

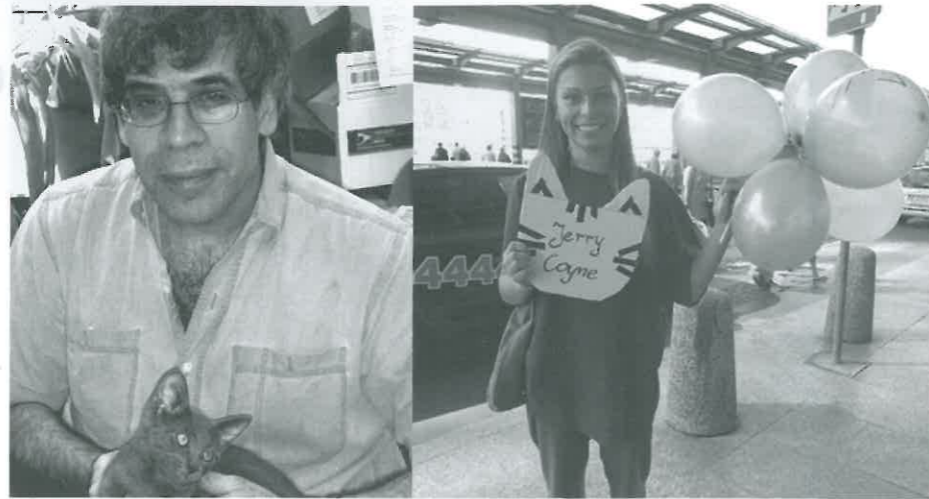
Jerry Coyne's message to Poles: 'You'd be better off without religion'

Report by
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The arrival of Professor Jerry Coyne to Poland came as a surprise to many local rationalists. The outspoken champion of evolutionary biology with little sympathy for claims of the supernatural came to visit a couple of his friends but wound up giving lectures and interviews as well as partaking in debates.

Coyne's travel destination has long been labelled as one of the strongholds of Catholicism in the Western world which is partially, but only partially, justified. While catholic faith is by far the prevailing religious denomination and the God squad may be a noisy and tiresome group in the public discourse, the situation isn't as black as it's painted.

For example, the stunning 95 percent of population classified as Catholics in the Statistical Yearbook of 2012 stems from the fact that the sufficient criterion of being counted as "adherent" is simply being baptised. The number of purely nominal Catholics is another, undetermined part of the equation. Still, Poland is a relatively religious country where sacred monuments and sculptures of saints are scattered all over the landscape, the church is a political force to be reckoned with, religion is a part of the school curriculum for most children and a form of blasphemy law is effectuated from time to



Jerry Coyne was greeted at Warsaw airport by a biology student, Justyna, who studies primates at the local zoo. "Having heard of my fondness for felids," wrote Coyne, "she prepared a lovely greeting (the balloons have cat faces drawn on them).

time by zealots of every hue.

Given all that, the visit by not only an ardent Darwinian but in addition a vocal proponent of atheism seemed like going to the lion's den but Coyne's stay in Poland turned out to be a great experience for all involved.

Firstly, the Chicago-based professor headed towards the capital of Poland where the Polish Rationalist Society and the Polish Skeptical Club organised two open meetings for all interested in evolutionary biology, scientific research and the interface between science and faith.

During the first meeting Coyne professed

that there is a fundamental disparity between the scientific approach and the religious perspective and criticised efforts aiming at reconciling these two cognitive models. He spared neither accommodationist views nor the stance of faithism. He disclosed also that he was in the process of writing a new book raising among others the issue of incompatibility of faith and scientific cognition.

During his second day in Warsaw, Coyne engaged in a partly heated debate at the department of biology at Warsaw University where his views on matters of faith met with resistance by a Christian apologist and

a biology professor in one person. Needless to say, the sympathy of the audience was with Coyne.

After the two public appearances and a fair amount of sightseeing, professor Coyne left the capital and set course for Krakow, the historical capital of Poland and a city of countless church towers where he was to give a lecture at the university.

The topic of his lecture at one of the departments of the 649-year-old Jagiellonian University was identical with the title of his immensely popular book *Why Evolution is True*. Coyne delivered what he promised – a brief presentation of the irrefutable evidence for evolution to the delight of the audience. Denialists were either absent or kept a low profile.

In the second part of the lecture Coyne went on to answer the obvious question of why all this tangible evidence in favour of the theory of evolution fails to translate into the increasing acceptance of evolution among others in the United States and why there are still chunks of the populations in most European countries rejecting this widely accepted pillar of modern biology. The conclusion was, rather unsurprisingly, that it was religious faith – and especially exposure to religious doctrines in one's childhood – that was to be blamed for this situation. That reasoning was illustrated with slides showing, for example, a correlation between religiosity and acceptance in evolution in different populations.

Debunking the ludicrous creationist ideas

doesn't cause much uproar among more enlightened people of faith but labelling religious faith as such as a phenomenon which should be consigned to the scrap heap of history is a different matter altogether. It was around that point that the undersigned spotted a few spectators shaking their heads unable as they were to accept the relentless message.

After a short series of questions we were reminded that the next lecturer was already waiting impatiently to take over the rostrum and after a short series of questions we had to leave the auditorium. The good news was that all enthusiasts of science and rationalism – as well as opponents of the views presented by the lecturer – had the opportunity to meet Coyne in a cosy little café near the old Jewish neighborhood.

