you are afraid of losing your faith, it's not firm, and if it's not firm, you are, besides being deceived, deceiving yourself. On the other hand, if your faith is firm, how can you be sure of that, if you don't put it to the test?

I challenge you, therefore, to read this book to the end, thus proving to yourself that you don't belong to the gigantic group of believers who are afraid of losing the faith. If *Liberated from Religion* doesn't make you doubt even a single one of the things you believe, you'll be able to say that your faith really is unshakable.

Paulo Bitten who?

I was born in the state of Paraná, Brazil, in 1966, but spent my childhood in the city of Rio de Janeiro, at a time when Brazilians still said God was Brazilian. My mother took me and my three brothers to the Evangelical church to which her father had taken her and her eight brothers and sisters and my three brothers had taken their sons and daughters. When I became an adult, my father, who was Catholic, converted to the Evangelical church to which the father of my mother had taken her and her eight brothers and sisters and she had taken me and my three brothers and my three brothers had taken their sons and daughters.

I didn't take my son to any church. I'm not just anyone. After all, I have the same family name as the disheveled composer of "da, da, da, daaaaa...". Bittencourt is the French version of the Dutch surname Beethoven, of most noble meaning: beet garden.

I dreamed of being a comic book artist and cartoonist, but a voice in my head commanded me to attend a Theology col-

lege and work for an invisible and angry superman. Instead of making me a man of God, studying Theology made me have doubts. At the end of the fifth semester, I abandoned my studies and moved to Europe. I only didn't get swallowed by a whale because I went by plane. After a short stay in several countries, in 1990 I settled in the Austrian city in which Ludwig van Beethoven became worm food: Vienna, where I graduated in Opera Singing.

I'm the author also of the books *Wasting Time on God: Why I Am an Atheist* and (only in Portuguese) *Zeus Is Not to Be Played With: Madnesses of the Belief in God*.

On my **website**, you can read more of my reflections on religion and Freethought.

To my son Evgeny

May you live in a world ever more free of superstitions and irrationalities.

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Preface

Imagine, dear reader, someone telling you a fantastic story, saying that, if you believe it, you'll be criticized for believing what the world considers madness, but that this should make you happy, because you'll be victim of persecution, which proves that that story is true and that you are part of a select group of privileged people. As soon as you believe that story and feel chosen, you are warned that, just like those who consider it madness, you'll suffer severe consequences, in case you doubt it.

Quite a cunning way to make you block out all critical thinking and reject whatever might induce you to subject that story to rational scrutiny, isn't it?

That, dear reader, is called religion. In countries where for centuries that story has been passed down from generation to generation as sacred, it's so deeply rooted that it's part of their tradition and culture. Thus, it's not surprising that, from the cradle up, millions of people are taught to see it as incontestable universal truth, which causes conditioning of the mind and results in a

religious automatism that prevents the majority of them from stopping to ask themselves whether that story makes sense and believing it is sensible and necessary.

Paradoxically, at the same time they take criticism of their beliefs as offense, these believers find it natural to criticize other people's beliefs. All religious people reject tens of thousands of religions as absurd, over which they don't lose a single minute of sleep. The difference between believers and me is, then, tiny: I reject only one religion more than they do.

If Christianity is the belief I most dissect, this is due to the simple fact that I was a Christian and that it's not only the largest religion in the world but also the most followed by Occidentals. It doesn't make much sense to write books about the irrationalities, for example, of Islam where this religion is practiced by a tiny minority. Actually, it's not even necessary, because all religions boil down to this: believing in the existence of things of which one has no evidence. By the way, since they are related religions, an analysis of Christianity is almost an analysis of Islam.

Where there is no reflection, there is manipulation. It's evident that religions make use of fear as an instrument of domination, first to deceive, then to prevent reflection and consequent deconversion of their adherents. In fact, any ideology that threatens with punishment those who reject it is perverse and deserves to be rejected. Those who are afraid of Hell are on the same intellectual level as those who are afraid of the Bogeyman.

One of the principal objectives of this book is to show that there are no reasons whatsoever to follow religions and that there are plenty of reasons to be a free-thinker.

Paulo Bittencourt

“There is no greater pleasure than to be a
freethinker.”

— Paulo Bittencourt

If the dear reader finds that some of my thoughts are formulated in a somewhat unusual way, I hope you will forgive me and, nonetheless, appreciate my effort to write in English despite it not being my native language.

