

## All Cults Are Religions

*A Baltimore mother accused of joining a cult and starving her child says she was acting on her religious beliefs. What's the difference between extreme religious conviction and delusion? Between a religion and a cult?*

1.....How one tells this gut-wrenching story is determined both by how one sees the event and what one thinks should come of it. Here's *how I choose to tell the story*:

A 16-month-old boy stopped saying "Amen" at meals. To punish him, and in hopes of restarting his "Amen"ing, the tiny religious community's leader, 40-year-old pot-smoking "Queen Antoinette," ordered that he be deprived of food and drink. The child, refusing to repent of his sin, died. For a week, the community expected his resurrection, then concealed his body. Upon finding the corpse, the police DNA-identified the mother as a resident member of the community, self-named "One Mind Ministries."

*How did it all happen?* (1) An unmarried teenager got pregnant and failed to have an abortion. (2) The child was born when the impregnator was in prison for attempted murder. (3) Wanting to go to college, the mother could not afford childcare. (4) The community of the "One Mind Ministries" religion offered to provide, without charge, housing for mother-and-child and child-care; and the mother accepted. (5) Efforts of the mother's family to get her to leave the community were unsuccessful.

2....."Bastard" is what my father, who became a New York judge, was called as a schoolyard child. That was a stretch. He was legitimate, but his parents were divorced. In the America of those days, more than a century ago, the word "divorce" had a heavy social-sanctional force: divorce was *shameful*. Even more shameful was extramarital sex, including progeny therefrom: the thought that your child would be called a "bastard" was a powerful deterrent to sex before marriage. Today, though the dictionaries continue to state its original meaning, "bastard" has so lost its essential force that only its negative connotation remains (a scowl on the Cheshire cat). / Now look at the subculture in which the accused woman grew up. Divorce rare, because marriage rare. Bastardy common, because marriage rare. While that pregnant teen was responsible for her condition (as she had not been raped), she was also a victim of her environment. The social project, which President Obama is open about, is how to change that environment. Not just that mother and her associates, but that subculture and America, are in court.

3.....My telling of the story acknowledges that death was due to a religion's excessive punishment of a sinner. A "religion," because a community with centering religious beliefs and a religious leader. Religious "punishment," because community-approved. A "sinner," because the child refused to "repent" and return to "Amen"ing at meals. And the religion's eschatology included belief in immediate "resurrection." The "*religion*" aspect of the defense lawyer's brief is strong.

4....."How did it all happen?" It, the murder and the court case, wouldn't have happened if there had been the earlier intervention I mentioned as possible: the pregnant "failed to have an abortion." In her subculture, the shame of bearing a bastard has been replaced by teen-age pride in becoming a mother. An abortion would have freed her (and thousands like her) to go to college or otherwise move toward maturity rather than being *trapped in child-motherhood*. Good religion (as I see it) would have encouraged her to have an abortion. (In that subculture, adoption is rare.)

5....."What's the difference between extreme religious conviction and delusion?" Extreme critics of religion, such as Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, say there's no difference: religion is delusional. But R.J.Lifton is level-headed: There's "an overlap between religious conviction and delusion...a difficult area for psychiatry and the legal system." ("Death Opens Doors on Group," 3.29.09 WP)

6....."What's the difference between a religion and a cult?" Again, an overlap. As "delusion" refers to a mind ineffectively coping with reality, "*cult*" refers to a religion effectively frustrating reality. True religion frees human beings to live responsibly and joyfully in relation to all realities, immanent and transcendent. Cults bind persons to a narrow range of reality, mentally if not also physically cutting off access to everyone and everything the cult

leader disapproves. But this religion/cult distinction is only ethical: it has no part in defining "a religion," which is a worship-centered local or larger community.

BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | MARCH 30, 2009; 8:08 PM ETSAVE & SHARE:        

PREVIOUS: [DEVIL'S WORK IS HARD TO DENY](#) | NEXT: [RELIGIONS ROOTED IN DELUSIONS](#)

## Comments

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Rev Elliott:

"A number of you commenters on the cult-murder of a 16-month-old boy are anxious to CONFINE to the human sphere your attempts to make sense (or give an account) of this event."

Well, I for one, suggest we work out the human end of things before rushing to figure out how the 'supernatural' went wrong.

Different sects of monotheists, however large, small, or offbeat, ...screaming 'Evil' at each other and every problem just \*isn't\* the way to understand how people get pushed over these edges ...and do these horrible things, not because they \*are\* 'evil,' but because they \*fear\* it. So much that things get backwards.

Now, I'm not saying every spirit out there is a friend to humankind, but there's a \*whole\* lot of indifferent ones that'll mirror what we bring to life.

So, call it a character flaw of 'species narcissism' to say so, but it does \*not\* clarify these things if we muddy up what we \*can\* know with notions of cosmic evil out to make people defy what some others think the verbal rules are.

(Frankly, \*that\* I find to be kind of narcissistic. )

This kind of thing happens, not cause some \*deny\* some force of evil, but because they're taught to \*fear\* it beyond sense and humanity.

Yeah, there's plenty out there that's bigger than us. That doesn't mean \*everything\* someone can't comfortably understand right now\* necessarily \*is.\*

Frankly, confusion on that point, that's often how people get turned around by quite unworthy agencies. You can't fight these things by amplifying the very premises by which they take such hold.

This thing was done cause someone was in terror of a cosmic evil. Turning around and saying 'Well, it was the wrong brand of terror,' never does seem to solve things.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | APRIL 4, 2009 3:02 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

"My telling of the story acknowledges that death was due to a religion's excessive punishment of a sinner."

That's not what the WaPo and other newspapers reported. The One Minders believed that the child had stopped saying "amen" because he was demonically possessed. Withholding food and water was meant to drive the demon(s) out. It was not to "punish" the child, and his death was not desired nor expected. They didn't think that God would allow the child to die; and when, to their surprise, he did, they expected (still do!) his resurrection.

This all fits with what the bible teaches. It is the very reason that we need to throw off these ancient superstitions, give up the ideas of eternal life and ultimate justice, and learn to deal with the real world, just as it is.

POSTED BY: PAMSM | APRIL 3, 2009 3:06 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Elliottwl:

"A number of you commenters on the cult-murder of a 16-month-old boy are anxious to CONFINE to the human sphere your attempts to make sense (or give an account) of this event."

Who's doing that? Who is trying to 'make sense' of it?

It makes no sense at all, it is a tragic example of (fortunately) somewhat rare human behavior.

"In historical & global perspective, your sense-confinement is abnormal"

You use the word 'abnormal' when you mean 'in a statistical minority'. It's not the same thing.

Most of the world does not believe in the god you believe in, by your definition that makes you abnormal.

"The normal human way to make sense of humanity-involved events astonishingly either good or evil is to involve more than the human sphere"

Nothing beyond the 'human sphere' (the universe and it's component parts) is actually known. A person, or even a great many persons can 'believe' that something resides outside that sphere, but that does not make it real. Since you can only define this other sphere in terms of your own belief, not actual knowledge, to assign it any powers or influence over events in this plane is completely irrational. There is simply no basis on reality. You cannot explain your god, you can not demonstrate your god, you cannot even determine what he looks like, thinks, or know what his plan for you or anyone else is. Yet you give him full credit for all that you perceive as good.

"This explanation-CONFINEMENT or constriction to the human sphere (to exclude "the supernatural") is an instance of intra-specific narcissism"

Intra-specific narcissism?

Self love within a species?

Okay... I think you are making a common, yet flawed assumption. You are assuming that atheists think of themselves as better than god, or as gods.

You are wrong. Atheists simply don't believe in gods. We believe that we are what we are, period. We do not claim omniscience, or cosmic powers, we simply are what we are. Intelligent but imperfect creatures inhabiting this place and time. We do not claim infallibility or perfection.

