

Out of Jim Riva's satiric, comic novel *The Champion of Reason* comes a section in which the Champ takes on religions and knocks down arguments for the existence of God.



"Testing, one, two, three. Testing, one, two, three."

The people in the auditorium braced themselves in their seats and suffered through the insufferable screeching as the level indicators on the amplifier shot from one end to the other.

"Testing, one, two, three. Testing, one, two, three."

At the microphone, Lucille Simpson, Chairperson of the Addleton Central High School Board, seemed to be the only person in the place unaffected by the eye-clenching, teeth-clamping, fingers-in-your-ears zings and tings.

"Testing, one, two, three. Testing, one, two, three."

I was there. With two cameras, both with flash attachments and zooms, I was taking pictures of the crowd that had come to hear Father Ralph's lecture "Nietzsche's Dead, But God Isn't", and I got some good shots of Officer Bellini in his nun outfit.

The PA system was finally adjusted properly and Chairperson Simpson's voice came through loud and clear: "And now, ladies and gentlemen, without any further adieu, I am proud to present Father Ralph Ryan."

During the applause, I took a seat next to Officer Bellini (“Excuse me, Sister, is this seat taken?”) and watched Father Ralph walk out with echoing footsteps. He placed a notebook on the lectern and opened it. After raising and lowering the microphone several times, he finally had it where he wanted it. Then he coughed to clear his throat and said, “Testing, one, two, three.”

The first row was reserved for distinguished theologians and members of the clergy, including Bishop Knight and Cardinal Crow. The next few rows were reserved for the press and the VIPs. The rest of those present, aside from the undercover cops, were everyday ordinary laymen and laidwomen. Duchess Mazur and the aristocrats were not there because the Addleton Central High auditorium, unlike Ponce de León Theater, didn’t have private opera booths, meaning that they would have had to sit with ‘vulgar plebeians’. Among the vulgar plebeians was Albert Mavis, who was seated next to Officer Rubin Amarro in his Serpico outfit.

Father Ralph stepped back from the microphone and looked out at the audience with a self-assured expression. Then he stepped forward and began: “I quote from Genesis 1,3: ‘God said ‘Let there be light’, and there was – ”

All of a sudden, the lights went out. Father Ralph tried to tell the people that the blackout was only a temporary inconvenience and nothing to worry about, but the microphone was dead. Feeling all alone in the dark, he carefully made his way to the side of the stage and then out onto the main floor.

The place was pitch black. I couldn’t even see the head of the person in front of me. I heard mumbling and coughing and other sounds, but it was hard to tell where the sounds were coming from and how far away they were. Approximately five hundred people sat in the darkness. (Did anyone have a flashlight? No, no one did. No one, that is, except Albert Mavis, who also had a pliers and a screwdriver.)

Feeling uncomfortably in need of some conversation, I turned to Officer Bellini and said, “So tell me, Sister, do you agree with the Pope that masturbation is a sin?”

A strange voice suddenly came loud and clear over the PA system. “Do

supernatural beings exist? Does *a* supernatural being exist? Or is it the case that there are no supernatural beings, not even one? Those are the questions.

“Listen. Early humans were in awe of what goes on in the world because they didn’t know enough to be able to explain things naturally. So some of them used their imaginations to explain things *supernaturally*. They made up stories about gods, and they told the stories to their impressionable children, and before long, people were believing the stories and performing rituals in order to appease or please the gods. I’m talking about the rise of religions. You know who *I* am, and you know where I stand. I stand on the side of science. I’m waging a war, and if I win, religion is going to lose because my foe is folly, and religion is folly.”

Up to this last comment, the audience wasn’t sure if it was or wasn’t Father Ralph doing the talking, but this last comment left no doubt that it wasn’t, and it didn’t take a genius to know who it was.

“To a reasonable person who looks up at the stars at night and wonders whether gods or a God with a capital ‘G’ really exist, religion doesn’t provide any answers, none whatsoever. A reasonable person looks to science for the answers. After all, questions about whether something does or does not exist are empirical questions.

“Do yourselves a favor and listen. You might learn something. It is an established fact that the universe began about fifteen billion years ago with an event called the Big Bang. If you want to believe that the universe hatched from a cosmic egg or that it was created in six days, that is your prerogative, but you’re not being reasonable.”

It was at this point that I heard what I thought was Sister Mary Bellini’s stomach growling, but I quickly realized that it was radio static, and then I heard a voice that sounded much more like a mister’s than a sister’s. “Bellini to team. Bellini to team. Culprit now inside. Repeat, culprit now inside. Proceed according to plan. Repeat, proceed according to plan.”

