

Gregory S. Paul says faith in God is bad news
for societies. But his disbelief is rooted
in his own personal passion.

the god that fails

BY MICHAEL ANFT

The godless gather on the second floor of an Irish bar, sandwiched between soccer fans howling at televisions below and drink-happy tourists sucking in the harbor view from an outside deck, to talk about what they don't believe. Tonight, about three dozen folks mill around or dive into bowls of shrimp and pints of Smithwicks. One of them, a young man, walks up to a balding, bearded guy. The young man tells the older one about a delightful article he read in the *Wall Street Journal* that argued that people aren't hardwired for religious belief and that countries with a high percentage of the pious are more screwed up than those that are secular.

The guy in the vest—Gregory S. Paul—gets to experience the fleeting glee of authorship. He tells the young man he wrote the piece in the *Journal*. The article, published in April, hit on themes Paul has broadcast regularly since first publishing a lengthy scholarly piece in the *Journal of Religion and Society* five years ago: Quality of life improves wherever God has reached the Nietzschean end of the road. Inversely, religion thrives in societies that have a high level of social dysfunction and economic

inequality. Among Western countries, only the United States maintains a high level of religiosity—and, he says, its citizens suffer because of it. “We’re the only country that’s dragging itself through a culture war,” Paul says.

A taciturn guy most days, Paul revels in the role of religious naysayer, ditching his characteristic world-weary modesty for some bolt-upright pride. “I’m sort of the house expert here,” he says as he peels a shrimp and scans the room. “I’m the only one doing peer-reviewed journal work and writing op-ed pieces.”

Paul developed a formula for determining why some countries do well and others don’t. His “successful societies scale,” a metric that boils down twenty-five quality-of-life categories (including abortion, drug use, economic inequality, incarceration, and homicide and infant mortality rates) was designed to rank nations on their ability to foster the good life for their citizens. Places like Denmark and Japan, where God is little more than a merry myth—kind of like Santa Claus—scored highly. The United States is the least prosperous of the seventeen Western countries Paul measured; it is also the most religious.

Paul’s attempts to measure and correlate religious fervor and socioeconomic well-being may represent little more than a man stalwartly and aggressively defending his atheism. But there’s more to this man than one might guess, watching him here, basking in a little attention from his public. He and his scholarly work have

won the attention of those thinkers and scientists responsible for an atheist revival, including Richard Dawkins, Daniel C. Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. He is in touch with each of them; each has expressed admiration for his arguments and the value they may have for the cause. They see him as a potential game-changer in the battle against God, a meek guy who has conjured a system by which to judge Him and his irrelevance in human affairs.

More unlikely still, perhaps: Paul is responsible for many of the images of dinosaurs that grace the pages of some of the country’s glossiest highbrow magazines—*Natural History*, *Smithsonian*. His books include the cheekily titled *A Field Guide to Dinosaurs*. He received a credit as a “dinosaur specialist” on *Jurassic Park*.

Paul’s nonbelief in what atheists call “the imaginary friend” and his well-considered theories on how dinosaurs moved and what they looked like creates an odd juxtaposition. His narrative is one of a man toiling quietly but diligently for decades on images of beings that have been dead for millions of years—while ripping up the reputation of one that he’ll try to convince you has never existed.

Gregory Paul entered Northern Virginia Community College in 1973, studying geology, where he showed up an instructor who was teaching his first class. "He knew far more about the vertebrate part of the history of geology than I did," remembers Terry Dyroff, now professor emeritus of geology and meteorology at Montgomery College in Rockville. "He was already highly proficient at researching, painting, and drawing dinosaurs. At that point, he already was reconstructing the bones and making informed judgments on what that meant for how they lived. It was clear to me he was going places."

Except he didn't—at least not to the typical ones. Even though "he certainly had the stuff to go and get a PhD," Dyroff says, Paul didn't bother. He never wanted to get tangled up in academia, he says: "There's too much bureaucracy. And I never wanted to work with students." He preferred hovering around the periphery, soaking up what he could from universities but not getting sucked into them. (He lives where he does in part because the Milton S. Eisenhower Library at Johns Hopkins—an invaluable research tool to someone who regularly consumes expensive journals such as *Nature*—is just a few blocks away.)

Not long after graduation, Paul ended up getting a job researching and depicting dinosaurs for Robert Bakker, a Johns Hopkins earth and planetary sciences professor who looked and sometimes acted like Rasputin. It was a heady time to be into paleontology. Scientists were coming around to the idea that dinosaurs were active, fast-moving, and warm-blooded. Some had feathers—a revelation at that time. Paul was there to spill ink on these new developments. With Bakker's help, he continued to hone his own research into how bones moved, what the feathers might look like. "I was fortunate," he says. "I got into dinosaurs as a kid and happened to be there as we went through this period of reconsideration about what they were."

Paul has gone on to espouse theories of his own, many of them vindicated by further research. In *Dinosaurs of the Air*, which he published eight years ago, he posited that the velociraptor and other theropods might have been descended from flying dinosaurs, an idea that has since gained the thumbs-up of many scientists. He has named at least nine different dinosaur species, redubbing the *Brachiosaurus Grancai* the *Giraffatitan*. "It's my favorite dinosaur," he says. "It was the biggest in its day, and it's just really cool looking." One theropod bears his name: *Cryptovolans pauli*. And Paul designed the model for Maryland's most famous dinosaur, *Astrodon johnstoni*, that currently dominates the Maryland Science Center downtown.

