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BIAS

“What Open-Mindedness Requires” by William Hare — there is no small irony in this title, given the anti-supernatural orientation of the author and publisher. Nevertheless, this essay is valuable as a serious secular attempt “to steer a course between being obstinately defensive and wantonly credulous.” Hare sees open-mindedness as an “intellectual virtue” and the philosophical orientation of his presentation is consequently somewhat technical in nature.

A second ironic surprise comes by way of his clumsy opening. Hare’s first proposition is self-defeating: “Open-mindedness requires serious consideration of alternative ideas ... unless ... they have no merit.” He moves on to make appropriate overtures to openness as if he hadn’t already betrayed his willingness to dismiss unmerited thought.

Hare says that “Open-mindedness requires sincere commitment to the pursuit of truth....” His assertion that this quest is “closely associated with the virtues of intellectual humility and epistemic modesty” gives pause for a snicker. He only digs himself into a deeper hole when he adds that “Open-mindedness requires the absence of a dogmatic and rigid stance....”

Some beliefs that have no merit are mentioned. “Holocaust deniers see themselves as open-minded and willing to consider relevant evidence, but bias and prejudice lead them to trust tainted sources that prevent them from taking genuine evidence seriously. Proponents of creation science are not willing to attend to relevant geological evidence because they base their view on sources outside the sphere of science against which, in their mistaken view, scientific claims must be judged.”

Oblivious to his own bias, Hare adds: “Since it is disingenuous to claim to have an open-minded attitude toward others’ views if we either prevent such views from being developed and circulated or support their suppression, open-mindedness evidently requires a presumption in favor of tolerance and the free expression of ideas in society....”

“A balanced treatment of evolutionary theory and intelligent design in science teaching would create the false impression

that these theories are on an equal footing, which would constitute miseducation with respect to what counts as science. To regard all claims as embodying their own truth (relativism) amounts to giving up on the idea of truth altogether, making open-minded inquiry pointless.” *Skeptical Inquirer*, Mar/Apr ‘09, pp36-39.¹

ISLAM

“The Meaning of Freedom” (no byline) — the best response we’ve seen to the resolution on “religious defamation” adopted by the United Nations’ Human Rights Council on March 26th. We begin by identifying “the context in which it was adopted (with an unholy trio of Pakistan, Belarus and Venezuela acting as sponsors), [which] makes clear that bigger issues are at stake.

“The resolution says ‘defamation of religions’ is a ‘serious affront to human dignity’ which can ‘restrict the freedom’ of those who are defamed, and may also lead to the incitement of violence. But there is an insidious blurring of categories here....

“[T]he more rigorous language of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948 ... protects individuals - not religions, or any other set of beliefs ... a vital distinction....

“In many of the 56 member states of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, which has led the drive to outlaw ‘defamation,’ both non-Muslims and Muslims who voice dissent (even in technical matters of Koranic interpretation) are often victims of just the sort of persecution the 1948 declaration sought to outlaw. That is a real human-rights problem....

“[N]o state, and certainly no body that calls itself a Human Rights Council, should trample on the right to free speech enshrined in the Universal Declaration....

“Having taken a politically risky decision (see article) to re-engage with the Human Rights Council and seek election as one of its 47 members, America should now make the defence of real religious liberty one of its highest priorities.” *The Economist*, Apr 4 ‘09, p17. <www.tinyurl.com/clzduj>

(continued on next page)

A companion piece to the above article, “Diplomacy, faith and freedom” (p63) adds that the Human Rights Council “has focused far more on Israel than on any other country, and it has devoted quite a lot of energy to a campaign for laws against the ‘defamation of religion’ whose main supporters are Muslim governments with distinctly illiberal ideas about free speech....

“Altering the council from within will be a formidable task—especially after a vote on ‘defamation’ on March 26th which enhanced the body’s reputation as an obstacle to free expression as most Westerners would understand the concept. The resolution was passed in defiance of an appeal from a remarkably broad range of secular, Christian, Muslim and Jewish groups; in a joint statement, they had argued that by denouncing the ‘defamation’ of faith the Council would give heart to regimes that set out to ‘silence and intimidate human-rights activists, religious dissenters and other independent voices.’

“The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), a lobby group which coordinated the appeal, says the resolution is part of an effort by Islamic governments to establish a new definition of human rights which stresses the immunity of faiths from criticism, not the protection of individuals from persecution. Roy Brown, who represents the IHEU in Geneva, believes the latest resolution reflects a campaign by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference to supplant the Universal Declaration on Human Rights with the ‘Cairo declaration’ adopted by the OIC in 1990, which lays out an alternative view of liberty.

“Supporters of the Cairo statement say it complements the universal one—but as human-rights wonks have noted, the Cairo document carries the huge rider that the application of all human rights should be subordinated to sharia law. It also affirms the illegitimacy of ‘exercising any form of pressure’ on Muslims to quit their faith ‘for another religion or for atheism’ - in terms that seem to deny the individual’s freedom to change religion, and to justify the penalties for ‘apostasy’ and blasphemy that many Muslim states impose.” <www.tinyurl.com/croub9>

monly clear call for help regarding the plight of innocents suffering within a vast culture racked by superstitious fear. Our greatest regret over this piece is that it fails to clarify the huge difference that exists between what is understood as witchcraft (or wicca) in the West and the jumble of traditional African occult practices casually identified by the same name.

The article touches on the many ways that weaker members of underdeveloped communities — such as children, the elderly, the disabled and unhealthy — are frequently charged with being the mysterious causes of unexpected calamities experienced by the group. Examples are given from several different African countries citing accusations of sorcery or witchcraft which result in mob reactions that visit abuse and murder indiscriminately on those who are the least able to defend themselves.²

Access to the above article is restricted within the publisher’s web site. However, we

found the complete text posted elsewhere: <www.tinyurl.com/dg7lh3>

For an African perspective on the problem, see:

- “Devil Worship” by Anthony Bugembe in *Sunday Vision* (Uganda), Mar 28 ’09, n.p. <www.tinyurl.com/ddukqt>

- “Digging into the juju world” by Robert Kalumba in *Sunday Monitor* (Uganda), Feb 22 ’09, n.p. <www.tinyurl.com/ceamkl>

- “Nigerian children branded as witches in deadly purge” (no byline), *AFP*, Mar 01 ’09, n.p. <www.tinyurl.com/d684qa>

- “The plight of Akwa Ibom children” (editorial) in *Punch* (Nigeria), Jan 15 ’09, n.p. <www.tinyurl.com/dftvxb>

SOURCES, PERIODICALS:

1 - *Skeptical Inquirer*, <www.csicop.org/si>

2 - *The Week*, <www.theweekmagazine.com>

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WITCHCRAFT

While regrettably short, the summary “Africa: The enduring power of witchcraft” (*The Week*, Apr 17 ’09, p14) is an uncom-