“Being reasonable involves objectively looking at the evidence and basing conclusions solely on the evidence. It does *not* involve having a belief based on nothing more than strong feelings and rejecting evidence that doesn’t square with the belief. The so-called ‘holy’ books are just

human-written books that people have strong feelings about. If a fundamentalist Christian had been raised by fundamentalist Moslems, that person would have grown up believing with strong feelings that the *Koran*, not the *Bible*, is a 'holy' book, and vice versa; and if a fundamentalist Jew had been raised by fundamentalist Hindus, that person would have grown up believing with strong feelings that the *Vedas*, not the *Talmud*, is a 'holy' book, and vice versa. Understand this. Think for yourselves. Don't let other people do your thinking for you. Take your thinking to a higher level. Rise above the manipulation. I'm not talking to you religious fanatics. I know that you're hopeless cases. I'm talking to you people who are not incapable of looking up at the stars at night and doing some serious, objective thinking. And I'm trying to get you to do it."

A shrill sound suddenly exploded next to me in the darkness. The little ball inside the whistle must have been zipping around like an electron. I heard footsteps and people running (a few or a hundred, who could tell?) toward the microphone it seemed – and fighting. It sounded like a barroom brawl. There were voices ("I've got him!" "No, *I've* got him!" "That's me, you idiot!" "Sorry." "Where is he?" "Over here! I've got him!" "Get off me, you imbecile!" ...), but, over the commotion, the speech in the dark continued.

"Think. Humans have a brain with a cerebral cortex that would be about twenty square feet if the convolutions were all flattened out. That cerebral cortex enables humans to reason. Think. You are a human because of a particular genotype contained in the nucleus of the zygote with which you originated. Think. You were raised in a particular culture. The way you were raised affected your thinking. Think. But think rationally. I'm not the champion of thinking; I'm the champion of *rational* thinking."

Someone shouted in a gruff voice, "He's in the basement!" – and the stamping shoes, stamping helter-skelter every which way, coalesced and stamped together ("To the basement!" "The basement!" "Let's get him!" "Get the bastard!" ...), and the rumbling, tumbling, and stumbling gradually faded as the undercover cops descended the basement stairs.

I thought that the Champion of Reason was inside the place. In that respect, I was just as much in the dark as everyone else. I had no idea that

he was delivering his speech from a telephone booth on the other side of town.

“Religious thinking is not rational thinking. Understand this. Religion wraps things up in a neat, little package; science doesn’t – but science can provide facts, and religion can’t. Anyone who claims to know that there exists a God or gods has the burden of proof, but none of the arguments that have been presented through the ages have been rationally persuasive. Anselm must have been out of his mind to think that the question ‘Does God exist?’ is a question about a predicate. His ontological argument, and Descartes’ ontological argument, and all of the other ontological arguments are worthless except for playing linguistic games. Let’s not play linguistic games. Let’s be reasonable. Let’s look to science. There was no need for Aquinas to make four cosmological arguments if he had one *good* one, which he didn’t. As for the teleological argument, listen. Order emerged from the chaos that followed the Big Bang because gravitational tug of wars gradually balanced, and Earth’s millions of animal and plant species seem to be perfectly designed for their environments because evolution occurred via mutation and natural selection. So the argument that there must exist a supreme orderer or a supreme designer is invalid. True, it’s amazing that things happened the way that they happened and that things are the way that they are, but science is full of amazing things. And granted that the probabilities of another big bang having exactly the same results might be astronomically infinitesimal, but that doesn’t mean that the universal ‘show’, for want of a better word, has a universal director.”

The stamping shoes, and the rumbling, tumbling, and stumbling returned (“He’s not in the basement!” “Where is he?” “Where’s that son-of-a-bitch?” ...) as the undercover cops ascended the basement stairs, still in pursuit.

As I sat in the darkness and listened to the voice above the commotion, I thought that Jake Leander was a fool not to heed my warning and that he deserved to get himself captured, for surely there was no way for him to escape. That’s what I thought. That’s what the entire police force thought.

“I’m not a wise man with all the answers. I’m just a reasonable man with a lot of questions. I don’t know why the Big Bang occurred exactly

when it did and not earlier or later. That question troubles me more than any other question, but I'm not going to make a leap of faith because I'm committed to reason. I'm the Champion of Reason, and I feel like a scientifically-minded ancient Greek must have felt after climbing to the top of Mount Olympus and finding no evidence whatsoever that any gods or goddesses lived there."

The same someone who had shouted earlier in a gruff voice shouted in that gruff voice again, but this time he shouted, "He's in the balcony!" – and the stamping shoes, which were again stamping in confusion and disarray, again unified ("To the balcony!" "The balcony!" "He's in the balcony!" "Let's get him!" ...), and the undercover cops rumbled, tumbled, and stumbled toward the balcony.

"You Jews and Christians and Moslems and Hindus and Sikhs, and all of you other kinds of religious people out there, you're always making claims about a God or gods. But where's the evidence? Don't point to your so-called 'holy' books because I'm sick and tired of your foolishness. Your 'holy' books don't prove anything. The world would be a much better place if they'd never been written. I'm not saying they're bad books. They're not. They're just books. But too many people have gotten carried away with them and have caused a lot of problems."

Again there was what sounded like a barroom brawl; again there were shouts ("I got him!" "No, *I've* got him!" "That's me, you idiot!" "Sorry." "Where is he?" "Over here! I've got him!" "Get off me, you imbecile!" ...).