(Continued)

POSTED BY: GLADERUNNER | APRIL 3, 2009 2:16 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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(continued) to Elliottwl:

"It's a metaphysical sickness, though some millions congratulate themselves on having it."

A metaphysical sickness?

Where are you getting these concepts? Can you call into work due to a metaphysical flu? Since this metaphysical sickness is outside our awareness, outside our ability to perceive it, how can it be a problem?

If I congratulate myself for anything it would be that I was able to escape the contrived dream world of angels, demons, magic, myths and jealous and vengeful gods. Despite my parents' efforts, despite the overwhelming societal pressure to kowtow to a Bronze Age fairy tale, I was able to escape from it and finally experience the true freedom of free thought.

Your veiled threats and overt arrogance do not shake me. They have no power over me or my 'soul'. You are just another quaint, delusional witch doctor rattling sticks and chanting meaningless incantations. Sputter on about your metaphysical illnesses and intra-specific narcissism. These terms only have meaning in your make-believe universe, not in mine. If I were to accuse you of something that makes no sense to you, say, ksirfbydu-ism. Would you feel shocked, offended or compelled to apologize or repent?

POSTED BY: GLADERUNNER | APRIL 3, 2009 2:16 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

A number of you commenters on the cult-murder of a 16-month-old boy are anxious to CONFINE to the human sphere your attempts to make sense (or give an account) of this event.

In historical & global perspective, your sense-confinement is abnormal. The normal human way to make sense of humanity-involved events astonishingly either good or evil is to involve more than the human sphere (however this "more than" is spoken of - the commonest way being "divine/demonic").

Ironic: This explanation-CONFINEMENT or constriction to the human sphere (to exclude "the supernatural") is an instance of intra-specific narcissism. It's a metaphysical sickness, though some millions congratulate themselves on having it.

POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | APRIL 3, 2009 1:26 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

TO MONO1:

You fit the New Testament (1 Corinthians 1:21-23) description of misunderstanders of Jesus' crucifixion in viewing it as "nonsense" or "foolishness." Your take, this time, is that Christians see God as having committed suicide.

The Christian cosmic-historic Story in & beyond the New Testament is not outsiders' way of making sense: to outsiders, it's non-sense. But to us Christians it's a continuum of God's intending (as spelled out, for example, in "Globalization and Grace," Princeton's Max Stackhouse's volume four of "God and Globalization"): God creates the universe (by "the Big Bang"), God comes (the incarnation), God dies at our hands (the crucifixion), God does not stay dead (Jesus' resurrection), God invites us to resurrection-life ("eternal life") with Jesus.

POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | APRIL 3, 2009 12:28 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

to DR ELLIOTWL.

would any human being in his/ her right mind nail himself on the cross to show and demonstrate his love and mercy to mankind?

would you nail yourself on the cross to convince me that god begotten a son?

would any human being nail any of his sons on the cross to show his love and mercy to mankind?

would any human being in his right mind nail his messenger to another mankind on the cross to show his love and mercy .

does the above make any sense to any mankind ?

its not even accepted by mankind ,mankind would call the above as crazyness as insanity they wouldnot even attribute this to themselves as human as they are, but christianity is balled enough to attribute this insanity to allmighty god??

DR E ,  
i donot mean to disrespect you sir but in your old age you should know better than this.

PEACE.

POSTED BY: MONO1 | APRIL 3, 2009 4:22 AM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Why, I'd even go so far as to say, Reverend, if you think you've been 'saved' from something. Take it.

Don't pick at it, don't try and re-dramatize it over and over again like there must be some 'evil' somewhere in you preventing it from taking.

Cause, simple Pagan as I may be, to the once-born 'born-again' types.

Doesn't seem you necessarily wake any fresher in the morning than the rest of the world.

But it can still be a good day.