Fear

“My mother told me, some time ago:
‘Wherever you go, God follows you.
God always sees everything you do’.
I was so afraid to get out of bed at night to go
to the bathroom,
afraid to know I wasn’t there alone,
because I always, always, always was with
God.”

(From the song *Paranoia*, by Raul Seixas)

GEORGE CARLIN, A famous American comedian, performed, in 1972, a monologue entitled *Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television*. Since I sense that the dear reader is dying to know these words, here they are: [censored], [censored], [censored], [censored], [censored], [censored] and [censored]. The joke consisted in Carlin dissecting these seven swear words in such a way that in the end they lost all obscenity, becoming ordinary words.

In the medium-sized city where I was born, there were two movie theaters: the Maharaja and the Plaza. While the Maharaja specialized in kung fu and Spaghetti

Western, the more sophisticated Plaza projected, many months late, the latest Hollywood hits, but without leaving aside the popular sex comedies of the 1970s. Boys in full hormonal explosion, like me, were delighted with the “obscenity” of the posters of these films, which at that time were considered pornographic, but less than a decade later came to be shown on TV and today don’t scandalize even centenary grannies.

Although not uniformly, around the globe the expansion of knowledge, advancement of Science, general increase in the level of education and popularization of the internet tend to make people ever less ingenuous. Much of what in the previous generation was reproachable is today acceptable or tolerable. As ingenuousness decreases, taboos lose their force or disappear.

Since 1826, the year in which teacher Cayetano Ripoll was hanged by Catholic tribunal Junta de Fé, in Valencia, Spain, no one in the Occident has to be afraid anymore of being sentenced to death for blasphemy or heresy. Even so, for many people

deities and religions remain sacrosanct and frightening taboos. If we take Christianity and Islam, we have a total of 4.2 billion people, more than half the world's population, who dare not doubt, let alone question the dogmas of the two largest religions, despite knowing they aren't based on evidence. While in much of the Islamic world criticism of religion and disbelief are subject to the death penalty, in the Christian world people can still be imprisoned for publicly opposing religious convictions. If the dear reader is an atheist and planning to spend some time in Russia, when you are there don't say in a virtual chat "God doesn't exist", unless you are in the mood to watch the Sun rise square (Brazilian expression that means to go to prison).

Not a few believers demand for Christianity to be uncriticizable. Despite all enlightenment and liberty, in Brazil it's common for administrators of YouTube channels and Facebook pages to be threatened with death or sued for criticizing or parodying the Christian faith. Around the world, anyone who states not to believe in invisible beings will be seen as normal. In the

Occident, anyone who states not to believe in the invisible beings of the indigenous, African and Asian religions will also be seen as normal. In contrast, in the Americas anyone who states not to believe in the invisible beings of the Judeo-Christian religion will be seen with suspicion and may suffer hostilities.

One of the principal attributes of the Christian god is to be holy. What is holy is sacred; what is sacred, inviolable; what is inviolable, unquestionable; what is unquestionable, indisputable. Thus, it's not surprising that in a country where, according to the 2010 Census of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, only 8% of people have no religion, 86.8% practice Christianity and Christian fundamentalism is growing at a vertiginous rate, critically reflecting on God and religion is neither common nor acceptable.

The essence of many religions is the same: however simple and unknown they may be, they preach the existence of at least one god who rewards those who please him and punishes those who displease him. One characteristic common to all religions is

that gods aren't in the least interested in ending the doubts and heated discussions about their existence. If the Christian god exists, it would be so easy for him to put an end to the affliction of those who yearn to discover the meaning of life, to the anguish of those who think they need to be sure that death isn't the end and to the enmity between different religions and their sects, which throughout History has killed millions of people and still generates arrogance, intolerance, discord and division: it would suffice that he appeared to Humanity. As an omniscient and all-powerful god, he knows how he could do it in an unequivocal way, dispelling any and all doubts.

Why, then, doesn't he do it?

The biblical god supposedly inspired some men from the Iron Age to write a handbook with accounts also from the Bronze Age, made some of them have enigmatic dreams, revealing to them future events by means of obscure symbolisms, and called people to found churches. Since then, he keeps watching his creatures struggle with the interpretation of his literary inspirations, curious to see who of them

decipher them correctly and how many accept them without question. It's said that all that is good must be achieved through hard effort. That being so, it's as if God took pleasure in putting to the test man's capacity to believe, execute and hope. Only those who pass this test qualify to receive the prize: to live in a mansion of gold for infinite centillions of years.