The bones of dinosaurs confirm their past. He's a big believer in physical evidence. He questions everything else. Dyroff

remembers that while Paul pursued his dinophilia in community college, he took a liking to Mark Twain's *Letters from the Earth*, in which the author laid out his misgivings about religion. "It's what got him started on the whole thing," he says.

Today, Paul is careful to note that his work merely shows a correlation between religiosity and dysfunction, and not causation either way. Still, he makes some claims that make many believers very uncomfortable. He has written that God and socioeconomic success mix as well as oil and holy water: "No socioeconomically successful and highly religious nation has ever existed, and the antagonistic relationship between benign conditions and the popularity of religion probably make it impossible for one to come into being." For Paul, religion is a balm for the fallen.

It gets more insidious than that: Paul argues that churches actively work to stanch the flow of progress—something he says his scale effectively susses out. "Conservative churches didn't like health care reform, even if many of their poorer members would benefit from it," he says. "They push for faith-based services instead of ones run by the government so they can hold on to their power."

Paul's work has done more than turn a head or two at the monthly Baltimore Atheists Meetup Group gabfests. He regularly swaps thoughts with Dennett, the author of *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, and an oft-quoted atheist and philosopher. In fact, the two may soon be working on a paper together, Dennett reports. When Pope Benedict XVI planned a trip to England earlier this year, Paul contacted Dawkins, the anti-God evolutionary biologist and author of *The God Delusion*, and author/journalist Hitchens (*God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Every-*

thing) to support to have the pontiff arrested for child abuse. His debunkings of other religious phenomena, such as the Shroud of Turin, hold prominent places on antireligious Web sites.

But academics who practice religion say Paul's findings are, if not offensive, at least specious. "I'm not sure he's proving anything in these papers," says John Conley, professor of philosophy at Loyola University Maryland and a Jesuit priest. "You might as well say that there is a correlation between certain ethnic groups and quality of life, or certain government types. There may be a bias in what categories he's mentioning, in that they reflect his view of what a happy society might feature. You'd have to be an incredibly gifted sociologist to develop a method to separate all that out, and it's clear he's not there."

Conley says Paul's argument that churches have hindered social progress ignores instances in American history, including the abolition and civil rights movements, which were led by churches. Further, a wide swath of Catholic thinkers believe in physical evolution but question how humans have attempted to apply knowledge of it during the past couple of centuries, such as through eugenics or by turning class distinctions into harmful stereotypes.

Paul was told early on that he could draw ancient reptiles really, really well. He was also told that they were fictional characters.

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What's more, studies show that about 84 percent of the human race believes in a religious being or beings. Scholars point to this as evidence that religion is hardwired into the neural systems of most of us. Psychologists, such as Paul Bloom at Yale, and religious leaders embrace science that says that praying and meditating activate pleasure centers in our brains.

Paul is having none of it. Using language and seeking food and belongings are truly "universal" traits people share—religion is a mere option, not something necessary to survival. He points to small groups, like the Hadza, a small hunter-gatherer tribe in Tanzania that doesn't observe a God or religious rituals, as well as larger groups. The majority of the Chinese believe in Confucianism, more of a philosophy than a religion. "It shows you that cultures can run without religion," he says.

Despite religion's claims to the contrary, nonbelief is already on the march, while religion is in retreat, Paul says. Several polls suggest that, despite its woeful showing in several successful societies categories, the United States in the midst of "going material," as Paul puts it.

His defenders add that Paul is doing more than recycling old ideas—he is shaking up debate about the value of religion. "It takes courage and insight to buck the received opinion," says Dennett, noting that many commentators blithely link religion with well-being. "Not many academics do anything as valuable as that."

A frequent collaborator, Phil Zuckerman, author of *Society Without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment*, adds that Paul "makes an argument you don't see

in Dawkins' or Hitchens' books. Instead of wasting time debunking the Bible, he's marshaled so much socioeconomic data that he makes it clear that religious societies don't do all that well. It's a completely new line of argument."

While he waits for the world to catch up with that argument—he says major media have so far ignored him—Paul will keep himself busy. He wants to create a dinosaur app for the iPhone. And there's the pressing question of where humanity, which is running through the Earth's resources at an astonishing rate, will end up. Paul doesn't speak of Judgment Day or heaven and hell, but his answer captures the imagination in a way those other ostensibly man-made constructs don't. What he envisions is a kind of anti-rapture.

"Human life is kind of boring," Paul says. "And it's bad for the Earth. The best solution would be to upload our minds to technology and just get off the planet and on toward a cyber, 3-D world.

"When I talk to people, they say this is weird," he says, pausing to let that thought sink in. "But Christianity is a lot weirder. And so is the secular answer: They think people will be here forever, but that flies in the face of what we know about evolution."

Another pause. "We might as well make plans now." ■

—*Michael Anft is senior writer at Hopkins Magazine, where he covers science and medicine. During his twenty years in the business, he has written for the Chronicle of Philanthropy, City Paper, the Baltimore Evening Sun, the Washington Post, and others.*



On the Air: Gregory Paul on The Marc Steiner Show, WEEA 88.9 FM, on December 29