Play to the strengths. You do have some. 'extinguishing evil' doesn't seem to be one of em, is all. :)

I suppose I feel some need to console you, Reverend. Surely, I've seen lights in dark places. 'Evil' ain't a \*thing,\* certainly not a 'thing' people \*have,\* it's not even an 'absence' of a thing.

Its a \*meme.\*

Which is to say, nothing a good douse in spring rain and humanity meeting each other can't put right. :)

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | APRIL 3, 2009 12:08 AM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Oh, and I don't mean to sound overly-accusatory, Reverend. It's just that I think humanity's learned an awful lot about goodness, just not necessarily put it together as something other than, 'that which there is when some 'evil' is 'destroyed.' or 'subdued' or 'controlled.'

Thinking of it \*that\* way is a great way for people to get the notion that without orthodoxy and orthopraxis to the \*letter\*.... their neighbors, their families, even their sixteen-month old \*children\* might be an 'evil' to be purged.

People cite happenings like this as 'evidence of what happens without more and more 'proper' control, but it's simpler than that.

This is what happens when 'control' and fears of 'evil' leave distraught people nowhere else to \*go\* but to commit horrors. Bishops speak of these things, and of, say, queers and Pagans as nice sterile abstractions and object lessons..... we're the ones who end up fending off the baseball bats when someone hears that and decides the only way to get right with a picky God is through hurting us.

Worse when that 'only way out' is a child. Or all children, or the world they're to live in.

And, really, this is why a lot of the talk here just makes me \*angry.\*

Cause we're better than that. All of us. Ideas of 'evil' or 'sinful human nature' need have no power...such as some give it.

Sure, it may seem to make people need 'redemption and forgiveness' the more, but you can't control it like that. No more than anyone else can. Why, they might even be said to smoke \*pot\* and still be able to run that kind of game.

Which frankly ought to tell you something more than 'Let's call pot evil' right there. I mean, if a stoner could run that kind of game, it probably didn't happen in a vacuum. Go figure.

It's

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | APRIL 2, 2009 11:40 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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That is... What's real is that we can share a better world. If we don't yield to fears.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | APRIL 2, 2009 11:15 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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And... That's all you have to say, I guess.

I've seen a number of things in my life, Reverend. Many which I, well, look forward to a day no one will have to know em anymore.

But this kind of story isn't about some 'intrinsic evil in humanity,' nor some disembodied malevolent 'intelligence.'

This kind of story's all too human: the wrong mix of traumas, confusions, frustrations, manipulations, and bad ideas, ...most notably fears.

Each piece all too common, to the point no one can point at any one real source of 'what went wrong.'

This isn't some disembodied 'evil act.' It's part of everything that came before and everything around, maybe the only courses some poor souls feel they have left to them in a gracious universe that somehow \*we\* manage to paint with horrors.

What can scare and numb someone such that they could do that to their own child.

Probably not just the 'evil power' of some random looney.

Random looneys don't \*have\* that kind of power, generally speaking.

Someone has to give it to them. And I see plenty of that. Little pieces of other agendas left \*lying around\* when the money and the power that uses them ain't looking or don't care.

People are actually pretty deeply-traumatized by what some have painted the world up to be, and what's been done, and denied, and justified.

All our cultures, all our societies, anyone that breathes and feels.

I don't see situations like these, sir, as some kind of abberation of an 'evil force' at work, not generally.

I don't see the world, don't see \*us\* as possessing some kind of 'evil nature,' barely controlled by some saying of 'Amen' or a thousand amens, or however many elaborations we'd like to make on the topic.

I think it's about the world we make for each other.

If we make one where someone who feels her life is out of control has the one hope for some eternal fate of her child's soul in that kind of control, this kind of thing's all too common and inevitable. Just a matter of degree.

'Darkness' yields to light, despair yields to hope. It's been big business putting terms and conditions and caveats on that for a long time, Reverend. There have always been casualties.