Christianity's greatest figure, apostle Paul compares faith in God to a fight, but principally to a race. For me, and I think for many people, a not very motivating comparison. In school, we had a terrible Physical Education teacher. Instead of teaching us different sport modalities, he would make the class run under the burning sun, reason why we nicknamed him track teacher. In the bimonthly tests, he would give us one point for each lap around the soccer field. Since we hated running, the majority of us would do only five laps, just enough to pass. If Paradise is attainable only by means of running and fighting, those who like neither running nor fighting are lost.

Religious people see life as a test administered by God. However, the conception that he tests us is an incoherence. First, because it's not just any test, like the school ones, which the student, if he fails, has the chance to retake. The divine test lasts a lifetime and its objective is not to qualify a person for professional life, but to determine where he'll spend eternity: whether playing the harp and singing praises in high and glowing clouds or being fried and howling in pain in the dark depths of the Tartarus. And second, because human beings aren't equal in a number of aspects, such as intellect, health status, socio-economic status, education, inclinations and opportunities. Therefore, given the terrible consequences of a failure, if life were a divine test it wouldn't be fair. At the same time race and trial, the life of some has more obstacles and is harder than that of others.

Nor is equal in all people the predisposition to believe in the existence of gods and follow religions. Some find it very easy to believe, as well as to submit to ecclesiastical authorities. In contrast, the more free-spir-

ited, who believers like to classify as rebels, are less or not at all inclined to religiosity. Similarly, the propensity to do good and do evil is not the same in everyone. On the other hand, if we were the same the result of everyone's test would be the same, making it meaningless, which it, in fact, is, because God, being omniscient, knows the future and the result of the test before applying it. That's right. In this exact moment, God already knows who will pass the test who will not, who will go to Heaven who will go to Hell. What Christian would dare to claim that God didn't know the result of the macabre and sadistic test he gave Abraham, when he commanded him to sacrifice his son Isaac?

Flashing like the neon sign of a Las Vegas casino, two words leap to the eye of those who, free from religious bias, reflect on the conception of God taught by many religions: infantility and sadism. God creates human beings different from each other, yet he ignores their differences and expects from all of them unconditional submission, punishing those who don't agree with what

is taught about him. In what way does such a god differ from dictators and tyrants?

By all appearances, God seems to be a bit tired of his millenary public image of a grumpy old man with a white beard. Because of this, to improve it, he hired the professional help of public-relations specialists: neo-Pentecostal pastors. The strategy consists in making the faithful forget that Yahweh, the bad-tempered and implacable god, who killed and commanded the killing even of children, and Jesus, the god who liked children, are the same deity. Grumpy Yahweh is the god only of the Jews. The god of the Christians is another one, completely different: Jesus, the comradely deity, bringer of cure and fortune.

And speaking of implacable, there are those who claim that they became atheists after reading the Bible carefully. At a press conference on the occasion of the release of Ridley Scott's film *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, actor Christian Bale referred to his character Moses thus: "I think the man was likely schizophrenic and was one of the most barbaric individuals that I ever read about in my life". God spoke to Moses di-

rectly and almost everything the most important figure in the Bible said, especially the orders to destroy entire cities, exterminating all their inhabitants, which included children, began with a frightening “Thus says the Lord”.

If we give someone who has never heard of the Bible Deuteronomy chapter 28 to read, he’ll certainly think it’s the script of a horror movie. Under divine inspiration, Moses lists the curses with which Yahweh promises to punish his people, in case they dare “not to carefully follow all his commands”:

The Lord will plague you with diseases until he has destroyed you from the land [...]. The Lord will strike you with wasting disease, with fever and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew, which will plague you until you perish [...]. The Lord will afflict you with the boils of Egypt and with tumors, festering sores and the itch, from which you cannot be cured. The Lord will afflict you with madness, blindness and confusion of mind [...]. The Lord will afflict your knees and legs with painful boils that can-

not be cured, spreading from the soles of your feet to the top of your head [...]. All these curses will come on you. They will pursue you and overtake you until you are destroyed [...]. You will eat the fruit of the womb, the flesh of the sons and daughters [...]. It will please him to ruin and destroy you.

Apropos of that, why does the Bible make such a point of stressing God's goodness? If it didn't contain passages like "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good" (Psalms 107:1), would we at the end of reading it conclude that the biblical deity is kind? At least 60 verses of the Word of God are dedicated to convincing the reader that the god who punishes those who don't worship him is good, a clear sign that this doesn't become evident.