Dimmed lights, the small size of the place and smell of coffee along with Coyne's unassuming way of being encouraged a lively discussion that touched on genetics, faith, the Beatles, miracles, and the position of the Catholic Church in Poland to name just a few. The issue of evolution being both a theory and a fact – raised during the lecture – occurred once again.

Coyne agreed that we had lost the word "theory" to the colloquial language and replacing it with the notion of "model" was not a bad idea. After all, the latter is equally fine but free for the kind connotations that make it possible for many people to perpetuate the terminology and logical error underlying the hackneyed "but evolution is

just a theory" argument.

Two hours of intellectual delight were over only too quickly but Coyne's stay in Poland was to continue and bring a surprise in form of an interview in one of the biggest TV channels in Poland. The broadcaster was more interested in Coyne as a famous 'godless science guy' than as a renowned biologist which was reflected in the number of questions pertaining to the issue of faith. Of course, Coyne was pretty blatant about his views on religion while on primetime TV which gave many a sense of schadenfreude. His message to Poles was straightforward – the world would be better without religion so have the courage to dispose of it the way you said goodbye to Santa Claus.

At the end of his stay, Coyne visited the place where the Nazis perpetrated some of the worst atrocities in the history, a place that has become symbolic of their endeavour to wipe out entire populations. Coyne's visit was symbolic too.

The wooden barracks of the camp are remnants of an utterly dogmatic ideology and a genocide fuelled by an irrational world-outlet. But instead of being a warning against the dangers of irrationality, the Nazis and their crimes are now used to bash Darwinists and godless people over the head by those who believe – believe being the keyword here – that the armies wearing the *Gott mit uns*-inscription were carrying out the atheist agenda and that the most murderous visions of the Nazi ideologists drew inspiration from Darwinism.

Muslim women's groups in Canada say the term 'honour killing' is 'racist'

IN 2007 Canada decided to set aside funds for a campaign to investigate and combat the growing number of killings of mainly Muslim women in the country. Until recently, religio-cultural violence – universally known as "honour killings" – were virtually unknown in that country. Only three known victims were killed between 1954 and 1983. But since 1999, 12 women have perished in honour killings.

Every year, according to UN reports, 5,000 women worldwide are killed for reasons of "honour" that relate to matters of modesty and obedience, though most experts maintain the numbers are far higher. And the number of victims of honour violence, which can involve beatings, acid attacks, or locking a woman in her home, is literally incalculable.

In the UK alone, more than 3,000 such honour crimes occurred just in 2010, according to a study by the Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation (IKWRO). The vast majority of those crimes, the organisation states, were committed by Muslims, though Sikhs and Hindus have also been known to commit honour-related crimes.

But Canada's efforts to stop this form of violence is being opposed ... by Muslim women! They are claiming that the term "honour killing" is racist, with many speaking out against the government's new focus on these crimes.

One outspoken opponent is Itrath Syed, who is pursuing a PhD in Islamophobia in Vancouver. She said: "When women of colour are killed, we ask these larger questions around their culture. We ask what's wrong

with their entire people – their culture, their religion – instead of a particular person."

Writing for the Investigative Project, Abigail R. Esman said: "What is so tragic about this remark is not just the half-dozen or so ways in which it is patently untrue, but that it seeks to nullify the horror that is honour violence, to deny the profound distinctions between honor crimes and other forms of domestic violence and femicide."

And she pointed out: "What Syed really was referring to was religion, not race. Or rather, the implication that domestic abuse in Muslim families is related to Islam, and that Muslim families are therefore treated differently than everybody else. It's a common accusation, and an ongoing question: are honour crimes culturally-based, or founded in interpretations of the Koran?"

It's a bit of both, according to Carla Rus, a psychiatrist in the Netherlands who specialises in working with victims of both domestic abuse and honor violence.

She says honour violence "involves a kind of ideology, which you don't find in domestic violence. In [Islamic] cultures, where church and state are not separated, it's difficult to distinguish whether honour violence comes through cultural or religious motives – culture and religion are inseparable in those cases".

Esman pointed out that understanding how dramatically honour violence differs from other domestic abuse is, however, critical and that Westerners rarely kill their young daughters, nor do Western families of origin conspire or collaborate in such murders. Similarly, domestic abuse in Western

families does not involve brothers murdering their sisters, as happens in cases of honour killings. To the contrary, siblings most often protect one another.

Esman said that two other critical points that opponents to Canada's focus on honour killings apparently do not wish others to see – "or perhaps are too culturally blinded to see is that ordinary domestic violence is nearly always spontaneous, while honour violence (and especially honour murder) is almost always calculated, often planned out over time through numerous family meetings. And the horrific reality is that, these women simply have nowhere to run: no mothers who will shelter them from the husbands they are trying to escape, no sisters or brothers to protect them from their fathers – no one.

"(Indeed, the sisters and brothers are often

recruited to assure a girl hiding from her family to come home, that all is forgiven. But this assertion is almost always a ruse; once she returns, the child is usually killed within days.)

"Which is precisely why funding for, and attention to, understanding and preventing honor violence is so very critical, not only in Canada, but everywhere in the West. It is why women – and especially Muslim women – should be welcoming it, even demanding more."

Esman concluded: "And yet, countless Canadian (and other) Muslim activists and apologists remain far more devoted to shaping public vision of their culture – even if it means disguising the truth – than to protecting the lives of their Muslim sisters."