And maybe the reality of that's too 'common' for some. But commoner, still, is that we can do better. Religious leaders whose ministrations I do not recommend, well, they traffic in fear, claim copyright on hope. All in the guise that there's something \*essentially wrong\* with us, and how we're made.

\*That's\* real, and by the Gods, it doesn't take \*much\* of that reality to prevent these atrocities.

Unfortunately, it also doesn't take \*much\* fear of 'evil' holding great power if someone doesn't say or believe the 'right' words ...to cause them.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | APRIL 2, 2009 11:14 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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TO PAGANPLACE:

1

The phrase "punishment of a sinner" was that religion's POV, not mine.

2

You ask "what could possibly scare or numb" anybody as much as that poor mother (who watched her child die slowly, at the word of that religion-cult leader)? Some would say simply that the human potential for evil is as great as the human potential for good. That to me is inadequate. My column last week was titled, "Satan's Compulsive Evil, God's Attractive Good." That religion-cult had demonic power to suck down (as a black hole) or up (as a tornado); to use another analogy, the poor woman was raped of her power of self-determination. (The title also noted that God, who loves us & seeks our love, does not do that to human beings.)

POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | APRIL 2, 2009 10:17 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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MONO1

God didn't nail Jesus to the cross, the Romans did.

God sent his son to restart his church. Jesus knew full well this would happen but he came anyways to free us from Satan's grip out of love for his spiritual brothers and sisters (us).

This does not make God a child abuser. But, it does show how much Jesus loves us.

Mark

Always seek the truth.

POSTED BY: VOLKMARE | APRIL 2, 2009 8:51 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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I mean. Isn't there something a little more obvious in play here, such as might confuse a woman into watching her own child die of thirst and neglect and starvation for 'God?' Cause of 'Sin?'

How could anyone \*possibly\* think that was the way of America, never mind this good Earth or humans?

What could \*possibly\* scare or numb someone \*that bad?\*

Get back to us, Reverend. b

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | APRIL 2, 2009 6:36 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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I mean, hey, Rush Limbaugh was slurring his words on Oxycontin when the latest version of 'God's Will' was popularized, no one went back and read the footnotes on \*that.\*

I'm guessing if you need to find the near occasion of someone associated with cannabis to figure what went wrong with trying to purge the 'sin' out of a yearling manchild, best you keep smoking up, yourself.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | APRIL 2, 2009 6:29 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Whoa, Reverend.

"A 16-month-old boy stopped saying "Amen" at meals. To punish him, and in hopes of restarting his "Amen"ing, the tiny religious community's leader, 40-year-old pot-smoking "Queen Antoinette," ordered that he be deprived of food and drink."

"3.....My telling of the story acknowledges that death was due to a religion's excessive punishment of a sinner."

Did you notice the ....sixteen month old bit before you blamed the kid's getting bored with parroting 'amen' on 'pot smoke' and called it 'excessive punishment of a sinner?'

Goddess, Mother of Birth, man.

Just \*slightly awry,\* this is?

'Overzealousness?'

At \*what?\*

Plenty of 'ministries' go after disadvantaged and desperate women.

Always thought the 'Abundant Life Church' could do with some checking of tax records in the state of New Hampshire, though they seem pretty good at not supplying headlines, just 'stealth candidates' for various local offices.

Call me a 'party pooper' or something. But this isn't a 'slight glitch' in how to treat a one-year-old as a 'sinner.'

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | APRIL 2, 2009 6:23 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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"You are deluded about Christianity. We do not view Jesus' crucifixion as child-abuse, but as God suffering for human beings, to deliver us from (in an ancient baptismal phrase) "sin, death, and the devil."

Won't go so far as to say child abuse never existed before, but the Abrahamic psyche \*does\* shape and promote abuse in the form that we know it.

In great detail.