"You're not going to get a 'holy' book from me, and I'm not going to be hypocritical and say that I write my speeches with divine inspiration or through divine dictation. There are a lot of phonies out there who claim to have direct contact with God or Allah or a supreme being by some other name, and many of them might even believe it. Oscar Wilde was right when he said 'the worst vice of a fanatic is his sincerity', and I'm right when I say that there are far too many sincere (and insincere) fanatics."

After the stamping shoes were once again disunited and stamping chaotically in different directions, the gruff voice was heard again: "He's in the women's bathroom!"

"Let's be more careful about the words we use. Let's be more careful

about the statements we make. There is a difference between the statement 'I experienced God' and the statement 'I had an experience that I interpret to be an experience of God'. The truth of the latter does not entail the truth of the former. If you happen to have had an experience of some sort of universal oneness, well, okay, so you had such an experience. Understand that the human brain, comprised of about a hundred billion nerve cells, is an amazing organ that produces consciousness and mental states, and if you can't say anything more empirical about the so-called 'mystical' experiences than that they're feelings of some sort of universal oneness, then shut up instead of interpreting the experience in accordance with your religious beliefs. I couldn't care less about your interpretations. It's not surprising that you never hear a Hindu claiming to have experienced Allah or a Moslem claiming to have experienced Ganesh or any of the other Hindu deities. I'm not the champion of interpretations; I'm the Champion of Reason.

"Listen. With giant radio telescopes, scientists have probed fifteen billion light years away, almost to the edge of the universe. They've found neutrinos, quasars, and black holes, but they haven't found a supreme being, nor any evidence that one exists."

The rumbling, tumbling, and stumbling again turned into brawling, but the amount of brawling going on among the undercover cops in the women's bathroom was nothing compared to the amount of brawling now going on in the general audience because of gropers, pickpockets, and rowdies. Still, there was that strange voice coming over the PA system.

"You people are in the dark in more ways than one. You need to turn on the scientific lights. Historically, monotheism has won out over polytheism, but that doesn't mean that it's more reasonable. It's not. There's no more reason to believe that one supreme being exists than there is reason to believe that a bunch of them exist, and there's no reason whatsoever to believe that a bunch of them exist. Take your religious blindfolds off. Open your eyes. And open your minds. Take your thinking to a higher level.

"Listen. Scientists have thus far not found enough diffuse 'hidden' matter between the galaxies to exert a gravitational pull capable of someday halting the expansion and bringing the galaxies speeding back in

reverse to an eventual 'big crunch' and another big bang. So it's presently unreasonable to believe that the Big Bang with which this universe originated was caused by a big crunch of a previous universe. Instead, it's reasonable to believe that the galaxies and galactic clusters will continue flying out until the hydrogen is all depleted and everything fizzles out. But that raises the question about what caused the Big Bang. Why did the primordial fireball of energy get into a state that caused it to violently explode? Why did the primordial fireball exist in the first place? If it was brought about by an unstable vacuum, then why was there a vacuum that became unstable? Why was there something rather than nothing? I don't know. You don't know either. Nobody knows. Let's leave it at that. Let's accept our epistemological limitations and do the best we can with what we *do* know and what we *can* know. Let's rely on science and not on religion. Let's not blindly jump to conclusions. Let's look before we leap. Let's look at the evidence. Let's be reasonable. Then we can start making things better. But we'd better get started pretty soon, before it's too late."

A couple of minutes later, after a door was opened (and the crowd stampeded out because someone shouted in a gruff voice, "Fire!"), the place was thoroughly searched with flashlights, and the only thing found amiss was a disconnected load wire to the emergency distribution panel. The panel was checked for fingerprints, but none were found. Almost every man who had been in the place was considered a potential suspect. My camera was confiscated and taken to police headquarters, where shots I had taken of the crowd were examined to see if anyone suspicious could be seen. When the bruised and bloody policemen came to a cookie-crumby photo of Albert Mavis, Officer Amarro said, "Well, you can take Albert Mavis's name off the list right now. That chicken-livered scaredy cat held my hand from the moment the lights went out until the whistle blew and we went into action."

Of course, it was *after* the whistle blew and Officer Amarro and all of the other undercover cops went into action that Albert Mavis made his move. He shouted in a gruff voice that the Champion of Reason was in the basement so the undercover cops would go downstairs and find that he was *not* in the basement. Then he removed the cable from the amplifier

input, shouted again in a gruff voice to send the gang on another wild goose chase to the balcony, and went to the basement. Within three or four minutes, he had removed all of the cables, taken out the programmable relay, disconnected the load wire to the main distribution panel, and rewired the emergency panel to its original state. He put everything, including the flashlight, the pliers, and the screwdriver into a bag and hid the bag in the back of the boiler. The rest of what he did and shouted needs no annotation.

Two more sections of the book in PDF files, as well as a reading by the author in an MP3 file, are free of charge at www.jimriva.com. The whole shebang, available as an eBook, can be purchased through the Kindle.