How could the extra-biblical prohibitions imposed by many Evangelical denominations, which can range from smoking, drinking alcoholic beverages and coffee, eating pork and seafood, watching television, going to the movies and the theater, reading novels and scientific books, listening to nonreligious music, dancing, playing

sports and wearing long pants, short hair, jewelry and makeup to painting one's nails, not be reflexes of the severity of the god of the Bible?

If there is anything that really bothers the biblical deity, it's the sexual pleasure of his creatures. While masturbation, which filmmaker Woody Allen calls sex with someone he loves, and extramarital sex are sin, homosexuality is much more than that: aberration. Officially, Catholicism sees sex as an act reserved uniquely for procreation. On the other side of the coin, is it a coincidence that the largest Protestant country, the United States, is also the one that has the most bizarre sexual laws? Believe it or not, in several American states all sexual positions are forbidden, with the exception of that one in which the man lies on top of the woman, known precisely as the missionary position. In the state of Alabama, no one needs a permit to buy a gun or is required to register it. Like in western movies, one can carry it almost anywhere. However, selling and gifting erotic toys, such as vibrators, incur a US\$ 10,000 fine and one year detention. Recidivism can re-

sult in up to ten years of “watching the Sun rise square”. Is it because vibrators are lethal, while firearms are harmless?

The fury of the *Old Testament* god is embarrassing for many Christians, yet they have no way to extricate themselves from it, because, in addition to Jesus having neither disapproved nor revoked a single letter of what is written in the *Hebrew Bible*, Yahweh and his son are the very same deity. As a result, however much his followers squirm to see him as such, there is no way that Jesus can be different from Yahweh, that is, be his good version. Those who think that the *New Testament* god is all about peace and love need to read, for example, John 3:36: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them”.

The dear reader has certainly heard of a lake of fire and brimstone in which people are tortured for infinite centillions of years, haven’t you? Incredible as it may seem, that place of unspeakable terror is a doctrine far more of the *New* than of the *Old Testament*. Destruction, perdition and Hell were

among the favorite themes of Jesus, who referred to them more than 40 times, as on this occasion: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who [...] says to a brother or sister [...], ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell” (Matthew 5:21-22). Like a neo-Pentecostal pastor, Jesus couldn’t go too long without citing Devil, demons and divine punishment. It even was he who pronounced the sentence that most gives Christians the creeps: “Anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven” (Matthew 12:32).

Could there be anything more distressing for a believer than being repentant and not forgiven by God? If speaking against the Holy Spirit is the only unforgivable sin, that isn’t trivial information, but crucial. Even so, the Nazarene didn’t take the trouble to convey it clearly, reason why among Christians there is no consensus on what “speaking against the Holy Spirit” means. This makes many believers panic. In online articles on the subject, terrified believers leave

desperate comments, begging for someone to assure them that they haven't committed the gravest of all sins.

An anonymous e-mail I received says:

Many years ago, I left the churches. However, no matter how hard I try, I can't stop believing in God. It's ingrained in me. This makes me angry, because I've believed in this God since I was a child, but have never had evidence of his existence. I've done everything I can for him to reveal himself to me, but he doesn't. Even so, the fear of not believing and of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit is very great.

All churches preach that the human being is lost, but that to be saved it suffices to believe in Jesus. Curiously, I have never heard of a president of a Christian denomination who opened a conference with the following words: "Sisters and brothers, Jesus said: 'He who believes in me has eternal life'. Reflecting deeply on this, it became to me as clear as the Sun that the church is a superfluous institution, because, as the Bible says, believing in Christ is sufficient. So, I hereby submit my letter of resignation

and propose the dissolution of our organizations. Oh, and to those who are sad because they don't know what to do with the tithe money, I recommend that, from now on, they donate it to charities”.

Why will we never hear a speech like that? Because, besides churches being fantastic businesses, what could be more fascinating than being the representative of the authority of none other than the Creator of the Universe himself? In Hebrews 13:17, God orders: “Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority”. Well, if the church represents God on Earth and the Holy Spirit makes use of “men of God” to instruct people, the voice of the church is the voice of God himself. Consequently, to diverge from church directives is to oppose divine authority and to close one’s ears to the voice of the Holy Spirit, a sin for which, as Jesus said, there is no forgiveness.

What instrument of manipulation could be better than this? It doesn’t take a very smart person to realize that there is a relation between God, religion, church, authority, fear and submission. Add...

Read the **rest** of the book.