In the modern devout Christian psyche, there is the ever-present threat of arbitrary death and even worse suffering... only to be appeased by arbitrary rules... Only enforced despite all the suffering by the Stockholm Syndrome that plays on denied instincts, much as the denied dominance instincts fuel it all... Only justified by the illusory notion that things must be far, far worse outside.

Unthinkable, even.

You Christians don't understand how anyone could possibly put up with domestic or child abuse.

Or even torture. You have this notion that true heroes can put up with torture and shrug it off like Jack Bauer, and that people you yourselves torture will yield to the righteous cause with some useful compliance.

Only problem there is, it's not true, and it doesn't \*have\* to be true to jangle our instincts.

A priest says it's 'human nature, obey to be 'saved' from it, and the 'worse punishment' we justify it with. '



But it's not human nature.

It's just who hits human nature longest.

No one doesn't break.

But breaking doesn't mean they own you.

Just means you have a nervous system.

Religious confusion about it optional.

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POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | APRIL 2, 2009 6:09 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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TO MONO1:

You are deluded about Christianity. We do not view Jesus' crucifixion as child-abuse, but as God suffering for human beings, to deliver us from (in an ancient baptismal phrase) "sin, death, and the devil." Easter is the annual Christian celebration of Jesus' resurrection, God's victory over death & delusion.

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POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | APRIL 2, 2009 4:45 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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TO GLADERUNNER:

As I see it, you are a victim of scientism's limitation of knowledge to the commensurable & the verifiable/falsifiable.

Adam Gopnik's most recent book distinguishes COMMON knowledge (what you would call "knowledge") from CORE knowledge (everything we human beings inwardly know but cannot scientifically prove).

This morning, from China (where he teaches in a university), our son Bill remarked at the increasing number of Christians he's meeting.

China now has 10x more Christians than it had only a few years ago. The Enlightenment logic of your position is that religion should be fading away; but globally, the opposite is happening.

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POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | APRIL 2, 2009 4:38 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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"Extreme critics of religion, such as Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, say there's no difference: religion is delusional"

I tend to agree. That's not to say it is always a bad thing. The Dictionary definition of 'delusion' includes "a false, persistent belief maintained in spite of evidence to the contrary" and "a false belief or opinion"

Religion has no evidence. There simply none whatsoever to support it. It exists completely within the minds of individuals. It cannot be tested, measured weighed, tasted or compared. It is an internal construct, differing among all individuals.

And it has to be taught. It is not something we are born with. If we are not taught about Abraham, Isaac, Noah, Job, Jesus and Satan, we will not know about them. In fact there is no evidence to support these beings ever existed other than the one book, and those books that have been written about that book. It requires one to believe many things that by all indications are not verifiable, therefore not 'true'.

I recall as a child being frightened of thunderstorms. My grandmother would try to comfort me with stories, distracting me from the thunder and lightening. She would tell me of 'God's potato wagon' causing the noise. Just imagining that notion calmed me. It was a delusion though, it was not real. I doubt seriously that as a small

child I would have been so comforted by being told that the rapid expansion of air molecules caused by static electrical discharges, etc. were the actual source since I had no knowledge or understanding of the underlying science.

As an adult however it seems absurd to cling to that fantasy, it simply serves no good purpose anymore. In fact that delusion, that fantasy, could cause some of my actions to be dangerous to myself and others around me. I see religion the same way.. If it helps your brain get through the day, then fine. If however it deludes you into believing that Jesus will protect you and your children from harm, then you at many levels are putting yourself and your children at certain and unnecessary risk.

POSTED BY: GLADERUNNER | APRIL 2, 2009 4:06 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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what is more delusional than the (god????)who nailed his only begotten son on the cross for the sin of mankind .

you know how many millions and millions (adultes and childerns)who deluded in the this delusion ?

the delusion is so deep.

POSTED BY: MONO1 | APRIL 2, 2009 1:27 AM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Sorry, Pastor Elliott, you got is wrong. All religions are cults would be a truer statement/

POSTED BY: GABY1 | APRIL 1, 2009 8:08 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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