

Consequences of an atheistic worldview

A review of
Trials of the Monkey: An Accidental Memoir
by Matthew Chapman
Picador, New York and
Duckworth London, 2000.

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This combination autobiography/Scopes trial montage, written by the great great grandson of Charles Darwin, is enormously enlightening because of what it colourfully reveals about the consequences of abandoning a theistic worldview. The author's intent appears to be to show the foolishness of the theist's worldview, but he actually eloquently shows quite the opposite. Much of the book contains the usual retelling about the Scopes trial which added nothing new and displayed very little insight into the case. The case, though, only serves as a backdrop for the real story, i.e. that of Matthew Chapman and his struggle with religion.

The book is loaded with misinformation, such as the claim that the 'Kansas board of education voted to delete virtually every mention of evolution from the state's science curriculum' (p. ix). Chapman repeats common misconceptions on almost every page, even about Galileo and the Catholic Church and the Scopes trial, which Chapman concludes was a 'skirmish between religion and reason' (p. 2). Part of the book was written to explore the effects of Darwin's works, which 'challenged not only Christianity but most other religions as well' (p. x). Chapman concludes that

'Darwin's theory of evolution had demolished the biblical story of creation And if the very

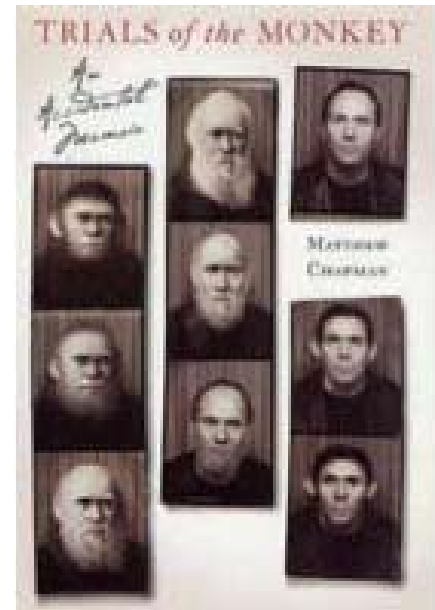
first chapter of the good book was nonsensical and untrue, why would the rest be more credible or useful?' (p. 5).

He concluded that the Bible is 'full of vile instructions which no one in their right mind would obey' (p. 19).

Chapman claims that Charles Darwin was at the top of his family, and he (Chapman) was at the bottom, admitting that his disdain for religion may not have done much to help him be a better person. The story of Chapman's mother was tragic. She failed to complete medical school and eventually became an alcoholic, and, according to Chapman, a tragic figure. He talks much about his own heavy drinking ('I have always drunk too much'), his arrests for drunk driving, and how he 'damaged' his memory, lost hours to blackouts, and wasted years of life on hangovers and alcohol-related despair' (pp. 59, 182).

Unwilling to join AA because he refused to 'have to prostrate my ego before "A Higher Power"' (p. 60), he continued on as an alcoholic, and eventually became a 'slave to nicotine' and a drug addict (p. 188). He even admits when he was younger he 'broke the law without much thought, once seriously, a crime that could have put me away for several years' (p. 189). He was also 'in the habit of burglary' (p. 163).

He also spent an enormous amount of time talking about his many and varied sexual exploits—he seduced anyone and everyone he could, whether young, old, tall, short, thin, fat, male or female, normal or deformed. He claims he was always interested mostly in females and then proceeds to describe his obsessions, many of which most people would label abnormal. Chapman admitted that he has seduced women 'of all ages, both beautiful and ugly', and that his favorite teacher in high school was a 'predatory homosexual'.



He then described in detail his sexual experiences with his teacher (p. 59). Incest, pedophilia, voyeurism—nothing was forbidden, and all was bragged about in page after page (such as pp. 108, 155, 160–164 and 188).

Chapman greatly admired Clarence Darrow, and sorely despised William Jennings Bryan. A significant part of the book is about his visit to Bryan College to interview Dr. Kurt Wise, a creationist who is probably 'smarter than most of his critics' (p. 124). He states that like 'everyone else, scientists crave the recognition of their peers', but as a creationist when Wise 'goes to a scientific meeting, his fellow scientists often clamber across chairs to avoid walking down the same aisle as him' (p. 146). He adds that by coming out of the closet as a creationist, Wise 'committed academic suicide' (p. 219). This says much about the tolerance of the academic community and its acceptance of immorality. He noted that Kurt Wise got into Harvard to do a Ph.D. only because

'No one mentioned on any of the applications that Kurt was a creationist. Gould accepted him without knowing and didn't find out until it was too late. ... The issue of creation didn't come up for another two years. One day Gould stopped and asked him, "Do you still believe the same way?" "Well,



Courtesy of Bryan College

John Scopes (1900–1970), the teacher who stood trial in 1925 in Tennessee, USA, for teaching evolution in a public school.

I'm still a creationist, if that's what you mean." "Oh, okay" replied Gould. Another couple of years later, it came up again when Kurt was sitting in his office chatting. Again Kurt reaffirmed his position. Since then they have spoken of it calmly and seemingly without tension. Unfortunately, it is not this easy with everyone. One graduate student declared war on Kurt. "I am going to do everything in my power," he told him, "to make your life hell while you're at Harvard" (pp. 149–150).

Chapman adds that all his 'adult life' he 'despised religion, in particular its resistance to scientific progress. Galileo is a greater hero to me than any saint'. Yet he liked and felt sympathy for the one creationist scientist he did get to know somewhat. In short, Chapman says that his visit to Bryan caused his intellectual views to remain the same, but his *feelings* have changed:

'faith in God or any of the fairy tales that surround Him may be absurd, but the *need* for faith is anything but. When you encoun-

ter someone like Kurt, you realize that faith is sometimes an absolute necessity' (p. 152).

Maybe he now has second thoughts about his life of sex, drinking, and drugs.

Of the students at Bryan college he states that the

'depth and pervasiveness of religious faith is overwhelming. Everyone believes absolutely, and seemingly without question, that God exists, that prayers work, and miracles happen' (p. 170).

Yet in all Chapman's talk about human rights and doing what is right, he never indicated that anyone should do anything about the problem of intolerance in academia and science as a whole, and especially against theists who believe that God has had a role in creating life.

Chapman actually admits that he longs to believe in God, but the work of his great grandfather took this view away from him (and society) forever (p. 199). If Chapman spent more time researching creationism and theology instead of repeating clichés (or the misconceptions commonly repeated in the mass media), he might well have been a very different person. Yet he concludes that 'fearfulness and bigotry prevent us from seeing how *comprehensively* preposterous all religious beliefs are' (p. 244). Preposterous?

Chapman admits that his life was such a mess that as an adult he was suicidal. This is a long way from when he was a child and wanted to become a missionary (p. 303). Now a very successful Hollywood writer, Chapman has lived (and still lives) the life so commonly seen on the screen, and he expresses the same antagonism towards religion, and the same positive values of promiscuity, drinking, drug use, and general irresponsibility common in the media. This worldview is likewise often portrayed very favorably on the public screen. After reading this book, it is easy to see why.